

ILLUSTRATING FARMER–ANIMAL ENTANGLEMENTS AND EMOTIONS: DRAWING ELICITATION IN UPLAND VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

While visual methods have been employed in research regarding human–animal relationships and entanglements, the possible benefits of utilizing drawing elicitation have not been explored to date. Our study utilizes drawing elicitation with Hmong and Mien (Yao) ethnic minority farmers in the northern Vietnamese borderlands. We aim to investigate human–animal relationships within these communities, considering their longstanding socio-economic and spiritual entanglements with a number of domesticated animals. Simultaneously, we aim to assess the benefits and drawbacks of employing drawing elicitation in the context of more-than-human research in the Global South. Through the drawing exercises, participants not only conveyed important insights into human–animal entanglements within these rural uplands, resulting in nuanced and at times highly emotive drawings, but they also provided reflections on the drawing activity itself. Despite challenges faced in encouraging drawing within a semiliterate population, our findings, guided by participant feedback, reveal numerous possibilities for employing this approach in more-than-human research.

Key words: Drawing elicitation; human–animal relations; entanglement; Hmong; Mien (Yao); Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Seeking to expand understandings of complex and dynamic human–animal relationships, in this paper we introduce a new methodological framework that emphasizes the nuanced and often-tacit dimensions of these interactions. Building on a case study in the uplands of northern Vietnam, we examine entanglements between ethnic minority Hmong and Mien (Yao) farmers and their domesticated animals, focusing on water buffalo, chickens and pigs. These relationships, which are deeply embedded in the fabric of economic, cultural, spiritual and emotional life, provide a compelling case regarding the need for and value of innovative research approaches.

Historically, studies on human–animal relationships have employed methods ranging from interviewing and ethnography (Probyn 2014), to historical and document-based analyses (Dittmer 2014; Fredriksen 2016). More creative methods to examine the more-than-human have also been tried, including ‘body practices’ (McLeod 2014), video games and even ‘immersive virtual reality’ (Driessen *et al.* 2010; Vannini 2015). A range of visual methods have also been used in such studies (Lorimer 2010; Pitt 2015; Bear *et al.* 2017; Alam *et al.* 2018). Despite these efforts, documenting certain subtleties in human–animal relations has remained elusive, particularly in less literate and more remote communities.

Our study employs drawing elicitation as a method to access less articulable aspects of such relationships, offering insights that traditional approaches may fail to capture. We suggest that drawing elicitation is particularly salient in studying more-than-human relationships which can extend beyond verbal and overtly observable behaviours to include shared emotions, subconscious connections and even spiritual worlds.

As a fundamental form of communication, drawing can reach far beyond the mundane. As Weber and Mitchell (1995, p. 34) explain, 'drawings...can express that which is not easily put into words: the ineffable, the elusive, the not-yet-thought-through, the subconscious'. Nonetheless, drawing has only been employed in a few notable examples to analyse 'more-than-human' entanglements to date, with the *researchers*—rather than *participants* themselves—creating illustrations (Brice 2018; Marr *et al.* 2022). Moreover, in their comprehensive reviews of potential methodologies concerning 'more-than-human' and animal geographies, neither Dowling *et al.* (2017) nor Rubio-Ramon and Srinivasan (2023) mention the use of drawing methods.

Recognizing the possible benefits of drawing elicitation as a means to evoke unspoken reflections and emotions, we wish to engage with and expand upon the small body of literature on drawing and more-than-human interactions. Additionally, we endeavour to adapt this methodology to focus on both a novel subject—human–animal entanglements—and to explore its applicability with a new population, namely semi-illiterate ethnic minority farmers. Our study populations and geographic location—Hmong and Mien farmers in the northern uplands of Vietnam—highlight the relevance of our drawing approach to contexts where traditional qualitative methods may falter. Research with these communities, who have oral traditions and generally lower literacy levels, offers a unique opportunity to possibly showcase the efficacy of drawing elicitation in uncovering reflective, emotionally rich and culturally embedded data.

These Hmong and Mien farmers have been relationally entangled with a number of domesticated animals for generations. Connections between water buffalo and farmers, for

example, span farming/labour, economic, nutritional, cultural and spiritual relationships. Everything from rice cultivation (ploughing), to a household's wealth and status (buffalo are one of the most valuable household 'assets'), to mystical communication with supernatural entities (buffalo sacrifices are crucial components of animistic curing rituals and funeral rites) revolves around the presence of water buffalo (Sowerwine 2004; Bonnin 2015). While not used as farm labour, local black pigs and black chickens are also bred for economic, nutritional, cultural and spiritual value, with both traded when cash is needed, eaten on special occasions and used in animistic rituals (Turner *et al.* 2015; Son *et al.* 2021).

However, in Vietnam's northern uplands the persistence of such human–animal entanglements has been challenged during the past 30 years due to several important factors, including a rise in extreme weather events, market integration pressures stemming from a government-supported agrarian transition and growing land constraints. In this context, we sought to understand how ethnic minority Hmong and Mien farmers relate to their domesticated animals and we asked them to draw elements of these relationships. We hoped that this drawing exercise might initiate meaningful conversations with participants about their human–animal relationships, especially the more affective aspects. Indeed, our drawing exercise was able to reveal a number of nuances regarding these human–animal relationships, highlighting the deep and long-held connections that farmers have with a number of domesticated animals, particularly water buffalo, but also chickens, pigs and fish.¹ Nonetheless, we also encountered several concerns to keep in mind while using this method with semi-literate participants or individuals with limited formal schooling, who might be unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with drawing.

Previous work with Hmong and Mien farmers in upland northern Vietnam has conveyed crucial insights into the changing livelihoods of these communities (Corlin 2004; Delisle & Turner 2016; Ó Briain 2018; Sowerwine 2004; Turner *et al.* 2015). While such studies typically use interviews and participant observation, we sought to determine whether drawing could elicit historical and also

affective experiences and understandings of changing human–animal relationships in this locale. We asked ethnic minority farmer participants to contemplate and then draw their response to a broad prompt regarding their relationships with animals. By doing so, we also wanted to determine whether a drawing elicitation exercise could help overcome the expectations (and possible stresses) of immediate responses commonly associated with interviews, which can sometimes lead to rote and/or restricted answers. Moreover, considering that adults tend to draw less frequently than school-aged children, we were further intrigued about drawing's ability to engage participants in a different mode of thought and expression than what they might be used to. We nonetheless also incorporated follow-up, slow-paced conversational interviews after the drawing exercise to help us avoid the researcher-induced biases sometimes considered to be inherent in drawing analyses (Literat 2013) and to glean the reactions of participants to the drawing exercise.

Next, we briefly review how drawing has been used in other research contexts, focusing on its advantages and potential shortcomings. We also stress why we chose drawing, rather than other potential visual methods, for our work. We then situate our study in Vietnam's northern uplands, before detailing our methodological design, which included ethnic minority farmers participating in drawing exercises in summer 2019. These exercises revealed the profoundly personal, emotional and cultural importance of particular human–animal relations in these uplands. The drawing exercises were also able to highlight how these relations endure despite important environmental, economic, and state policy changes. We conclude by interpreting the benefits and possible concerns of employing drawing elicitation with populations with limited literacy or formal schooling.

COUPLING DRAWING ELICITATION AND GEOGRAPHY

As a visual research method (Rose 2014), drawing can be more precisely characterized

as a 'non-textual [way] of knowing', gathered from 'performative dimensions' of participant-created pictures (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty 2006, p. 327). In disciplines such as education, health and psychology, drawing methods have often been employed with children and youth. Younger individuals are considered more likely to perceive this activity as 'creative, fun, and [encouraging]', hence facilitating their engagement in research more directly (Punch 2002, p. 331). Within geography, our home discipline, such studies have included Young and Barrett (2001) employing drawing in their research with Kampala street children and Punch (2002) utilizing it with young people in rural Bolivia. Drawing has also been fruitfully implemented with adult participants in the Global North, including in organizational research (Nossiter & Biberman 1990; Kearney & Hyle 2004), communication studies (Singhal & Rattine-Flaherty 2006), education (Weber & Mitchell 1995) and health geography and sociology (Coen 2016; Guillemin & Westall 2008). Other geographers cite drawing as a methodological possibility, however usually only with brief mentions and/or as an activity for researchers to complete themselves, rather than participants (DeLyser *et al.* 2010; Clifford *et al.* 2016).

Turning to the possible benefits of drawing for academic research, communications scholar Literat (2013, p. 85) advocates that drawing can be empowering for participants by facilitating a space where 'agency [is] literally in their own hands'. Literat (2013 p. 84) elaborates that this method is a co-constructed, visual research tool which incorporates a 'subsequent discussion of [the] drawings in the context of their production'. This discussion or interview that follows the drawing activity is often an important element, focusing on what a drawing means to a participant and why they chose to draw particular images. Organizational researcher Vince (1995, p. 12) adds that the benefits of drawing arise 'not only in the diagnostic power of the images themselves, but also in the contextual and collaborative discussions' following the activity. As highlighted earlier, we also argue that drawing can facilitate reflections on out-of-the-ordinary and abstract questions, while allowing participants more

time than a number of traditional qualitative methods to think and reflect about how they wish to respond. This can help uncover more nuanced perspectives on topics that might have previously seemed obvious, mundane and/or unworthy of critical reflection (Gauntlett 2005). By bridging verbal and visual data generation methods, drawing elicitation can also support data triangulation (Kearney & Hyle 2004).

Turning to critiques of the method, organizational scholars Kearney and Hyle (2004, p. 380) note that 'the use of drawings and all arts-based or visual research methods' have been criticized for their lack of 'sufficiently rigorous' techniques. Even in their own drawing-based study, the authors note that 'larger studies with greater sample sizes' would better show whether drawing represents a worthwhile method (Kearney & Hyle 2004, p. 380). This statement notably conflicts with Literat's (2013, p. 93) assertion that small sample sizes are entirely appropriate for drawing methods due to the 'highly personal nature' of the approach. She continues that this renders drawing 'inherently unfit for use with large groups of participants' (Literat 2013, p. 93). Specifically related to research with children, Punch (2002) outlines two other concerns, which we suggest likely apply to adults as well. First, depending on the context, limited prior 'contact with visual imagery influences the type and limited range of visual images that [participants] produce' (Punch 2002, p. 331). Second, a participant's perceptions of their drawing abilities may deter them from joining a study (Punch 2002, p. 331). We discuss the relevance of these concerns to our own study below.

While acknowledging these critiques, we still wanted to employ drawing elicitation with Hmong and Mien farmers in upland Vietnam as we believed the method was well-attuned to capturing affective aspects and temporal changes regarding human-animal entanglements. We considered that regular interviewing approaches might not be as effective at eliciting such abstract perspectives, in part because our target population had not been immersed in the 'interview society' to the degree that can occur in more formally educated

populations (Atkinson & Silverman 1997). Rather, we thought that the extended length of the drawing exercise could help relieve the pressure of providing immediate responses to our somewhat abstract interview questions. The drawing itself also represented a type of blueprint or prompt that participants could refer to when reflecting on and conveying their thoughts.

While also considering other visual methods, we decided upon drawing for three additional key reasons. First, we ruled out photo elicitation because the second author had piloted this approach in the same communities. She had selected and showed respondents historical photographs to facilitate a discussion (on a different, yet livelihood-related topic), but the approach had failed to garner in-depth feedback or conversations. While there may be many reasons why this did not work well, one appeared to be that participants struggled to make meaningful connections to photographs in which neither they, their family members, nor precise, known landmarks, were present. We were thus concerned that an even more abstract topic (human-animal relations) might cause similar problems via photo elicitation.

Second, a former graduate student working with the second author had piloted photovoice with Hmong youth in the District a few years prior, with limited success. Instead of taking pictures of climate-related livelihood changes as carefully explained and requested, the participants captured scenic, tourist-oriented images, assuming that was what the graduate student wanted to see (despite constant assurances otherwise). Moreover, these youth participants were already familiar with cameras on their smartphones, while the participants in our study ranged from their early 20s to mid-80s (some with no phone). We were thus concerned that the learning curve to take photographs could be far steeper for some of our participants than putting a pencil to paper and then asking individuals to describe what they drew.

Finally, we were aware that our study participants had numerous responsibilities as busy farmers and often as parents. We were thus wary to use photovoice and/or video-based methods, as these would have required a sizeable time commitment on behalf of

participants (e.g., having to travel around their land to take photographs/videos and then return them to us). Instead of following up with participants days or weeks after our initial visits to discuss their photographs or videos, we were able to conduct the full drawing exercise and follow-up interview within an hour.

STUDY CONTEXT

Our study site of Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, is located in the rugged mountainous uplands of northern Vietnam. Sa Pa has a population of just over 65,000 people, 75 percent of whom are Hmong and Mien ethnic minority individuals (General Statistics Office of Vietnam 2019). While many ethnic minority households continue semi-subsistence farming with rice and maize as their staple crops, the Vietnamese government's modernization reforms have worked to increasingly integrate these upland communities into the market economy (Turner *et al.* 2015). These reforms have included new infrastructure projects, such as highways connecting these uplands to the lowlands, fixed marketplaces, hydroelectric dams and telecommunication technologies, among other projects (Turner 2022). The distribution of government-subsidized hybrid seeds and agricultural inputs in these uplands since the late 1990s has also steadily reconfigured the semi-subsistence livelihoods of Hmong and Mien farmers. One notable result has been the unprecedented need for farmers to access cash to purchase newly introduced farm supplies (Baulch *et al.* 2007; Bonnin & Turner 2012).

To meet their growing cash needs, Hmong and Mien farmers have increasingly turned to a number of cash-based livelihood strategies, such as cultivating and trading black cardamom, collecting and trading non-timber forest products, trading animals, wage work, selling traditional textiles and crafts, and providing trekking services to tourists (Turner *et al.* 2015). These cash needs have also recast water buffalo, chicken, pigs, ducks, and goats—all traditionally raised by Hmong and Mien households for draft work, animist rituals, and/or household consumption—into

tradable commodities. Formerly sold only in emergencies, these animals now represent a form of living 'financial capital' that households can sell for the cash needed to navigate an increasingly monetized landscape. Complicating things further, increasing extreme weather events have caused the deaths of thousands of prized water buffalo across these uplands, while growing land constraints are removing important grazing lands (Rousseau *et al.* 2019). Some farmers are now buying mechanical ploughs for the first time, dealing with repair and fuel costs that were previously nonexistent (Delisle & Turner 2016).

DRAWING IN THE UPLANDS – OUR APPROACH

The first author completed 70 in-depth interviews with semi-subsistence Hmong and Mien farmers in Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, from May to July 2019. He worked alongside a male lowland Kinh (ethnic majority) research assistant, who had prior experience working with upland ethnic minority communities and was conscious of lowlander biases. The first author also completed participant observation and oral histories, while the second author has completed fieldwork in the region with ethnic minorities since 1999, helping to provide longitudinal contextual insights.

During interviews, farmers were invited to conduct a drawing elicitation activity, with 21 farmers agreeing to participate (5 Hmong; 16 Mien). Drawing participants ranged in age from 23 to 85, with 12 women and nine men, all of whom provided one drawing. Both men and women participants were positive about the activity and provided nuanced reflections, as highlighted in the case studies below. Most participants had primary school education, with men having been at school slightly longer than women on average. Some participants noted, however, that they could neither write nor read well. As upland, ethnic minority semi-subsistence farmers, all participants were deemed 'poor' by Vietnamese state categorizations, despite subtle differences that we note below regarding different hamlets.

Procedure and considerations – When undertaking drawing elicitation, researchers must first determine whether to request participants' drawings when individuals are first recruited, in order to 'combat researcher bias', or later in the interview process, to first 'develop a level of [participant] trust' (Kearney & Hyle 2004, pp. 378, 379). We decided to introduce the drawing activity toward the end of interviews so that rapport could be developed before asking participants to partake in a new and perhaps for some, stressful activity. This approach also allowed us to better gauge if participants seemed interested in the research topic as a whole and the time they might be willing to offer.

Each drawing participant was provided with the same prompt:

Please draw your relationship to animals. It can be anything you'd like to draw. The quality of the drawing isn't important; you don't need to know how to draw or to have gone to school. We'll wait outside [the house] while you draw. When you're finished, we'll return to discuss your drawing.

We provided participants with paper and a pack of crayons or coloured pencils, which they could keep if they wished. We told participants they could take as long as they needed to complete their drawing. We also encouraged participants to refrain from including text (although some added phrases to their illustrations, which we accepted without comment). During two initial trials of staying with participants while they drew, participants seemed pressured by our presence; we thus decided to leave the house at this stage to see if they would feel more comfortable, which follow-up interviews confirmed to be the case. Finally, we asked participants to explain the meaning of their drawing during a subsequent interview phase. We did this directly following the drawing exercise so that the reasoning behind the elements drawn would be fresh in the participants' minds and because we risked these busy farmers being away in distant fields on a return visit, or refusing to participate further due to time constraints. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded, enabling us to apply thematic and axial coding to the drawing interview transcripts.²

Kearney and Hyle (2004) raise a number of elements to consider when completing drawing

research, including whether the drawing activity should be implemented one-to-one or in groups and the degree to which the activity and subsequent interview should be structured (see also Nossiter & Biberman 1990). While we had hoped the drawings could be completed individually, we soon recognized that that did not reflect Hmong and Mien cultural norms as other household members or neighbours were often present, sometimes also deciding to draw as well. Wanting to be as inclusive as possible, we allowed anyone interested to participate, but then focused on the original interviewee for the follow-up interview regarding their drawing.

Although we primarily sought to elicit participants' perspectives on historical and affective elements of their human-animal entanglements, we also asked participants about their reflections on the drawing activity itself. We gained thought-provoking insights into how adult participants with low levels of formal schooling viewed and experienced this research method, which we discuss further below.

ILLUSTRATING HUMAN-ANIMAL ENTANGLEMENTS

By coding and analysing participants' drawings through thematic analysis, a wide range of customs, emotions, entanglements, memories, places and phenomena emerged as broad themes. We also noted that just under half (9/21) of the participants focused exclusively on buffalo during the drawing activities, while the remaining participants' drawings included a mix of chickens (6), pigs (4), geese (3), as well as horses, cranes and/or carp (1 each). Accordingly, we include three drawing examples here that focus on buffalo, as this was the most commonly drawn animal and represents a highly symbolic part of Hmong and Mien lifeworlds. From these drawings, we highlight three subthemes that emerged. We then present two more drawings that showcase entanglements with chickens, pigs and fish, as these elicited other interesting and diverse discussions which we delve into below.

Sadness in the snow – Nhia³ was a Hmong man in his 20s from a particularly mountainous,

remote hamlet in Sa Pa District. After drawing [Figure 1](#) in response to our prompt, he explained:

This shows me crying when my buffalo died in the snow. She was 10 years old, and I found her under a Hmong apple tree. I was so sad ... I loved that buffalo. I recently bought a young buffalo, but I'm not sure my other buffalo can be replaced...

As briefly introduced earlier, extreme weather events have been occurring more frequently and intensely over the past 15 years in Vietnam's northern uplands. Along with many other participants, Nhia had experienced the devastating loss of his family's prized buffalo because of these events. Importantly, even though he had since bought a mechanical plough, he emphasized that he needed to continue raising buffalo. This was due to the spiritual and economic values (and we would add emotional values, evidenced by his mention of 'love' for his buffalo) that buffalo held for him and his household. The emotional dimension of these entanglements became even clearer when Nhia conveyed how he felt when drawing: 'I felt sad when I was drawing this picture because I was thinking about that moment'.

Fragmented land holdings and childhood companionships – Hin, a Mien man in his 30s from another remote, mountainous hamlet, had had the responsibility as a child, like many Hmong and Mien children, of feeding and looking after his family's buffalo when the

buffalo was not labouring in the fields. Hin described his drawing ([Figure 2](#)):

When I was younger, I used to tie my buffalo under a tree after a day [of work], so the buffalo could rest in the shade. We [neighbouring children] used to herd our families' buffalo into the same spot, and then we'd play with crickets together. Nowadays, grasslands have become more fragmented, so children need to go to different locations to graze buffalo and they can't be together anymore.

Hin added how the decreasing availability of land for raising and grazing buffalo had caused some households to reduce the size of their buffalo herds, or to stop raising buffalo altogether. As a married adult, Hin did not have any buffalo, but was keen to buy one. In the meantime, however, both his picture and his reflection on the drawing activity revealed the profoundly social role that buffalo play—creating companionship between people, as well as between people and buffalo. He exclaimed: 'Drawing this made me remember when I was a child; now, I'm 30!'

'The buffalo is like a friend' – Lu was a Hmong woman in her 20s from a hamlet more integrated into the market economy than the other hamlets where we completed interviews (due to her hamlet's location near a local busy town). Lu conveyed the meaning of her drawing ([Figure 3](#)):



Figure 1. Nhia's depiction of his sadness when his prized water buffalo died.



Figure 2. Hin's family's buffalo being tethered after a day's work, while Hin played with other neighbouring children also looking after their household buffalo.

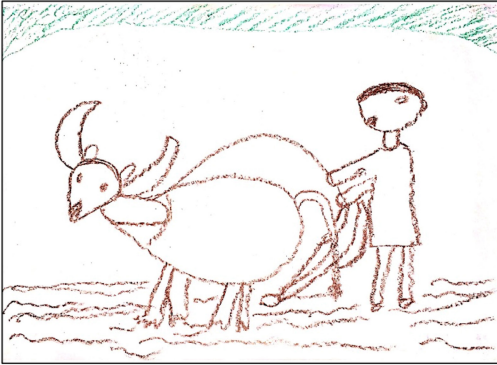


Figure 3. Lu's drawing of a male family member working with his buffalo in a rice paddy field.

Buffalo are more friendly than any other animal because buffalo work with people, and people need to protect and feed buffalo. The buffalo is like a friend. Buffalo are helping the life. On a funeral day, we have to use [sacrifice] buffalo. We have to. And in the fields, we have to use them for working.

Here, Lu emphasized the varied and profound connections that entangle humans and buffalo. These connections arise in and co-create everyday life including in work and spiritual settings, whether through preparing terraces for rice cultivation or honouring a loved one who has passed. Reflecting on the drawing activity, Lu added:

When I was drawing this, I thought about my father and other local men here using buffalo in their rice fields. This is like a memory. I still see this scene, but less than before. Before, we didn't have ploughs, so 100 percent of people used buffalo, but now about 70 percent of people use ploughs.

Despite the increasing use of mechanical ploughs—including by Lu's household—she was clear in asserting that buffalo not only remain important for their draft power (especially for ploughing steeper, narrower terraces), but also for their friendship and sacrificial roles.

Necessity and beauty – Kao was a Mien man in his early 30s from a relatively rugged and remote hamlet. Through his drawing (Figure 4), Kao conveyed a combination of fundamental cultural traditions, childhood

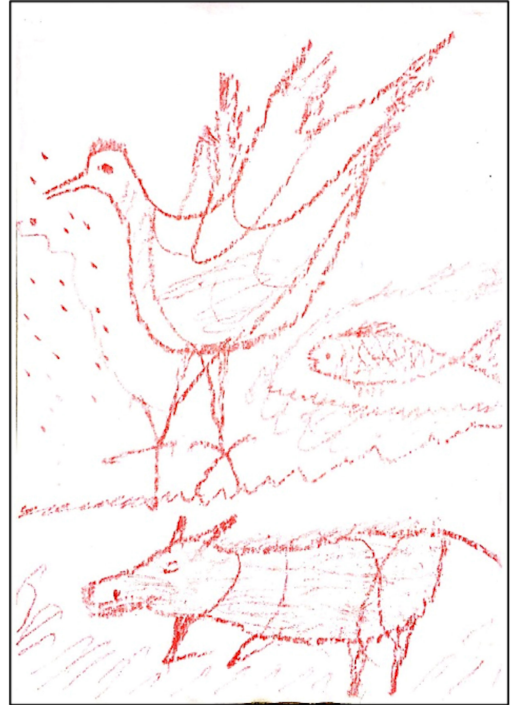


Figure 4. Kao's drawing of a chicken, carp and pig.

memories and wishful desires. Kao began explaining his drawing by stating: 'We can't live without chickens and pigs because they contribute a lot to our family. We use them for ceremonies'. Similar to Lu's explanation of buffalo sacrifice for Hmong funeral rites, chickens and pigs are regularly sacrificed by both Hmong and Mien households in a range of animist rituals, including shamanistic healing practices and spirit offerings for bountiful agricultural harvests (Tapp 1989). The carp that Kao drew, however, does not embody such spiritual values among Hmong and Mien households in upland Vietnam. After drawing the chicken and pig, Kao recounted: 'My dad had a fish pond [of carp], and I really liked it...Fish are beautiful to me. I wish I had a pond, but there's nowhere to build it'. The childhood emotions reflected in the fish drawing add another dimension to human–animal entanglements in upland Vietnam, namely the idea of beauty and enjoyment. While Kao noted that the fish were for 'selling and eating', the pleasure he derived from simply watching the fish in

his father's pond cannot be discounted as an emotion that has entangled fish and farmers.

Gender and family – San was a Mien man his 40s from a hamlet fairly accessible by road from Sa Pa Town and located near a tourist ecolodge. San's drawing (Figure 5) of his relationship to animals reflects the following:

The male chicken is on the right and the female is on the left, and this is our house [in the middle of the page]. They're a couple. When the female is giving birth, the male will go around the house to protect her... You can see the eggs [next to the female]. If a chicken gives birth without a male, the eggs can't successfully hatch.... Chickens must be in a couple.

San further elaborated upon the gender roles of the chickens depicted in his drawing in our discussion: 'I drew chickens because when we first separate from our family and get married, we must have chickens. When we have chickens, we can sell some to gain money to buy pigs'. For newlyweds, these chickens might be acquired as part of the bride-wealth or purchased with bride-wealth cash. Here, the familial functions of chickens connect to the familial function of humans too; not only is the chicken couple somewhat analogous to a married couple in this case, but the success of chicken couples (i.e., to 'successfully hatch' their eggs) also influences the success of human couples establishing a livelihood. As San mentions, it is common for newlyweds to start with raising chickens, before selling the chickens to buy and raise larger (and more expensive) animals, such as pigs.

These brief examples of the drawing exercises begin to reveal the profoundly emotional, social and spiritual values that different animals held for many of our Hmong and Mien participants, revealed through

their drawings and reflections. For water buffalo specifically, participants maintained these values despite important external impacts on upland farming approaches and broader livelihoods, such as extreme weather events, agrarian transformations, and growing land constraints.⁴ Yet, it is also interesting to note that the drawing exercise allowed participants to highlight experiences that have become more 'absent' with declining buffalo numbers, especially noted in Hin and Lu's responses.

DRAWING STRENGTHS AND COMPLEXITIES

By asking participants a broad question and then giving them time and space to respond through a visual medium, participants provided carefully considered drawings and commentaries. The emotions, memories and relationships evoked during the drawing exercises were notably more vivid and comprehensive than those revealed through our initial conventional interview prompts. These findings not only reaffirm the benefits of drawing, as highlighted by other researchers, but also demonstrate the strengths this method offers in uncovering more intuitive thoughts, particularly among adults who, in this case, were semi-literate and had little or no formal schooling. This further underscores the value that drawing can bring to more-than-human research, especially given the often-abstract nature of this focus of inquiry. As Lu poignantly noted while reflecting on the activity: 'I think you want to know exactly how we feel about the animals here, like if we think they're very important or not, and then when we draw, it comes from the



Figure 5. San's drawing of a male and female chicken outside of his house.

mind... More from heart and mind and nature' (Figure 3).

Despite their own concerns over drawing quality (discussed below), farmers noted that they enjoyed this exercise, and conversations regarding their drawings flowed freely, with farmers keen to discuss their reflections on the drawing activity itself. A 23-year-old Hmong woman noted: 'It was fun, but hard... It was a hard question', with other participants repeating that the activity had been 'fun'. Participants also appreciated having some privacy while drawing, as Hin (Figure 2) explained: 'I felt more comfortable when you went outside'.

Importantly, the drawing exercises provided more space and time for participants to reflect and provide the information that *they* deemed interesting and relevant. In the particular context in which we were working, this contrasts markedly with typical state-researcher approaches for eliciting information from these communities, which typically rely on very quantitative, extractive approaches (Michaud 2009). As an older Hmong man told the second author in 2019: 'The officials never listen to us; it's just "answer this, answer that". When they come, I try to hide in the fields [laughs]'.

Notwithstanding these encouraging findings, we encountered several challenges. Every participant expressed initial hesitation toward drawing due to their perceived (in)ability to draw and/or their level of formal education. Despite explicit reassurances that neither element mattered to us, some shyly refused to participate in the drawing exercise due to these concerns. For example, one woman mentioned that she had never held a pen before, adding that she only knew how to embroider (incredibly intricate) clothing. Other participants suggested that their children could complete the drawing exercise; a response that seemed to be based on parents assuming that their children were able to draw better due to higher levels of schooling. Yet, positively, a number of participants mentioned that their initial hesitations faded once they began drawing, as a 40-year-old Mien woman stated: 'It was hard at first, but gradually got better after picking up the pencil'.

After participants completed their drawings, some also expressed embarrassment about their drawing or asked to redo it, to make it 'better'. One participant repeatedly apologized after we started discussing her drawing, wanting to improve it after claiming that it was 'not good'. We were able to appease this participant by assuring her that her initial drawing was perfect for our project.⁵ In a more light-hearted situation, one participant's wife suggested that her husband redo his drawing, chiding him that it was not good enough. Again, we reassured them both that the drawing was most appropriate.

The importance of the follow-up conversational interviews for understanding the content of the elicited drawings and why certain animals had been depicted became even more apparent during a conversation with Yen. A Mien woman in her 40s from a hamlet close to Sa Pa Town, Yen noted that she had drawn chickens despite wanting (and initially trying) to draw a horse. Yen explained her drawing (Figure 6): 'These are chickens and baby chicks, and I'm feeding them. This is a foot trail made by the chickens.' However, when we asked about the foot trail, Yen

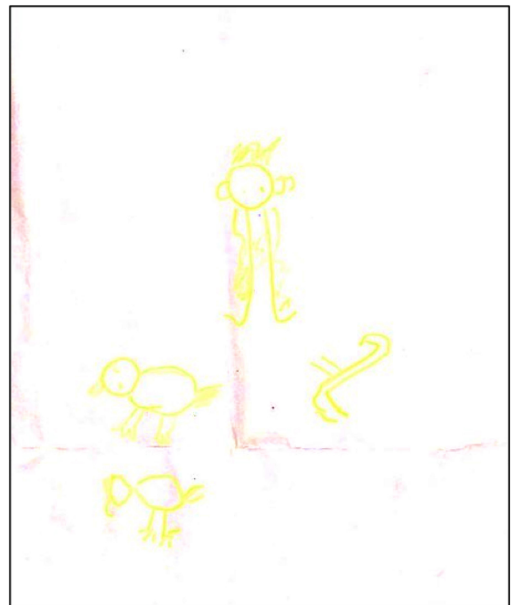


Figure 6. Yen's drawing of her feeding chickens after breakfast (with the abandoned horse drawing, which became a 'trail' on the right).

mentioned that this was initially supposed to be a horse, which she modified to be a trail after feeling that she could not complete the horse. This insight allowed us to expand and enrich the discussion to include reflections on two animals and their entanglements with humans. Yen detailed: ‘I wanted to draw a horse first. Before we had roads and vehicles, I used horses to carry rice. They helped us a lot’. She then added that she drew chickens because: ‘I like chickens. After I eat breakfast, I feed the chickens’. Our interactions with Yen thus highlighted the worthiness of reflecting upon the activity as a whole with participants, to reveal such considerations and concerns, while also opening space for further discussions of details not drawn.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our research employing drawing elicitation with Hmong and Mien farmers in Vietnam’s northern uplands has demonstrated the method’s effectiveness in capturing the deep and often-intangible aspects of human–animal entanglements. This approach provided participants with a unique medium through which they could express complex relationships embedded in their cultural, spiritual and emotional lives, which have often eluded more conventional research methods used in this setting to date. Undertaking this drawing elicitation exercise produced a number of important insights regarding both human–animal entanglements, and the method itself. The drawing activity gave participants time to carefully reflect on how they related to domesticated animals, as well as how these relationships have been modified or upheld over time. While farmers have been navigating a number of serious livelihood changes stemming from extreme weather events, market integration pressures and land constraints, many participants were also actively maintaining spiritual, emotional and labour-based links to their animals—which their drawings highlighted. We were able to distinguish, for example, a number of ‘traditional’ roles that water buffalo have played for Hmong and Mien households over the past 20–30 years, which they continue to play. Participants not only reflected on their

current relationships with these beasts of burden, but also their childhood relationships to these animals as well. Buffalo have held an especially revered place due to their importance as forms of physical and financial capital as well as their embodiment of spiritual values (particularly for Hmong individuals). These elements were teased out in the drawings and a wide range of emotions that came with these entanglements were also revealed. Meanwhile, black chickens and black pigs were found to facilitate numerous aspects of everyday life for Hmong and Mien communities, including economic and bride-wealth exchanges, ritual sacrifices, and health practices. The drawings also allowed participants to recount the beauty that they find in fish. Overall, these drawings reflected how Hmong and Mien farmers have responded to agrarian and climatic change processes that have the potential to profoundly transform their relationships to animals and their livelihoods, while revealing meaningful human–animal entanglements that have stood the test of time.

Despite certain challenges, such as participants’ feelings of ineptitude regarding drawing due to partial literacy and/or a lack of formal schooling, we argue that drawing elicitation can be a powerful tool. It can help initiate important and contemplative reflections regarding abstract and often-unspoken thoughts and emotions. Moreover, drawing participants were very positive about having the opportunity to reflect on these relationships through this method. This underscores the method’s potential as an empowering research tool, enabling participants to share their perspectives and to express agency in representing their lived experiences.

This study not only advances our understanding of human–animal relationships in specific cultural contexts, but it also reinforces the importance of developing tailored, sensitive research methods and methodologies that can better address the complexities of such interactions. At a time when there is a growing call for ‘more inclusive, culturally specific, actor-oriented approaches to livelihoods that consider microscale social relations and their embeddedness within local socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems’ (Turner *et al.* 2015, p. 6; see also Forsyth & Michaud 2011),

drawing elicitation shows promise for engaging with diverse populations and exploring the rich, dynamic interconnections at the heart of human–animal relations.

As such, we advocate for the broader adoption of visual and creative research methods within the social sciences, particularly for studies in settings where traditional approaches may falter. This methodological expansion is a helpful tool to glean the multifaceted realities of human lives, especially in regions where literacy is not universal. By integrating such innovative approaches into social science research, scholars can enhance the depth and breadth of their studies and relay more meaningful contributions to academia and the communities and individuals who participate in such studies.

Accordingly, the findings from our use of drawing elicitation not only contribute to the academic discourse on methodological innovation, but they also have practical implications for policy and community engagement. While continuing to refine and adapt these methods, we aim to foster a deeper dialogue among researchers, participants, and policymakers, ensuring that the nuances of local life are not just recorded but are also better understood and appreciated. This approach can potentially inform more suitable interventions by state and non-governmental organizations in these uplands and beyond.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflicts of interest to disclose.

Endnotes

¹For more on our research findings regarding changes in human–animal entanglements over time in upland northern Vietnam, please see Garber and Turner (2023). This *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* article specifically

concentrates on our findings from adapting the drawing elicitation method, as well as the strengths and limitations we found in its application.

²Our approach loosely followed Kearney and Hyle's (2004) suggested steps for conducting drawing research, with a few modifications.

³All names are gender-appropriate pseudonyms.

⁴For more on the causes and consequences of these changing human–animal relationships, please see Garber and Turner (2023).

⁵We observed that most of the drawings produced in our study were line-based and monochromatic (primarily consisting of lines without much use of colour). However, participants did not have specific explanations for choosing this drawing approach when asked, often simply responding: "I don't know. I just did that," indicating a spontaneous or instinctive approach to their artwork. This observation aligns with findings from other research employing drawing elicitation, which also reported a predominance of line-based, monochromatic drawings (Kearney & Hyle 2004; Coen 2016).

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