Red Stamps and Gold Stars

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Dilemmas and Detours: Fieldwork with Ethnic Minorities in Upland Southwest China, Vietnam, and Laos

Sarah Turner

The topics at the heart of this collection interweave the professional, political, and private. By chronicling all the messiness, compromises, and ethical dilemmas that come with fieldwork in socialist Asia, the authors cast light on the realities of attempting to record and analyze the everyday life, practices, and challenges of ethnic minorities in China, Vietnam, and Laos. As human geographers or social anthropologists, we are all actively engaged in research with ethnic minorities in socialist Asia and have conducted in-depth fieldwork at our research sites either for continuous periods or during repeat visits, the latter in part reflecting the realities of fieldwork in socialist countries (see Figure 1.1). In this volume, we scrutinize our positionality in the field, question the social scientist's subjective gaze, and debate representations of "the other" and the importance of reflexivity in social science research. We do not shy away from deliberating over mistakes made along the way and appreciate the rewards that can come from such critical reflection. In turn, we hope that this volume can act as a partial road map, demystifying fieldwork and providing directions to help ease novice researchers – or those more experienced elsewhere but new to the region – into and through their fieldwork experiences, allowing for richer and more meaningful field encounters and interactions.

The principal organizing theme of this volume concerns the dilemmas that arise, the negotiations one must engage in, and the possible solutions that can be found when undertaking fieldwork among ethnic minorities in socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos. Alternative terms such as "market-socialism," "socialist-market economy," "transforming socialist countries," "late-socialism," and "post-socialist" are also used when exploring contemporary events in the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, as well as "socialism with Chinese principles" and even "neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control" (Harvey 2005, 120). First, one must note

the important political differences between today's Asian locales and "post-socialist" Eastern Europe and Russia. In the former Soviet Union and its satellites, state socialism collapsed in the late 1980s and the shift towards market integration and capitalism occurred rapidly as these states departed from Marxism. A small but growing literature on fieldwork in post-socialist Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union includes edited collections by De Soto and Dudwick (2000), Hann, Humphrey, and Verdery (2002), and Hörschelmann and Stenning (2008), among others.[1] Although important in their own right, the contributors here did not find these collections of direct use when stepping into the realm of socialist Asia. Economic reforms have been far more gradual in China (beginning in 1978), Vietnam (1986), and Laos (1986), while the socialist governments have also maintained a firm grip on centralized political control, with all three remaining single-party states. This results in a rather different milieu for undertaking fieldwork and especially for gaining access to ethnic-minority voices. Reflecting these political and historical differences from post-socialist Eastern Europe, most contributors to this volume continue to refer to China, Vietnam, and Laos as socialist; this choice was left to the individual.

A further characteristic of our work concerns the everyday realities that ethnic minorities in these three countries experience. The participants in our research are seldom in positions of political power or financial wealth, but neither are they passive victims of the changing circumstances that are entwining economic liberalization with centralized authoritarian political structures. Frequently, ethnic minorities quietly contest the "rules" of the lowland ruling majorities; they are well aware of the malleability of culture, history, and social relations (Turner 2012). Our research projects hope to shed light on the impacts of and reactions to such challenging circumstances as environmental change and deforestation, outside aid programs and their (un)intended effects, agrarian transitions and livelihood strategies, market integration, state ideologies, state/society relations, and the multiple impacts of globalization.

Not surprisingly, socialist rule in these countries plays a substantial part in shaping our fieldwork experiences as we attempt to answer our research questions. Many of the contributors to this volume have also undertaken fieldwork outside this realm, and this provides context for us to reflect on the impact of socialist rule on field relationships, working conditions, and perceptions. We are concerned with the establishment and maintenance of positive relationships in the field with ethnic-minority informants (who often become friends), political gatekeepers, and local researchers, as well as with how to generate and sustain trust. Working with ethnic minorities often generates a strong desire to help right wrongs and support local customs, perhaps in direct opposition to the state's wishes. "Professional detachment" is neither an option nor a goal for any of this volume's contributors,

and we explore the quandaries raised when trying to balance empathy with observation, and scholarship with advocacy.

But let us start with the pragmatic issues. To be allowed to undertake officially authorized social science fieldwork in the contemporary political climate in China, Vietnam, or Laos – countries flying one or more "gold stars" on their flags, or, in the case of Laos, on their national emblem from 1975-91, and on contemporary military uniforms – one must have the correct "red stamps." Besides the political symbolism embedded in this colour, these stamps must adorn letters and authorizations provided by all levels of the state apparatus in order to confer on the bearer the proper credentials. Most frequently, gaining such authorization (often for a fee) entails being linked to either a state research institute or a local university. Those new to the field often gain this access through the pre-established contacts of colleagues or supervisors, although it is possible, but not always guaranteed, to gain access through more direct meetings, such as "cold calling" an institute in the hope that someone will help out a newcomer (cf. Scoggin 1994). There are a number of compelling reasons that it is important to have official permission to undertake fieldwork in these countries, despite the drawbacks (Hansen 2006). In Chapter 3, Stéphane Gros notes how he came to this realization while in the field, reflecting on the problems a lack of authorization was going to cause not only him but also those with whom he wanted to interact.

It is also possible to gain authorizations and logistical field support through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This raises a different set of concerns and ethical dilemmas, as NGOs may have their own research agendas that they want employees or consultants to follow, or may lay claim to research results after fieldwork and analysis (McAllister, Chapter 9; see also Daviau 2010). Participatory action research and participatory geographic information systems involve collaborative research as another potential trajectory, moving away from more traditional ethnographic studies. As much as we might want to employ such approaches, however, these are still difficult to implement in socialist states, where authorities remain cautious of those wanting to undertake long-term fieldwork with extended interactions with upland communities (cf. McKinnon 2010).

What one might consider the first hurdle before reaching "the field" – gaining a research visa and the required official permissions and red stamps – is soon followed by a range of other anxieties and coping strategies. Of the three countries under scrutiny, fieldwork procedures and practices for foreign researchers in China are the best documented to date (Thurston and Pasternak 1983; Curran and Cook 1993; Rofel 1993; Herrold 1999; Pieke 2000; Bin Liang and Hong Lu 2006; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Hsu 2010). This relative wealth of reflection is not surprising given China's size and the fact that it reopened to outside social science researchers before either

Vietnam or Laos, although the initial acceptance of American researchers by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 1978 was curtailed in 1981, when an American graduate student was expelled, and fieldwork thereafter was significantly restricted for quite some time (see Thurston and Pasternak 1983; Pieke 2000; Harrell 2007). Hitherto discussions on fieldwork among *ethnic minorities* in China have been far less common, with Smith (2006) working in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Hansen (2006) working with Naxi and later Han migrants to ethnic-minority regions, Yeh (2006) working in Tibet, and Harrell (2007) working with a number of ethnic minorities in southwest China, especially Yi and Nuosu, being among the few academic authors explicitly discussing fieldwork procedures and reflecting on their experiences among ethnic minorities.

In comparison, very little has been written on fieldwork practices in Vietnam with *any* ethnic group, beyond Bertrand (1994) and Scott, Miller, and Lloyd (2006) working predominantly with the Kinh majority. Bertrand (1994) explores fieldwork conditions in the early 1990s, considering the differences between working in the north and the south, and suggests that whereas local authorities in the north follow directives from the capital diligently, local leaders in the south "make their own law." He analyzes the role of local gatekeepers and the administrative obstacles to undertaking fieldwork with coastal sampan dwellers. Scott, Miller, and Lloyd (2006) profile the conditions they met when carrying out fieldwork as graduate students in three different locales in Vietnam in the late 1990s, focusing on the procedures they were required to follow and the gatekeepers and bureaucratic hurdles they faced along the way. These three authors likewise observe the lack of information on fieldwork in Vietnam, noting that earlier authors, such as Marr (1993), Fforde (1996), Kerkvliet (1995), and Forbes (1996), tended to make only passing reference to research procedures and conditions. Yet, as the country opens up to Western-based researchers, more scholars, such as Sowerwine (2004; Chapter 6) and Bonnin (2012; Chapter 7), are consciously reflecting on their fieldwork experiences with ethnic minorities in their graduate theses.

Turning to Laos, the cupboard is nearly bare. Outside this volume, Vandergeest and colleagues (2003) analyze a North/South collaboration with the National University of Laos, yet with a focus on institutional capacity building and no mention of fieldwork per se. Indeed, Enfield (2010) stresses the need for far more sustained field research residence in Laos. A small number of scholars are beginning to accomplish this, yet nuanced reflections on such fieldwork are still rare. This volume helps to fill that void with contributions by Petit (Chapter 8) and McAllister (Chapter 9).

To facilitate a better understanding of the specific contexts in which we are engaged, in the next section I briefly introduce the ethnic-minority participants in our research. Then I define and review the core elements
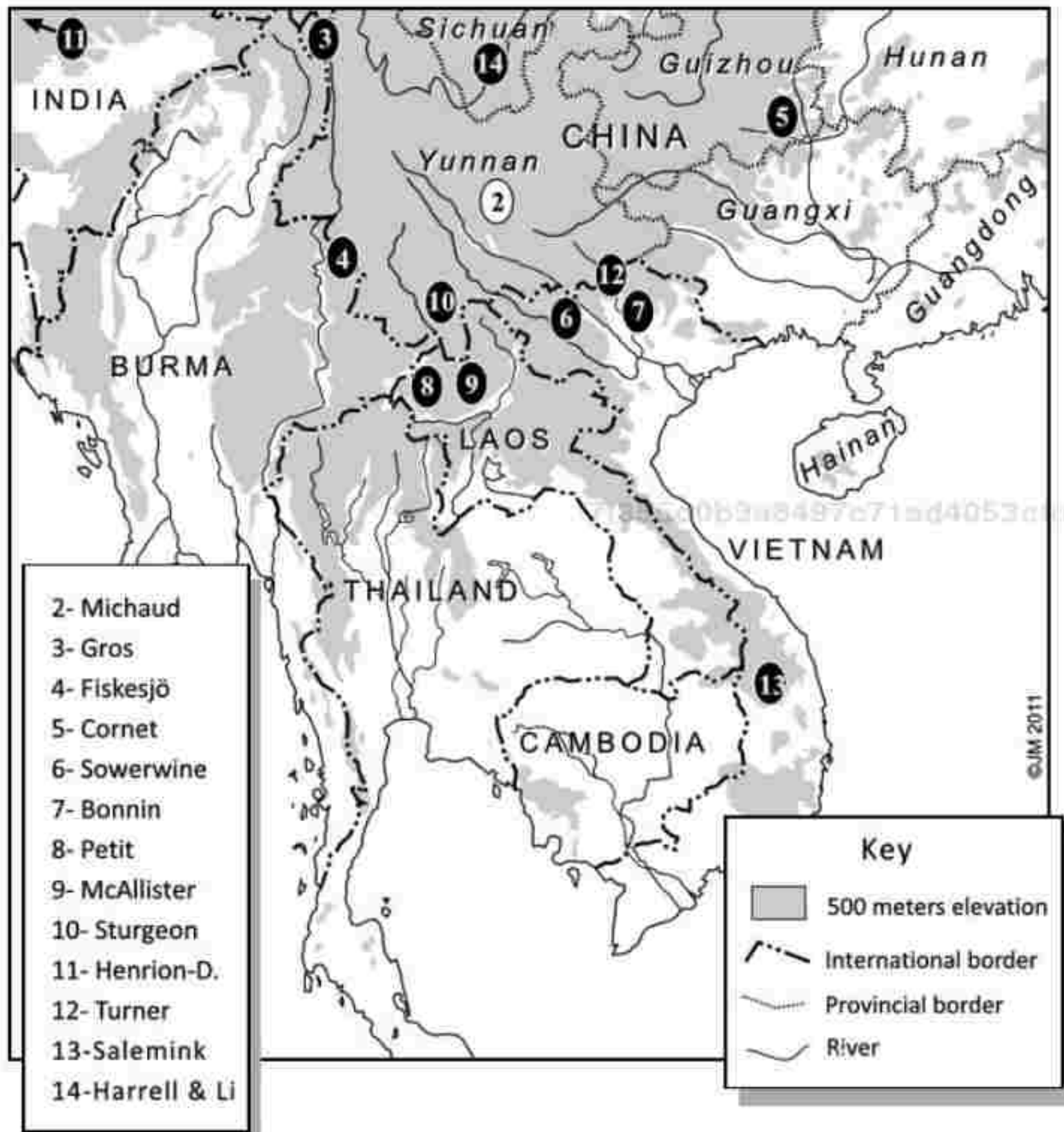
Figure 1.1 Locations of authors' fieldwork in socialist Asia, with respective chapter number.

considered in this volume, beyond the nuts and bolts of physically getting to a field site – including positionality and reflexivity, power relations and the role of gatekeepers, and ethical dilemmas. Here I emphasize previous material on fieldwork in China, Vietnam, and Laos.

It should be noted that a conscious decision was made to focus this volume on the experiences of overseas/foreign/non-local researchers. This is because the experiences reflected on here are so very different from those encountered by local researchers undertaking fieldwork in their own country and those travelling from these socialist countries to the Global North (as highlighted in Bamo, Harrell, and Ma 2007). As we meet a small but growing number of critically engaged ethnic-minority graduate students and scholars (predominantly from China to date),[2] we hope that companion works that go beyond our approach will become available. Harrell and Li's contribution

to this volume (Chapter 14) and my own focus on the voices of Chinese and Vietnamese research assistants (Chapter 12) are possible bridges in this regard.

Meeting Our Informants

According to the latest census information available in the three countries studied here, there are over 110 million people belonging to ethnic-minority groups in the whole of China, Vietnam, and Laos. Our fieldwork has concentrated in the southwestern uplands of China, the northern and central uplands of Vietnam, and upland Laos, located within what has been called the Southeast Asian Massif or "Zomia" (Scott 2009), as discussed further by Michaud in Chapter 2.[3] This area incorporates the uplands over roughly 300-500 metres in elevation (grey in Figure 1.1), encompassing the high ranges extending southeast from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau and all the monsoon high country drained by the lower Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong, and Red Rivers and their tributaries. In the part of this Southeast Asian Massif shared by China, Vietnam, and Laos, there live approximately 70-80 million ethnic-minority individuals.

As detailed by Michaud (Chapter 2), since 1981 China has officially recognized fifty-five groups of "minority nationalities" *(shaoshu minzu)*. Thirty-two of these are indigenous to the southwest area, including Tibet, with a population of over 64 million. In Vietnam, fifty-three groups of "minority nationalities" *(các dân tộc thiểu số)* have been officially recognized since 1979, and those living in the uplands number over 8.5 million (MacKerras 2003; Michaud 2006). In Laos, of the forty-nine ethnicities *(sonphao)* now recognized by the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC), forty-seven are minorities, totalling 2.5 million people (Ovesen 2004; National Statistics Centre 2005).

In China, after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, "minority nationalities" *(shaoshu minzu)* had their cultures recognized again. Official ethnic minorities are now awarded certain "affirmative action" measures, such as exemption from the one-child policy, fewer taxes, and preferential university admission (Gladney 2004; Michaud 2009). Nevertheless, although primary education may be available in local ethnic-minority languages, one must be fluent in Mandarin to access higher education as well as numerous off-farm employment opportunities.

In Vietnam, *Đổi Mới*, the Economic Renovation decreed in 1986 at the Sixth National Congress and implemented over the following years, has reduced the level of state authoritarianism to some degree. A policy of "selective cultural preservation" appears to best describe the state's approach to ethnic minorities, with cultural performances, material culture, and tourist items being seen as worthy of preservation (especially on VTV5, the state-run television channel especially directed towards ethnic-minority viewers).

Concurrently, "unsavoury" practices such as slash-and-burn/swidden agriculture and expenditures for rituals and shamans are strongly discouraged (McElwee 2004). As a whole, however, upland ethnic minorities continue to be little understood by lowland Kinh, and are often characterized as "backward" or "lazy" (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Koh 2002; Sowerwine 2004; Turner, Chapter 12).

It has been suggested by Goudineau (2000) that the shared state ideologies regarding ethnic minorities in China and Vietnam are also reflected in Lao political strategies. Here a relocation policy for ethnic minorities is at the heart of the government's plans for upland non-Lao settlements (Daviau 2010). Such policies "result in the implicit confirmation of ethnic Lao political and cultural superiority" (Ovesen 2004, 214). Ovesen (2004, 222) adds that "the official view tends to be that non-Lao traditions are archaic and not conducive to improving the socio-economic conditions of the group in question" (see also Stuart-Fox 1991). Given that these are the discursive spaces in which our fieldwork is carried out, the themes reviewed next and expanded on in subsequent chapters are not entirely surprising.

Pre-Field Preparation: Reflecting on Positionality, Power Relations, and Ethical Dilemmas

Positionality and Reflexivity

Debates over positionality and reflexivity among social anthropologists and postcolonial and feminist geographers have been growing in critical discussions of the politics and ethics of fieldwork since the 1980s.[4] Positionality involves the recognition that "all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins" (Valentine 2002, 116). Hopkins (2007, 391) proposes that such positionality is inclusive of one's race, class, gender, age, sexuality, and (dis)ability, as well as life experiences. These characteristics are relational and never static. Others suggest that positionality also includes philosophical perspectives, ways of viewing the world, political leanings, and specific combinations of these that reinforce how we represent peoples and places (McDowell 1994).

In turn, reflexivity can be considered "self-critical sympathetic introspection" coupled with "the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher" (England 1994, 82). Such approaches are echoed as well as critiqued by many from the fields of social anthropology and human geography, including McDowell (1992), Katz (1994), Radcliffe (1994), Moss (1995), Prattis (1996), Rose (1997), and Kleinsasser (2000). The benefit of reflexivity is that it "allows the researcher to be more open to challenges to their theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises" (England 1994, 89). Critical reflexivity compels social science researchers to grapple with how and why

the meanings and perceptions of theoretical and conceptual tools are shaped and altered, which in turn impacts analyses and interpretations. Reflexivity also changes researchers and their relations with others in the field. In one of the more searching critiques of reflexivity, Rose (1997, 316) argues that "the authority of the researcher can be problematized by rendering her agency as a performative effort of her relations with her researched others." She adds that because the researcher's identity is fluid and changes in an iterative process, we need to think more in terms of "situated knowledges," "hybrid spaces of research," and "webbed connections" (Rose 1997, 308, 315, 317). While our contributors explicitly or implicitly take on this challenge here, it still remains relatively uncommon for field researchers to document the practice of these considerations in their published work. This is certainly the case with regard to China, Vietnam, and Laos, where, until this collection, reflexivity regarding the positionality of researchers engaging with ethnic minorities has been rare.

While being mindful to not slip into reification, specific positionality characteristics have been briefly raised by Western researchers working in socialist Asia, which shows how our positionality is always influenced by those to whom we have access in the field. In Vietnam, Scott, Miller, and Lloyd (2006) noted that being female researchers facilitated easy rapport with female respondents yet resulted in far less socializing with males. At the same time, "foreignness" did grant them some invitations to male circles, placing them in a somewhat ambiguous gender role. Smith (2006, 143), researching with the Uyghur in China, also reflects on how she negotiated her positionality depending on whom she was interacting with:

> Keen to avoid being channelled into activities considered suitable for women, I re-negotiated my role afresh depending on the gender, educational and religious (nominal or observant) background of companions. With rural men and most women, I was the epitome of female modesty. With educated men, I played up my Western image and academic status. This enabled me to assume a neutral role *vis-à-vis* men, and to observe from the men's side of the room at Uyghur weddings, where guests are conventionally segregated. I was thus included in the "male fraternity" closed to the society's female members. I gained perhaps greater access than a male researcher, who would have had access to male domains but only limited access to female domains.

Likewise, Sturgeon (Chapter 10) notes how being in her late forties meant that male officials in China and Thailand took her more seriously than she believes they would have if she had been younger while completing fieldwork.

Svensson (2006), researching cultural heritage in China, quickly realized that she was not going to have fruitful interviews with local residents if she were initially observed talking and walking around a village or neighbourhood with party secretaries and local officials. She was being "positioned" by future interviewees. Likewise, Cornet (Chapter 5) soon understood that having a government-sanctioned research permit made local villagers suspicious of her motives, associating her with those they were in conflict with. Moreover, as Gros (Chapter 3) and Cornet (Chapter 5) show, we should never jump to the conclusion that a clear binary exists between lowland ethnic-majority and ethnic-minority individuals; state employees are often ethnic minorities in remote villages, adding complex layers of positionalities and power relations.

Power Relations and Gatekeepers

Relationships between researchers and the researched can lie anywhere along a spectrum from "reciprocal" to "potentially exploitive," while continuing to be "inherently hierarchical" (England 1994, 82, 86). Relationships in the field are a result of specific power structures that are highly contingent on one's own positionality, that of one's research collaborators and interviewees, the time available for fieldwork, and research goals. Certainly, specific circumstances can render the researcher "quite helpless" (Wolf 1996, 22), such as when attempting to gain permission from authorities to undertake interviews (Gros, Chapter 3; Cornet, Chapter 5; Bonnin, Chapter 7), when interviewing powerful actors (Cornet, Chapter 5; Bonnin, Chapter 7; Turner, Chapter 12), or when observing what one believes to be inappropriate behaviour or social injustice (Bonnin, Chapter 7). Yet, once again, a researcher from the Global North is frequently in a position of relative power vis-à-vis ethnic-minority interviewees. Researchers commonly have more educational qualifications, an ability to access research funds beyond local norms, the freedom to leave the field as they wish, and the capacity to decide how research results will be portrayed and disseminated (cf. Svensson 2006).

Such power relations are closely intertwined with the roles of the gatekeeper, a person who controls "opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site" (Hay 2000, 114). While a fairly narrow definition, this reflects many situations we have found ourselves in, having to negotiate with authority figures and manoeuvre around obstacles to access field sites and interviewees. More broadly, however, gatekeepers include "those who provide – directly or indirectly – access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informational" (Campbell et al. 2006, 98), reflecting the positive aspects that gatekeepers can also bring to one's fieldwork experiences (cf. Heller et al. 2011).

Hansen (2006, 81), describing fieldwork with ethnic minorities in south-west China, notes that classic participant observation is frequently impossible due to local gatekeeper decisions:

> Ethnographic fieldworkers in China are faced with a number of challenges which may not be specific for China only, but which certainly are distinct-ively different from fieldwork in many other parts of the world. Practical circumstances such as the political restrictions on research topics, limited access to data, closed areas, and control of researchers' movements, have forced anthropological fieldworkers to develop other ways of studying social life and culture than the "traditional" fieldwork method which Malinowski so tellingly called "participant observation."

Also in China, Gros (Chapter 3) and Cornet (Chapter 5) note that protocol dictates that a research proposal is usually presented to university officials – often one's initial gatekeepers – who then liaise with the local govern-ment to facilitate field access and provide an official research assistant (for a fee). Gatekeepers at all stages of this process may or may not agree to the research being proposed and the fieldwork processes one wants to follow. This can result in having to make research proposals "more palatable" for local authorities, as noted by Sowerwine (Chapter 6) and Bonnin (Chapter 7) in Vietnam, and Petit (Chapter 8) in Laos. Some of these negotiations, told from "both sides of the coin" – the Western academic and his Chinese counterparts – are also explored thoughtfully by Bamo, Harrell, and Ma (2007) in their collaborative book on fieldwork experiences in Sichuan.

Herrold (1999), in a note on research in Guizhou, southwest China, details further how the Western researcher can be at the mercy of local gatekeepers and protocol. After three months, she was finally allowed to stay overnight in local hamlets around Caohai Nature Reserve without a "minder," resulting in dinner conversations far more rewarding than formal interviews. She notes the role of her designated driver as an additional (perhaps uninten-tional) gatekeeper, with her timetable governed by his need to detour, sleep, eat, and so on. She provides an entertaining example of a typical "day in the field" that highlights the frustrations of operating with local gatekeepers and "minders." Similarly, Gros (Chapter 3) explains how, over time, local officials came to be less wary of him (see also Mueggler 2001). This was also the case for Bonnin (Chapter 7) in Vietnam, who was finally able to under-take research with self-selected research assistants rather than state appoin-tees. Interestingly, it does seem that wishing to do fieldwork in "remote" areas with ethnic minorities can aid one's ability to work (after a while) without state-appointed research assistants; Gros's assistants did not want to get snowed in over winter in the Dulong Valley, and Bonnin's state as-sistants were often too homesick, bored, or concerned about being in an

area ruled by malevolent ghosts to stay long. This also depends, of course, on official views of what and where is politically sensitive (Sowerwine, Chapter 6; Salemink, Chapter 13).

Smith (2006), recalling fieldwork procedures in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, western China, in 1995-96, judged local authorities and informants to hold much of the power in the research process, and considered herself at their mercy for access to sites and data. Nevertheless, she bargained where she could and gained remarkable access, considering that she had arrived as a doctoral student in an ethno-politically charged environment with research interests in Uyghur/Han relations. She reports that "a letter of introduction to a named cadre and a fee of £5,000 gained me a research visa (code F) and affiliation to the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, located in northwest Ürümchi" (Smith 2006, 137). She adds that while the academy "seemed bent on keeping my research indoors and firmly away from Ürümchi's Uyghurs," she was able to negotiate a trip to the south of the province "as a tourist" (137). Here, her identity as a young female worked to her advantage, as she was perceived as non-threatening. At such times, she saw merit in downplaying her official researcher role, much as Hansen did (2006).

Solinger (2006), working in China on local economic, migration, and employment questions, mostly with Han Chinese, details interesting strategies for being able to "interview up" and obtain information from potential "information gatekeepers." Prior to interviewing state officials, she gathered extensive knowledge about the interviewees and their work, including details of accomplishments and experiences. Showing such knowledge and "stroking egos" whenever possible, she argues, meant that interviewees opened up. Nevertheless, it paid to appear naïve or ignorant at other times. She thus suggests that one "appear at once knowledgeable but ignorant, knowing and not knowing" (Solinger 2006, 161). The benefits of this chameleon approach are also reflected on by Henrion-Dourcy (Chapter 11) with regard to the different positionalities she took in China and India to gain access to Tibetan respondents, and by research assistants Chloe and Vi (Chapter 12) with regard to how they devised careful strategies to address specific interviewees.

Ethical Dilemmas

More often than not, as academics undertaking fieldwork, we are required to submit ethics applications to an institutional review board. Clearly, however, ethical fieldwork goes beyond such routine procedures or "ethics for ethics' sake" (Boyd et al. 2008, 38; see also Hay 1998; Guillemin and Gilliam 2004; Berg 2007). Ethics in practice appeals to reflexive methods that guide one's morally based decisions and enable the researcher to be sensitive to and explore the ethical dimensions of fieldwork. In turn, this helps us to be

prepared, as much as possible, to cope with ethical concerns that may arise (Kleinsasser 2000; Gold 2002).

As Thurston (1983, 9) rightly contends, the ethical dilemmas of undertaking fieldwork in China, to which we would add Vietnam and Laos, "are weighty." Maintaining one's field access as an overseas researcher, especially over repeat visits, can lead to compromises over data published and debates over the integrity of academic research. If one publishes findings that are offensive to the government concerned and a senior government official reads it, it is highly likely that access will be denied – to the researcher, those associated with the researcher, or, indeed, to future scholars from the same country. Often the problem is knowing *what* exactly are considered controversial findings, as this can shift on an almost weekly basis, depending on factors often far removed from the researcher's gaze and comprehension. As Svensson (2006) notes, in China, topics that one might not immediately consider to be sensitive suddenly become so if they relate to difficult political decisions or economic interests, or if there have been open protests, even if miles away from one's field site (see also Hsu 2010). Curran and Cook (1993) further note the risks to Chinese researchers when their overseas collaborators publish critical research internationally, raising fundamental questions over self-censorship (Petit, Chapter 8; Salemink, Chapter 13).

These dilemmas, in turn, point to concerns over the safety and well-being of interviewees.[5] In China, locals, especially ethnic minorities, are frequently subjected to investigations into their private lives by state researchers and government representatives (Hansen 2006; Daviau 2010 for the Lao context). Over time, locals have come to realize that such investigations can have serious negative consequences for their lives and livelihoods, including "loss of illegally cultivated land, children sent to school, birth control," and so on (Hansen 2006, 82). Due to such state intervention, Hansen contends that any current-day researcher "is walking in the footsteps of the Communist Party." Essentially, she reminds us to reflect on who we are and how we are positioned when arriving in the field with a letter of invitation or a research assistant from a powerful institution, and the unforeseen consequences that this and our questions may have.

Svensson (2006), writing on urban redevelopment and cultural built heritage in Han Chinese cities, comments on relationships with interviewees who may have their expectations raised, in part due to a researcher's empathy. She notes that "it is natural during interviews to be sympathetic and attentive to the interviewees' concerns. But it can feel very unsatisfying to leave an interviewee/field site after a long and sympathetic interview without offering any help" (269). She continues to question the degree to which genuine friendships, and all the expectations that these can bring with them, can be formed in the field, raising concerns mirrored by contributors Fiskesjö elsewhere in China (Chapter 4) and Bonnin in Vietnam (Chapter 7).

Ethical concerns also arise regarding what is appropriate or adequate compensation for an interviewee's time (Head 2009). This can become a juggling act with the hospitality that interviewees wish to show. When interviewing ethnic minorities, outside researchers are frequently treated to food and drink, especially local alcohol, which can deplete locals' incomes and supplies considerably (Svensson 2006; Fiskesjö 2010 and Chapter 4). Interview schedules can become carefully timed to avoid mealtimes, something Christine Bonnin and I have frequently negotiated while interviewing in northern Vietnam. When arriving with food as recompense for a family whom we wish to interview, we always hope that it will remain with them for a later meal, rather than being immediately prepared to be consumed by us, a delicate negotiation that we sometimes succeed in, sometimes not. Gros (Chapter 3) also discusses concerns over consumption, this time in relation to the Drung customary New Year festival and deliberations regarding whether, after state pressure had all but extinguished it, it should be reinstated, with all the "counter-productive" consumption that it entails.

Like many of us, Svensson (2006) was often asked questions about her salary or the price of an item of her clothing, and admits to feeling uncomfortable with the wealth differential she encountered with interviewees in urban and rural China (cf. Smith 2006). She concludes that there are a host of problematic situations researchers can find themselves in, which always require negotiations over one's positionality and level of involvement versus neutrality or detachment. Only the most insensitive researchers, she holds, will not be affected by their time in the field and will not question the ethical debates raised and the success of their fieldwork.

Entering the Field

The reflections and considerations reported in this volume were the cornerstone of a workshop held in Montréal, Canada, in Spring 2011. Contributors and graduate students came together to collectively analyze the debates we are raising here, and to reflect on the similarities and differences in our fieldwork experiences. During the workshop, we discussed our draft chapters, gained insight from critical yet enthusiastic graduate student participants, and brainstormed how we would bring this project to fruition. Our contributors – seven women and seven men – span numerous nationalities from the Asia-Pacific region, North America, and Europe, and range in age, experience, and academic seniority from post-fieldwork doctoral students, to newly hired permanent researchers, to mid-career and senior professors. Among us, we speak Dao/Yao, Drung, Lao, Mandarin Chinese, Thai, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and other Asian and European languages not associated with this volume. We have been trained as human geographers and cultural and social anthropologists in a wide range of university settings, with a diversity of theoretical backgrounds. Such positionalities enable us to explore a breadth

of fieldwork experiences on the ground with ethnic minorities in socialist China, Vietnam, and Laos, and how we have learned to negotiate different environments and circumstances, trying to find workable approaches for all those involved.

Providing the context for this volume, Jean Michaud reviews in Chapter 2 the means by which ethnic minorities became classified and categorized as they are today in China, Vietnam, and Laos. He analyzes the historical complexity of highland minority policies in these three countries, while interpreting prevalent state strategies that have aimed to "handle" highland minorities in the most effective and economical way, to ensure that the nation will progress steadily.

Stéphane Gros begins our case studies in Chapter 3, researching with Drung in northwest Yunnan province, China, on the Burmese border. He provides an account of a research "blunder" when he inadvertently involved locals in a debate over whether or not local New Year's celebrations, banned for almost twenty years, should be held again. He contemplates the degree to which researchers can accept, from a methodological point of view, meddling in interlocutors' lives in such circumstances, and the extent to which we influence our fieldwork surroundings.

In Chapter 4, Magnus Fiskesjö investigates how ethnographic field research in a social context deeply marked by an ethos of reciprocity and egalitarianism is bound to become entangled in a web of relations and obligations. He reflects on a series of dilemmas during fieldwork in Wa areas of Yunnan's borderlands with Burma. These include participant intoxication as a fieldwork methodology that overlaps with indigenous social mores, and debates over local constructions of outsiders and foreigners. He explores the cultural differences between theft and borrowing, considers his roles as village photographer and pharmacist, and returns to general moral debates over the give-and-take of ethnographic information.

We then travel in Chapter 5 to southeastern Guizhou province, China, where, as a young woman, a mother, and the first foreign researcher to gain official permission to work in the area, Candice Cornet considers both the practical and methodological challenges she faced. Based on fieldwork among Dong villagers undertaken when pregnant, then with an eleven-month-old and later with an almost two-year-old child, she considers the logistics involved in bringing a child to a remote part of the Southeast Asian Massif. She considers the impact that a researcher's children can have on fieldwork, not only in terms of access to local voices but also regarding the researcher's ever-changing positionality.

Crossing the border to Lào Cai province, northern Vietnam, in Chapter 6, Jennifer Sowerwine examines the opportunities and dilemmas of being the first woman from the United States to conduct in-depth fieldwork in Dao/Yao minority villages in the northern highlands after the Vietnam War.

In particular, she discusses the ways in which war memories, the legacy of socialism, and the "lowland/highland" discourse shaped the trajectory of her research in important ways.

Still in Lào Cai province, Christine Bonnin illustrates in Chapter 7 a range of "messy fieldwork" concerns that came to light during her research among ethnic-minority marketplace traders. She traces the official procedures she had to follow to gain entry to the field, from the national-level Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences to the local hamlet. She highlights the ethical dilemmas one faces when friendships are made in the field, racism is encountered, and painful decisions need to be made, and concludes by questioning the degree to which advocacy research is possible in such socialist settings.

We then head southwest to the northern provinces of Laos in Chapter 8. As an Africanist retrained in fieldwork in Laos, Pierre Petit was struck by his relations with state officials in the Lao PDR. Officials sometimes appeared hospitable, casual, and open, but at other times highly suspicious. Petit explores how religion, ethnicity, and "induced" migrations are among the touchy subjects that call for discretion, political correctness, and self-censorship when applying for field access and writing research reports. Such complications can provide vivid glimpses into the intimate life of the Lao bureaucracy as well as society in general.

Still in northern Laos, Karen McAllister reflects in Chapter 9 on a number of gendered concerns raised while she was completing fieldwork with ethnic-minority Khmu. She reflects on how access to research permits in the Lao PDR is still extraordinarily difficult without strong formal and social ties. When granted, permissions often assume short trips to villages and organized meetings with farmers. A chance encounter with a charging buffalo helps her overcome some of these challenges to gain access to Khmu women's voices. She finds Khmu women doubly marginalized, with local men acting as community gatekeepers, providing perspectives that conceal gendered conflicts.

The next three chapters focus our lens on comparative research endeavours. In Chapter 10, Janet Sturgeon exposes how such a comparative approach presented both challenges and opportunities while completing research with Hani/Ahka ethnic minorities in China and Thailand. She had to decide how to justify her comparative work, learn the historical, political, and social context in two countries, and negotiate research strategies in numerous languages. Despite such difficulties, moving between two sites has provided rich opportunities to raise new research questions and challenge assumptions.

In Chapter 11, Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy takes a comparative approach to reflect on her fieldwork with Tibetans, both those in Lhasa and those in exile in Dharamsala, northern India. Although there might not be socialist state

actors to negotiate with on a daily basis for Tibetans in exile, she explores the other ideological and practical parameters these exiles must deal with, namely pro-Dalai Lama propaganda and a brain drain to the West. In turn, these very differently situated communities generate novel opportunities and ethical dilemmas for field researchers.

We then gain the insider's perspective in Chapter 12 of two local research assistants who were part of the fieldwork reflected on in this volume. Chloe, working with Candice Cornet in China, and Vi, working with Christine Bonnin in Vietnam, contemplate the fieldwork process from their own points of view. As they reflect on their positionalities and concerns during fieldwork, they provide us with pertinent suggestions on how foreign researchers should prepare for working alongside local assistants. They also provide helpful advice for future assistants working with overseas researchers in these locales.

Two contemplative pieces complete our collection. Oscar Salemink reflects in Chapter 13 on three (actual or near) incidents of abuse of ethnographic texts or ethnographic encounters that he met in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. In two of the three cases, a serious backlash occurred against the population that formed the "object" of ethnographic research. The lesson Salemink drew at the time was the need to anonymize ethnographic descriptions in his monograph to such an extent as to make the ethnography "bland," with people and places becoming almost unrecognizable. This meant denying explicit requests on the part of some interlocutors to publicize their plight. When he was later asked to speak to an audience of senior Vietnamese researchers and officials who were complicit with some of the human rights abuses occurring in the Central Highlands, Salemink accepted the invitation. He reflects on the effects – and the potential power – of ethnography, arguing that both publication and public engagement are risky ventures.

Stevan Harrell, an American anthropologist, and Li Xingxing, a Han Chinese anthropologist, have been active since 1999 in Nuosu (Yi) communities in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. They collaborate together with local scholars and community members. Despite their familiarity with this area, they have written very little about it. In the first part of Chapter 14, Harrell describes the "textual desert" that has resulted from this long-term collaboration, and how it relates to his own feelings of inadequacy as a fieldworker and his growing emotional bonds with the local community. Li responds by describing the "emotional oasis" in the "cultural desert," suggesting that they ought to take on the roles not of researchers but of research subjects.

In a brief concluding chapter, I focus on two groups of gatekeepers of access and knowledge who can make or break the research endeavour in the

socialist context: the ethnic-minority individuals at the heart of our research, and the state with its representatives. It is essential that outside researchers continue collaborating with both.

In sum, *Red Stamps and Gold Stars* calls attention to the ethical dilemmas and debates involved in completing fieldwork with people who are often misunderstood by members of the dominant ethnic group in their country of residence. Belonging to an ethnic minority here can play a decisive role in one's identity and everyday life, having a direct impact on social relationships, cultural practices, and political power. Throughout, the contributors to this book emphasize the reflexive stance we must take while considering the social, economic, and political positions of our interviewees, and the multiple positionalities that we find ourselves taking on while in the field. It is our hope that this book will prepare and inform those who wish to undertake research with ethnic minorities in the uplands of China, Vietnam, and Laos, while being of interest for comparison and reflection to those already carrying out research there. Although some of the concerns, dilemmas, and solutions raised here will resonate with those who have undertaken fieldwork elsewhere in the Global South, there are unique elements of fieldwork with ethnic minorities in these socialist locales. We are optimistic that readers who venture to conduct research in these areas will find it as rewarding as we do, despite – or perhaps because of – the challenges.

Notes

1 Other interesting articles reflecting on fieldwork in post-socialist Europe include Kürti 1999, 2000; Wolfe 2000; Muršič 2002; and Chari and Verdery 2009. Articles on Cuba that reflect on fieldwork include Reid-Henry 2003 and Michalowski 2006.

2 I have made a conscious decision not to name these individuals. Some are just starting out along academia's long road, including new doctoral students studying in the United States and Europe, and most are struggling with debates over their positionality and how ethnicity and politics are intertwined. They will decide whether and when to discuss their experiences.

3 See van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009, and Michaud 2010 for debates over the labelling of this region, termed *Zomia* by van Schendel and Scott, although they use the name to describe different land areas and populations within.

4 Early works in this field include, among others, Mohanty 1988, Harding 1991, Keith 1992, Duncan and Sharp 1993, Probyn 1993, England 1994, Kobayashi 1994, Madge 1994, Nast 1994, Haraway 1996, and Wolf 1996. Since the mid-1990s, the number of relevant publications has continued to grow and I do not list all that have followed.

5 Skidmore (2006), working in Burma, raises similar ethical concerns, including the safety of her informants after she left the country with her research data. Her interviewees were especially anxious over how she might then write up her results. She noted that several recorded the conversations *themselves*, in addition to her doing so, as a safety measure.

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