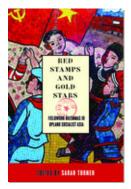# Red Stamps and Gold Stars

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Red Stamps and Gold Stars on the Margins

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At the end of our journey, one might ask: with all our fieldwork tribulations, angst, ethical dilemmas, and detours, is such research worth it? Unequivocally yes. As noted at the outset, the contributors to this book have collectively focused on making explicit the dilemmas and debates for outside researchers undertaking fieldwork in socialist Asia, on making more visible the mystery that is the research process in these uplands. All the authors continue to work in these uplands and continue to be inspired by the people with whom they work there. None of the contributors thinks that her concerns are more important than those of local researchers, just potentially different. With Harrell and Li's piece and the voices of research assistants in Turner's Chapter 12, it is hoped a bridge can start being built to future potential collections that will examine researcher positionalities from an even wider range of viewpoints.

Listening to the debates and discussions during the two-day Montréal workshop that brought the authors together to review earlier versions of these chapters, the statement that "fieldwork is always difficult, always unequivocally collaborative" seemed highly apt (Kaufmann 2002, 190). The reflections in this collection clearly illustrate not only the difficulties met but also the breadth of actors involved in such endeavours: research assistants, interpreters, drivers, local university scholars and administrators, other foreign researchers, local tradespeople, state officials at every level, immigration officers – the list goes on until we meet our informants (and their families, friends, neighbours). In this final chapter, I focus on two groups of gatekeepers of access and knowledge who, I argue, can make or break the research endeavour in these socialist contexts: first, the ethnic minorities at the heart of our research, actors with a degree of agency that must not be ignored; and second, the state with its representatives, which can facilitate or block access to minority voices. In the following pages, I urge outside researchers to continue collaborating with both.

Ethnic Minorities and Everyday Politics

From the outset, the term "ethnic minorities" and its socialist relative, "minority nationalities," are problematic. Not only can they lead to essentialism as much as stem from it but they also represent modern state-centric claims over subaltern and marginal respondents, giving power and governance entitlements to the majority. In the three countries considered in this book – China, Vietnam, and Laos – it is unlikely that these relational and non-neutral classifications will fade from use anytime soon; they will continue to play a central role in state and everyday discourse, much as the equally ill-adapted "hill tribes" is still used in Thailand (Chapter 2; Mullaney 2011).[1] The contradictions and constructedness of such terms need to be made visible, and contributors here are often reflecting on research investigating the very politics of being labelled a "minority."

On another front, stemming from their location on the political, economic, ideological, and physical edges of current nation-states, the manner by which these groups negotiate the state is nuanced and often subtle:

> The postcolonial lowland states have sought fully to exercise authority in the hills: by military occupation, by campaigns against shifting cultivation, by forced settlements, by promoting the migration of lowlanders to the hills, by efforts at religious conversion, by space-conquering roads, bridges, and telephone lines, and by development schemes that project government administration and lowland cultural styles into the hills. (Scott 2009, 20)

In the face of such projects, the persistence of minority individuals on the margins needs to be highlighted. An everyday politics involving "people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organized or direct" resonates with the communities that many of the authors in this book work with (Kerkvliet 2009, 232). Although contributors have not been directly discussing their research findings in this collection – this was not the aim – I note that in many chapters this resolve and determination strikes a chord, as indeed it does in much of our writing elsewhere about these communities. In this collection, for instance, under-the-radar resistance is recorded in the actions of Tibetans asking Henrion-Dourcy to take information out of China with her. More subtle instances arise in the reflections of Bonnin regarding how young Hmong women in Vietnam tried to work the system to gain the financial and health support to which they are entitled. For McAllister, this happens in the ways that Khmu women in Laos finally, quietly, told her their stories, while Fiskesjö's analysis of Wa narratives of their positioning vis-à-vis everyone else also speaks to this political positioning.

Ethnic-minority individuals in southwest China, Vietnam, and Laos learned long ago that they seldom have the power to appreciably alter or openly resist the sizable political and economic transformations occurring in the region as these countries embrace global market forces (Turner 2012). Yet, local individuals and household members are not passive or powerless actors. They are skillful at adjusting and diversifying their livelihoods to take current demands into account. Ethnic-minority farmers, for instance, have become active in contemporary economic opportunities – Dong tourism in Guizhou, China; Hmong and Yao marketplace trade in Vietnam; or Akha rubber holdings in Yunnan and Thailand – while making culturally rooted decisions. Local reasoning and decision making depend on a specific balance of current opportunities embedded in historically shaped cultural and social relations, as well as geographic variables (Michaud 2012).

Perhaps the most salient point to make here is that careful research must continue so that concerned social science researchers can better appreciate how these individuals, households, and communities react to, cope with, and negotiate increasing market integration tendencies, agrarian change, environmental pressures, state/society tensions, and so on. Bearing in mind Salemink's cautions, only then can overseas and local researchers, in turn, try to create nuanced understandings of these communities, carefully inform more locally relevant policy making and programs, and work to reduce the negative consequences of the above processes for individual and household livelihoods. To comprehend and act competently, cautious ethnographic research needs to take place at the micro level. This will involve significant time and energy costs that, in the long run, will invariably turn out to be a better investment than ill-suited solutions founded on poor initial understandings (cf. Michaud 2011).

State Surveillance and Trust

Nowadays, the civilizing projects of the state are omnipresent in these uplands. These interventions resonate with each socialist state's specific evolutionary route to development and modernization, entrenched in centuries of political antagonism, historical misunderstandings, and unique trajectories. As ethnic-minority individuals and households must comprehend, negotiate, and accommodate these situations, so too must researchers, although to a far less serious degree and over a significantly shorter time period.

Conceivably the most obvious signature of the fieldwork experience for a foreigner in a socialist country is the degree of surveillance. This distinguishes fieldwork in socialist Asia from that in many possible sites elsewhere in the Global South and North.[2] This surveillance is omnipresent, both multi-dimensional and multi-level. As has been highlighted in many of these pages, it can entail subtle or obvious censorship (Petit, Salemink); research permit tribulations (in China – Gros, Cornet; in Vietnam – Sowerwine,

Bonnin; in Laos – Petit, McAllister); lengthy processes required to gather permissions to stay in villages overnight (Sowerwine, McAllister) or over winter (Gros); and the extreme of having one's room overtly searched (Henrion-Dourcy).

When considering fieldwork in Tibet, Henrion-Dourcy questions how one builds trust with informants, other villagers, and local officials when the pervasiveness of the state intervenes in everyday life (Henrion-Dourcy). She is, of course, right to note that in this environment, careful perseverance is required. All contributors have explicitly or implicitly acknowledged the importance of trust for establishing crucial links in the communities in which they work and for obtaining the red stamps required to facilitate their journeys. For instance, Salemink notes the trust he placed in local collaborators and friends to guide him through the thorny process of providing alternative discourses on religious conversions in the Central Highlands of Vietnam; Sturgeon recalls the kindness of gatekeepers who took her aside on return visits to "bring her up to speed" with local events; Petit placed his trust in numerous local collaborators to help guide him through the authorization process in Laos.

Elsewhere, Michaud (2010, 224) has reflected on how vital trust is when completing fieldwork in these socialist uplands, suggesting that "in China, Vietnam and Laos, this is also called 'friendship'; in Western academia these days, we like to call it 'social capital.' Without a doubt, wherever we are, making friends among our research subjects requires gaining their trust, or they will otherwise remain reluctant participants." He goes on to add that, just as important,

> trust must also involve state officials and collaborators at all levels – academics, interpreters, librarians, guides, jeep drivers – who are far more likely to accept to help once they recognise one is a trustworthy person. To all these friends, official rules still remain a constraint; but with trust, ignoring or bending the rules in ways that are tolerable to all parties almost magically becomes a distinct possibility. (224)

Yet, there are still limits to what friendship and trust can achieve when socialist politics are concerned, and it is crucial that overseas researchers be mindful of these thresholds. For Gros, friendships alone with villagers in the Dulong valley were not enough to keep him at his field site long-term, while no amount of trust developed with villagers and local state officials would gain Henrion-Dourcy field access to Tibet after political unrest. As important, Bonnin has revealed the responsibilities that come with friendships and trust developed in the field, and our accountability to the communities and individuals with whom we work (see also Campbell et al. 2006).

Triple Ethical Dilemmas

The ethical dilemmas that arise from any social science fieldwork are plentiful. When working with ethnic minorities, one can perhaps argue that these are doubled, and tripled when these minorities dwell in an authoritarian, socialist state. How overseas social science researchers assess and act on these dilemmas is directly linked to their positionality in a specific research context. While institutional review boards or research ethics boards (REBs), despite their procedural approach to ethical dilemmas, can possibly help researchers who are connected to academic institutions avoid obvious ethical traps (as noted in Chapter 1), they do not necessarily prepare researchers for the moral dilemmas they are likely to meet in the field. Indeed, "textbook" or procedural ethics can increase our anxieties as we realize that the fieldwork situations we find ourselves in are all the more "messy" (cf. Hay 1998; Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

As researchers, we must acknowledge the importance of critical reflexivity when searching for solutions to ethical concerns in a complex, multi-layered context, however hard this may be (see Rose 1997). What does one do when one encounters racism in the field (Chapter 7)? How do we meaningfully give back to the communities in which we work (Chapter 14)? And how should one speak out on behalf of informants, and to which audiences, while protecting informants at the same time (Chapter 13)?

Henrion-Dourcy's experiences talking with Tibetans who have survived labour and re-education camps raise even further questions, this time concerning potential emotional distress for researchers themselves (cf. Widdowfield 2000; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer 2001; see also Chapter 14). Exposure to painful stories, emotional accounts, dangerous events, or illegal activities can take a serious toll on researchers, leading to mental exhaustion (cf. Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Israel and Hay 2006). As Heller and colleagues (2011, 78) suggest, this has to be acknowledged and even embraced: "By recognizing fatigue, embracing it as part of the process, and establishing positive coping strategies, our research is not only made more rigorous, but we also mitigate many ethical dilemmas that may arise as a result of a researcher 'running on empty.'" Moral distress, ideological confusion, a sense of helplessness, and rage may also result, and each individual researcher has some soul searching to do to address these in ways that will be both meaningful and morally acceptable – sometimes a very difficult task.

At the same time, the power relations embedded in field research are inherent in the production of knowledge.[3] Foreign researchers have "the ability to name the categories, control information about the research agenda, define interventions and come and go as research scientists" (Staeheli and Lawseon 1995, 332). The foreign researcher, by leaving the field with data and reflections, also has the power of analysis and interpretation. Considering these privileges with lucidity can make researchers from outside the region

more sensitive to the power relations of which they are a part. This challenges the researcher to learn more about these fields of power, or indeed to work to try to reconfigure them:

> The fields of power that connect the field researcher and participants, the participants to one another, scholars in the field, and research participants and audiences as historical subjects who confront various but specific conditions of oppression, deserve critical scrutiny in the conduct of field research. Such scrutiny raises questions such as "where are one's fields"; what are the displacements"; and "how does the work deploy and confront power – whose power, where, and under what conditions? (Katz 1994, 69)

It is with careful ethnographic fieldwork, after those red stamps are dry and trusting relationships forged, and while critical reflexivity unfolds, that these questions can begin to be tackled efficiently and important insights gained into how policies launched at national and global levels are negotiated at the local level. Researchers who accept this investment of their time and energy will better understand how marginalized groups reinterpret the rules of the majority, how local livelihoods are shaped and remoulded, and how knowledge and power are mediated and transformed through culturally rooted frames in these uplands. While doing so, we remain accountable to those with whom we work. Striving to create macro-level development policy alternatives to decentre the state is an unpromising approach when working with marginal minorities in authoritarian regimes. Alternatively, we *can* commit to challenging the subordination of the knowledge and interpretations of ethnic-minority individuals and communities.

Notes

1 See also Sturgeon 2007 and Hathaway 2010 for interesting critiques of the use of the term "indigenous" in China.
2 But not everywhere: one thinks, for instance, of authoritarian regimes, countries at war, or rogue states.
3 I agree here with Rose's critique (1997) of power and reflexivity, in which she argues that analytical claims of "transparent reflexivity" are little more than a version of Donna Haraway's "god trick" (1991), and that instead we need to recognize that the research process is an ongoing constitutive negotiation.

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