CHASING TRACES

HISTORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE UPLANDS OF SOCIALIST ASIA

EDITED BY

PIERRE PETIT AND **JEAN MICHAUD**

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Cover photograph: A research assistant interviewing a centenarian Hmong woman with the help of the latter's daughter (left), about the story of the prophet Pa Chay Vue. © Sarah Turner

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CHAPTER 10

“I Never Knew My Dad Experienced That!”

Reflections on a Collaborative Oral History Project with Hmong Youth and Elders in Upland Northern Vietnam

Sarah Turner and Sarah Delisle

Coauthor Sarah Delisle and a young ethnic minority Hmong man, Chen, sat down to reflect on an oral history they had just completed with Chen’s grandfather in Sa Pa, northern Vietnam. Sarah Delisle asked Chen:

> Sarah Delisle: When we spoke with your grandfather was there anything you learned that you didn’t know before, about your family’s past?
>
> Chen: Yeah! I learned stories from what my grandfather shared with us. Like when he said he’d lived in China for many years and that his generation moved here from China, and then in Vietnam they had moved around and lived in different places before settling here. I never knew that or that my family came from China. I was surprised to learn that.

Completing fieldwork in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam with members of ethnic minority communities mixes professional, political, and private domains of life in complex ways. The country’s socialist government has maintained a firm grip on political control across the country, and Vietnam has remained a single-party state despite economic reforms. Concurrently, state officials, especially those closer to the center of power in Hanoi, tend to regard ethnic minority communities living in the country’s mountainous frontier regions as “backward” or "lazy" and in need of modernization (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Koh 2002; Sowerwine 2004; Turner 2013b). In reality, these upland communities are often highly adaptive to policy changes, economic opportunities, and environmental changes, as they have been for generations. While these communities and the individuals and households within them are seldom in positions of political power or financial wealth, neither are they passive victims of such changing circumstances. This means that ethnic minority upland farmers frequently contest or negotiate "the rules" of the Vietnamese state, while being well aware of the importance and suppleness of culture, history, and social relations (Michaud 2012; Turner 2013a).

For outsiders wishing to work with such communities and learn more about their cultures, histories, livelihoods, and sociopolitical negotiations, gaining formal access is an ongoing challenge. To undertake officially authorized social science fieldwork in contemporary Vietnam, one must have the correct authorizations—or red stamps—from a range of different levels of state bureaucracy. Most frequently, obtaining such authorizations (with either official or unofficial fees) requires connections to either a state research institute or a Vietnamese university. At times, one can also gain such permissions via nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), although this can raise different concerns, as NGOs may have their own research agendas that they expect researchers to follow. Collaborative participatory research is even more difficult to implement than standard ethnographic approaches here, since government authorities remain cautious of those wanting to undertake long-term fieldwork, especially in upland ethnic minority communities (Mackenzie, Christensen, and Turner 2015).

In Vietnam, fifty-three groups of "national minorities" (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have been officially recognized since 1979, and those living in the northern uplands numbered approximately 9.3 million, or 10 percent of the country's population at the time of the 2019 census (General Statistics Office, Vietnam 2020; Michaud 2022). A discourse of "selective cultural preservation" probably best categorizes the state's approach to these minority communities, with cultural performances, material culture, and tourist-focused goods seen as the elements of ethnic minority culture worthy of preservation (Ó Briain 2018). Simultaneously, "unsavory" practices, such as swidden agriculture or expenditures for shamanistic rituals, are strongly discouraged by the state, with upland ethnic minorities continuing to be poorly understood by many Kinh (the lowland majority) (McElwee 2004). The Hmong, the focus of this chapter, are one of these "minority" cultures and are a kinship-based society living primarily in the uplands of southwest China and the northern mountainous areas of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (Lee and Tapp 2010). Hmong livelihoods in this region are predominantly agricultural and semi-subsistence-based, with a core crop of rice or maize that is supplemented by small home gardens. Some Hmong households also engage in cash cropping, non-timber forest product collection and trade, or wage work for income (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015).

Apart from the Tai-speaking minority groups in Vietnam's northern uplands (e.g., Thái, Tày, and Nùng), most other societies in this region, including the Hmong, have not produced written archives. Without such self-produced, emic written histories, what is known by and shared with outsiders regarding the early histories of Hmong in Vietnam is relatively minimal. Moreover, Hmong culture and language are overwhelmingly embedded in oral tradition, with an historical absence of literacy (Lee and Tapp 2010; Michaud 2020). Hmong are one of the stateless, kinship-based societies that have no common writing system, with over 24 different scripts having been created for the language (Michaud 2020). Instead, Hmong "have a very developed oral tradition" that includes many rich origin stories, legends, and myths, as well as traditional botanical knowledge. Having been "passed down orally for generations," these oral traditions have shaped the vernacular production of their own history (Lee and Tapp 2010, 49, 47; see also Livo and Cha 1991; Nguanchoo et al. 2019). As Tapp (2003, 35) stresses: "An oral tradition has been vital to the transmission of Hmong culture and the maintenance of Hmong identity." Thao (2002) underscores that cross-generational knowledge transfer is central to this oral tradition, with knowledge being passed on to younger generations (see also Thao 2006).

It is in this context that, in 2013, with financial support from the National Geographic (US) Legacy Fund, we designed the Hmong Voices Project. This applied project emerged from discussions that the first author, Sarah Turner (hereafter Sarah T), had previously held with a long-time Hmong friend, Shu Tan, in Sa Pa town, Lào Cai province, about what an outsider could do to support Hmong culture in the area. Shu was concerned that local Hmong youth were increasingly unaware of their local family and community histories and traditional craft techniques. While oral tradition remains a core part of Hmong culture in these uplands, Shu noted that with more youth attending local boarding schools, and with growing access to the internet and mobile phones, their time spent with elders was decreasing, and opportunities to learn about the past were diminishing. Thus, the Hmong Voices Project was born. In collaboration with Sapa O'Chau, a Hmong-run social enterprise that Shu Tan and supporters had established in Sa Pa town, our project aimed to document oral histories and traditional knowledge in Hmong communities while bringing together youth and elders. The project was also a way for younger Hmong men and women to learn more about their heritage, by being a core part of the project.

Sapa O'Chau operates a boarding facility for ethnic minority youth attending local schools, while also providing extra tutoring (often by overseas volunteers) for these youth. It also runs a hotel and tourist café in Sa Pa town, and offers trekking and village homestay services for tourists. Collaboration with Sapa O'Chau was essential for this project, a partnership facilitated by strong relationships between Shu and the authors over a number of years. The first author, Sarah T, had completed ethnographic fieldwork with Hmong and other minority communities in Sa Pa District since 1999. She had also worked alongside Shu for a number of years to develop funding proposals for Sapa O'Chau, to help recruit overseas interns, and to organize an international advisory board. The second author, Sarah Delisle (hereafter Sarah D), had previously helped with the management of the advisory board, including running its virtual meetings for two years, and she had completed her master's thesis on ethnic minority livelihood changes in Sa Pa District.

In brief, for the Hmong Voices Project, we recruited eight young Hmong men and women trekking guides with basic or intermediate English comprehension and oral skills, and taught them the basics of interviewing elders in an oral history style (detailed below). The guides—or youth interviewers—then completed an oral history interview with someone of an older generation whom they already knew, such as an elder in their family or a long-time neighbor in their village. In these interviews about the changes that the elder had experienced in their lives, the elders reflected on and retold their personal experiences of changing political landscapes, their strategies for creating sustainable upland livelihoods, and the challenges of increasing market integration and shifting family structures. Each interview was taped and then reworked to make a continuous written story script (also detailed below). The story script was then returned to the elder for participant validation. These revised and participant-approved scripts were then recorded by the Hmong youth interviewers in English as oral history stories, so as to reach as broad an audience as possible (including members of the international Hmong diaspora who speak different dialects). The finished recordings are available on the Sapa O'Chau website.[1] While not the focus of this chapter, a second aim of the project was to record and archive traditional Hmong craft and musical techniques for younger generations to access. For this, we interviewed and filmed community members weaving hemp fabric, dyeing cloth with batik methods, designing Hmong jewelry and playing the *qeej*, a traditional Hmong woodwind instrument. These videos are also available on the Sapa O'Chau website, with the hope of retaining and spreading this traditional knowledge.

In this chapter, our aim is to critically reflect upon the oral history segment of this project, while detailing the collaborative process that we developed and highlighting the strengths and drawbacks of our approach. Next, we outline the five-step process we followed to try to create a "performance based collaborative form of writing" that involved Hmong elders and youth (Brooks 2005, 182). We then critically reflect on our positionalities regarding this process and on the positionalities and commentaries of the youth interviewers and elderly interviewees. We conclude by highlighting some of the political and ethical considerations raised when undertaking such a project with ethnic minority individuals in a socialist state.

While touching on many of the ten issues outlined by Pierre Petit and Jean Michaud in this book's introduction, we particularly focus on four of these elements in this chapter. These are number 1, "A 'Duty of Remembrance,'" with our applied project striving to support the transmission of historical knowledge; number 5, "A Gendered Access to the Past—and Writing about It," with our focus on writing about a gendered history, as well as gendered negotiations in the field; and number 9, "Reflexivity and Positionality in Authoritarian Situations," with discussions of how we navigated this context. Our concerns regarding the most ethically sound way to complete this project—number 10, "Ethics"—are woven into our discussions throughout this chapter.

Producing Historical Narratives in a Multistep Collaborative Process

Step 1. Recruiting Youth Interviewees and the Group Training Session

Youth involved with Sapa O'Chau who were eighteen years old or older were informed about the project by Shu, and those who were interested were invited to a training session. In total, eight trekking guides completed the training and participated in the project, with seven as interviewers and one helping with Hmong-to-English translation. These youth included three men and five women ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-one. Five had been involved in research projects prior to this oral history project, four having worked directly with Sarah D during her master's thesis research, so they had already developed a good rapport.

The initial training covered the basics of interviewing elders in an "oral history" style. Topics included ethical practices, such as gaining consent; how to build rapport; and different ways of asking questions. The discussions about ethical practices also centered on the importance of ensuring that the elder was aware of what would happen with their words and stories. Likewise, confidentiality was also stressed, with discussions focusing on the importance of keeping people's names and stories secret and not sharing these details with others. The youth interviewers were mindful of these concerns. For example, one interviewer, Chi, stated that she was apprehensive that other residents of her elder's village would find out about what the elder had said and perhaps not like it. When we reiterated that all elders would be given pseudonyms before their histories were published (as we have also done for the youth interviewers here), Chi's apprehension waned.

We asked the youth to think of older family members who they thought would be comfortable being interviewed. Some youth raised questions about which ages would characterize someone as an "elder," as some youth no longer had living grandparents. The group collectively agreed that even if someone was only in their sixties, they would have lived through a number of important events, such as the American War (as the Vietnam-America War is locally called), the peak and termination of socialist collectives, the rise of the market economy, and a number of other important changes in the area. Hence anyone in their sixties or older was deemed a possible elder participant.

Five youth interviewed family members, including parents, in-laws, and grandparents, while the remaining four interviews were conducted with long-time neighbors or family friends. Five youth collected the oral history of one elder each, and two youth collected two oral histories each, reaching a total of nine. Elders ranged in age from their early sixties to ninety-four and included five women and four men from five different communes in Sa Pa District (see table 1). The training was very interactive and included Sarah D and the youth taking turns asking and answering the oral history questions (e.g., "Can you tell me about yourself?" "Can you tell me about your family history?"). In this way, the youth were introduced to the oral history process while also helping validate the possible questions. For instance, they suggested a couple of word changes, including using the Hmong terms for "farm work" instead of "livelihoods," as they deemed this would be easier for elders to understand. Because the training session included the youth practicing interpreting the questions from English to Hmong, this was used to gauge each youth's comfort level with switching between the two languages. While some struggled with certain vocabulary, all the youth interviewers were keen to be involved in the project, so we agreed that one of the youth with proficient interpretation skills would assist with reviewing the recorded oral histories of others, if needed.

Through this training process, it became apparent that the youth already knew some aspects of how life had been in the past, especially about certain difficulties that older generations had faced. Many youth talked about their grandparents and parents not having enough reliable food sources previously, and turning to banana trees, ferns, or other gathered foods for sustenance. Others recalled being told how elders would walk to Lào Cai City (thirty-three kilometers away from Sa Pa town) to buy goods before there were well-stocked shops in Sa Pa town or in the villages. Considering the youths' prior knowledge, we highlighted the need to let the elder answer the question being posed, even if the youth thought they knew the answer.

Step 2. Initial Oral Histories

After the training, each youth met with Sarah D individually at the Sapa O'Chau headquarters to trek together to each elder's village. Before setting out, a pre-interview was completed with each youth covering information on their age, village, brief family history, their experiences as a trekking guide or research assistant, and so on. These were later supplemented with exit interviews as the project was ending, which included reflexive-focused questions. Here, we asked the youth interviewers whether they would describe their own life as easier or harder than the lives of those they interviewed, whether they learned anything about their family's history or the history of the area during the process, whether they thought the elder was intimidated during the interview or during participant validation, and so on. Details from those reflections are included below.

Table 10.1. Details regarding Hmong youth interviewers and the elderly interviewees

Youth interviewer name (pseudonym)	Youth interviewer age	Youth interviewer gender	Interviewee's relation with youth interviewer	Interviewee age	Interviewee gender
Nhia	23	Man	Long-time neighbor	60s	Woman
Chen	19	Man	Grandfather	67	Man
			Long-time neighbor	60s	Woman
Kee	23	Man	Grandmother	80s	Woman
Chi	18	Woman	Brother's mother-in-law	67	Woman
Lan	27	Woman	Grandfather	90	Man
Tau	31	Woman	Sister's mother-in-law	94	Woman
			Father	77	Man
Hua	31	Woman	Long-time neighbor	61	Man
Kai	23	Woman	Helped with translation		

Upon arrival at the elder's home and after introducing the project and obtaining consent, Sarah D started the interview by asking a couple of basic questions regarding household composition, years lived in the village, and so on. Youth interviewers typically became more confident after watching these initial interactions, and Sarah D encouraged them to take the lead for the rest of the interactions. Overall, the topics covered included broad questions about the elder and their family, such as their age and the number of people in their family, including children and grandchildren, their parents' hamlet (if the elder was a married woman), their family history, and their livelihood activities. These were supplemented with questions about changes that the elder had experienced in their lifetime, changes in local livelihoods, and discussions of specific historical periods or events such as the 1979 China-Vietnam border war. Elders were also asked about the future and whether they had specific concerns with regard to their children or grandchildren, as well as the source of such concerns.

As with all interpretation activities, there were some common difficulties. For example, youth interviewers would sometimes reduce a several minutes-long response by an elder to just a couple of words in English. The content collected thus depended heavily on the skills of the specific youth who was directing and interpreting an interview. For instance, during one interview, Sarah D tried several times to reformulate a question in the hopes of gaining a more detailed response, but the youth interviewer continued to struggle to interpret the reworded question. Several times youth recommended that they avoid asking certain questions—such as about widowhood or politics—to protect the elder, which Sarah D immediately respected. When asked about these potentially unsettling questions post-interview, one youth interviewer replied that he did not want to ask about widowhood because he did not want to make the elder sad.

Managing the presence of other family members or listeners also proved challenging when they interjected with their own replies. At other times, interviews flowed very easily if the youth and elder were fully engaged in the process. One of these sessions ended with the elder "interviewing" Sarah D about her background and life story, as the youth interpreted. As Sarah D noted in her field journal afterward:

> The visit went really well. Chi is a really good interviewer and it felt more like we were having a nice conversation than we were conducting an oral history interview. It was clear Chi enjoyed it because she was equally engaged in the process: she asked follow-up questions without prompting and seemed keen and interested throughout. [The elder] was also quite talkative which helped too! One of the nicest parts for me was at the end when I asked if [the elder] had any questions and she proceeded to ask me questions similar to those I asked her: "Was I poor like her when I was younger? How did I make money?" etc. It felt nice to be able to share like that and when we finished I felt less like we'd been interviewing her and more like we had simply been exchanging life stories. (Sarah D, field journal)

We had five cases in which the youth interviewer and elder participant were of the opposite sex, and we observed that this made little difference to building a strong rapport. Instead, prior familiarity between the two individuals appeared to be more important and helpful for ensuring rapport. We also noted that elder women were as interested and engaged in the conversations as elder men, and that they were able to give rich accounts of a broad range of themes, including topics beyond what are locally deemed as "women's topics." For example, elder women were similarly animated in their discussions of livelihood strategies, migration, and changes in the local environment as elder men were. We found this range of themes that women were comfortable discussing revealing, given that Hmong society is traditionally patriarchal, and hence it is often assumed that men should speak for the family. On the other hand, we were not that surprised at the women's range of knowledge, knowing that women pass down much information and many skills to younger generations regarding food crops, traditional medicines, specific shaman rituals, hemp and cloth production, embroidery, and so on.

Step 3. From Transcripts to Oral History Stories

Once the initial oral history was completed, the recording was transcribed by Sarah D. The original recordings ranged from one hour to ninety minutes but were not always easy to follow due to background noise (family members talking, sounds outside, children playing/yelling) and other on-the-ground realities. Sections of a recording when the youth had struggled to interpret or when the interpretation was unclear underwent a quality-check by Kai, a youth participant with advanced English skills. This check involved listening to short excerpts and checking them against the transcripts Sarah D had prepared. This was a valuable exercise as Kai indicated that each youth had done a very good job interpreting; overall, there were no major changes to make and only a few details to add.

Once this quality check was completed, the transcripts were reworked into coherent story scripts by Sarah T and Sarah D (see text box). One of the challenges of collecting and making these oral histories available was that in recounting their memories, elders often jumped back and forth chronologically, making the transcripts difficult to follow. In addition, as the youth interpreted and asked for clarifications, further digressions in timelines were produced. We therefore undertook a form of storytelling, mildly editing the transcripts into chronological order (Christensen 2012). To make a continuous script, which we hoped would be easier to understand, we also smoothed or “tidied” the transcriptions via “naturalized transcription,” removing some features of spoken language such as “ums” and “ers” (see Bucholtz 2000; Henderson 2018). While we are cognizant that we were imposing a structure and modifying the original transcripts by undertaking these steps, this process nevertheless allowed us to “present findings in ways that *make sense,* that *speak to* and *speak with* the communities in which the research takes place” (Christensen 2012, 233; emphasis in original). The edited story script was then returned to the elder for participant validation.

Editing Process

In the process of creating these recorded oral history stories, we smoothed out wording that might have been confusing or misunderstood (~~strikethrough~~ or *italics* here) and we added details where appropriate that were told to us during the participant validation process (**bolded**). Moreover, a few words were changed because of pronunciation problems for the youth interviewer in the final recording in English. For example, *embroidery* was changed to *needlework* here.

Excerpt from Za's Edited Oral History Story

My name is Za. I'm almost 70 years old. I married my husband when I was 15 and moved to Cat Cat village from my parents' in Ta Phin village. My parents were farmers. We had a lot of rice paddy so we had enough food to eat. We had a big family. I had 2 brothers and 4 sisters. One of my sisters stayed in Ta Phin and three married and moved to Ma Cha village. Growing up I spent my time doing ~~embroidery~~ *needlework*, taking care of buffalo and taking care of my younger siblings. […]

When I first came to Cat Cat village there were only 14 houses. There was lots of forest around the village and only a few rice paddies. Now there are more than 100 houses. That's too many. There's not enough land for so many people. For some families with less land, it's difficult to grow food. **My family had lots of land but when my sons got married we had to share it with them, so now it's little. We can't get more land now unless we want to buy more. Everywhere belongs to someone. Most people don't want to sell because without land they cannot grow food and they will be hungry.**

Now most of the forest in the village is gone and there are many rice paddies. Before, the soil was rich and we could plant crops. Now the soil is poor and we need to use chemical fertilizer or nothing grows. **Sometimes we don't have enough money to buy fertilizer. We need 800 kilograms per year. This costs about 6 million dong [~US$250]. We use our cardamom money to buy fertilizer. My son sometimes also works as a porter for treks to Fansipan and gets money from that.**

Step 4. Oral History Story Participant Validation

Participant validation or member checking is increasingly used as a tool for establishing credibility in qualitative research and for upholding the integrity of research findings. Results are returned to participants for them to determine and approve that the completed scripts accurately portray what the participants initially conveyed. Indeed, using this form of internal authentication is argued to act as a qualitative proxy for traditionally quantitative evaluations of rigor (Baxter and Eyles 1997;

Barbour 2003; Turner and Coen 2008). For these reasons, we wanted to take our oral history stories back to the elders so that they could confirm that the scripts accurately portrayed the information that they had provided. We also wanted to make sure that the elders were absolutely comfortable sharing the information contained within these oral history stories. This was especially important to us due to the fact that ethnic minority-state relations in Vietnam are such that minority individuals can be easily harassed or persecuted for speaking out against the state or for voicing opinions that are not considered positive regarding any (however vague) political topic (McElwee 2004; World Bank 2009).

Returning to elders with their edited story scripts proved to be extremely valuable as they took the opportunity to add further details or clarify certain elements. For example, during an initial interview, an elderly woman in Hau Thao village had provided few details about the China-Vietnam border war, but on the second visit, she elaborated that together with her husband and two children she had fled the village and stayed in the mountains for ten days, surviving on corn flour that they had carried with them. An elderly woman in Ta Van village added more details about her second husband and children, and about her worries for the future, including the bribes that they were expected to pay at the local hospital. After this participant validation step, the additional information and clarifications were worked into the story scripts. We also decided to add dates of key historical events so that the oral history stories were comprehensible to a broader audience.

Step 5. Youth Audio-Recording Their Oral History Interviews with Elders in English

> As Kai is practicing the script she suggests that I read a line and then she will repeat/read it after me. We try this for the first sentence and it goes quite well! Basically I start the recorder and press pause, read out a sentence and then unpause when Kai repeats. ("Wait for the beep!") It sounds a lot less like reading and more like someone is just speaking. Great! (Sarah D, field journal)

During the final stage of creating the oral history stories, each participant-validated script was recorded in English by the youth interviewer and then added to the Sapa O'Chau website. Members of the Hmong diaspora in the West are not necessarily able to easily understand the Hmong dialect spoken in northern Vietnam, and we hoped non-Hmong-speaking individuals might want to listen to these stories as well. This step was a learning opportunity for the youth interviewers since they were able to practice their English reading and pronunciation/enunciation skills—useful for their work as tourist guides. The initial idea was to have the youth read the story script, but some struggled and the resulting recording was stilted, which distracted from the elder's story. After several attempts, we decided that one of us would read one sentence of the story script at a time, and then the youth interviewer would repeat the sentence while being recorded. This worked well for all the youth involved.

While preparing the oral history scripts for the website, we created additional background information for the website to help contextualize the stories. We also spoke with Sapa O'Chau employees about where the Hmong Voices Project page could be placed for maximum visibility. The final location was not where we would have placed it necessarily (within the social enterprise's website tourism section), but we let Shu and Sapa O'Chau employees make that ultimate decision.

Discussion: Critical Reflections of Positionality and Power Relations

Positionality, or 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) relates to all those involved in the research process, not just the researchers. In this case, we needed to be mindful of the impacts that the positionalities of the elder interviewees, youth interviewers, and ourselves would have on the research process and outcomes. One's positionality is inclusive of one's ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexuality, and (dis)ability (Hopkins 2007). It also incorporates life experiences, ways of viewing the world, and political leanings and positionings, with these characteristics being relational and never static (McDowell 1994). This means that we knew it would be impossible to fully grasp all the interactions at play during (and after) the Hmong Voices Project or their impacts on the processes and individuals involved. As G. Rose (1997) notes, the researcher's identity is fluid and changes in an iterative process (particularly in relation to research participants), and hence we needed to think in terms of "situated knowledges," "hybrid spaces of research," and "webbed connections" (Rose 1997, 308, 315, 317).

Two White Women Researchers "in the Field"

These positionalities and interactions were being played out in the borderlands of a socialist state with members of an ethnic minority community. This broader context had an important impact on how we undertook the project and on the relationships that developed at all levels. Having the support of Sapa O'Chau was critical, not only for creating a collaborative project but also pragmatically for gaining official permissions to gain access to the field. This field context heightened our awareness of our privileged positionalities as two Western-educated middle-class white women with the socioeconomic privilege to fly in and out of Vietnam when we wanted (albeit with the correct visas). Such mobility remains far beyond the financial means of many of our Hmong collaborators, never mind the bureaucratic red tape required for them to obtain a passport.

Despite the nearly impossible task of trying to understand the impacts of our positionalities across time and space, we attempted to remain critically reflexive throughout the project. To try to do so, we kept the following questions in mind: Were we providing enough space for authentic stories to be told? How were our positionalities and actions impacting the manner in which the youth and elders conducted themselves and interacted with each other? What should we and could we be doing differently?

While being mindful to not slip into reification, we observed that being women researchers facilitated fairly easy rapport with elder interviewees. However, the rapport between the elder interviewee and the youth seemed to be the most important determinant of how well the oral history progressed. Grandchildren seemed particularly at ease when interviewing their grandparents, and these sessions generally went smoothly. Chen explained regarding interviewing his grandfather: "I know him and he knows me for a long time, so it's easier to talk with him." Nonetheless, family dynamics could also create obstacles. In one instance, during a participant validation session, the elder started out very enthusiastically, indicating that he had "many more" stories to share. As the session progressed, the youth—his daughter—got frustrated that he kept retelling stories that had been covered in the first interview. Unfortunately, the youth told the elder that he did not need to keep retelling stories he had already shared, and the elder's responses became less expansive. Overall, however, the richest conversations about elders' lives occurred when the youth interviewers had known the elder for a long time.

Our "foreignness" placed us in a somewhat ambiguous gender role, allowing us to discuss certain topics with Hmong men that would not necessarily be the norm, such as duties and livelihood tasks seen as "men's work" (see also S. Scott, Miller, and Lloyd 2006). The presence of the youth, often a family member, also appeared to contribute to increasing the willingness of the elder to discuss such topics. This issue of trust was mentioned several times by youth in exit interviews. As youth interviewer Kee commented when asked whether he thought his grandmother was intimidated at all during the interview: "I can say she was not scared with us. She was confident because she knows I'm her grandchild." Similarly, when asked whether she thought it was easy for her mother-in-law to speak with us, Chi replied: "Yes, because we know each other already, so she trusts us and she can say anything she would like to say."

Our age placed us in certain and different categories as well. Here, Sarah D was older than most of the Hmong youth interviewers but close enough age-wise to be able to relate to them fairly well, while she was also significantly younger than our interviewees. On the other hand, Sarah T was clearly a generation older than the youth interviewers and a generation younger than the interviewees. Nonetheless, when Sarah T joined in participant validation trips and worked with the youth interviewers, it did not seem to change the dynamics very much. Familiarity with research team members, sometimes over a number of years, as well as multiple interactions during the Hmong Voices Project, appeared to have worked well to gain and maintain trust.

We were mindful not to be associated with any local state officials, as this would have very likely made both youth interviewers and elderly interviewees suspicious of our motives, resulting in a loss of rapport or trust. Indeed, possible government surveillance was brought up by one youth in her exit interview. When asked how she felt during the interviews and whether she felt scared or intimidated, Chi replied: "The questions were ok, but what I was scared of in the village was when we were speaking to the person, the government people would come and ask 'What are you doing here?' [. . .] It was very lucky that we didn't have any big camera with us, we had a very small recorder." The youth interviewers noted that they also felt more at ease knowing that Shu Tan from Sapa O'Chau had discussed the project with Mr. Cao, a local Hmong ex-policeman affiliated with Sapa O'Chau who has maintained strong connections to local communities and to higher-level officials in Sa Pa District. In the youths' opinions, these connections afforded project members and interviewees possible protection from harassment from other state officials.

Youth Interviewers' Reflexive Accounts

> SARAH D: So overall what would you say about your experience?
>
> TAU (young woman interviewer): I think it's a good thing to do this project and for me to be able to learn; to learn some more from the old people, to talk with you, and to practice my English.

The pre-interviews and exit interviews with youth interviewers provided valuable insights into their experiences of the research process. As our chapter title indicates, the exit interviews created an opportunity for the youth to reflect on what they had learned over the course of the project and highlighted the intergenerational and often intrafamilial knowledge transfers that had occurred. Regional history, especially the 1979 China-Vietnam border war, was a topic that many youth noted that they had learned more about. They also mentioned becoming more knowledgeable about different aspects of their family history, such as that their forbears emigrated from China, or about the local natural history, including changes that had occurred in the surrounding landscape and environment. The focus on the past also brought up many comparisons with the present.

Another question asked during exit interviews was how the youth thought their lives compared to the elders'. Overwhelmingly, youth indicated that their lives were easier than those of the elders they had interviewed. Whereas many elders reported needing to eat corn or cassava in the past when rice was in short supply, many of the youth indicated that the more stable food supply nowadays represented a significant difference with the past. Several reasons for this difference were given, including greater rice yields. As Tau explained: "Now we have more food so it's easier. [. . .] I work in the rice fields or the corn fields and we get more food so we have enough." Hua added that life was also easier because there were more shops to buy food if necessary. Increased economic opportunities were also cited as a reason for life becoming better. Lan stated: "I think life's easier now. It's easier to make money and we have enough food so we don't need to go into the forest to forage or carry wood to sell." Youth also cited greater educational opportunities as a positive change. Chen noted: "I think for me my life is better than my grandfather because I've been able to go to school and learn more things." Chi added that being able to learn to speak English provided more opportunities for work than her mother-in-law had experienced when she was young.

One of the more practical concerns raised by six of the youth interviewers in their exit interviews was the difficulty they had interpreting between Hmong and English. The youth specifically noted that they struggled to interpret words that did not seem to have an equivalent in the other language, and that they had difficulties "keeping up" with the elders when interpreting longer story segments. Yet, based on quality checks of the original oral history recordings and on feedback from Kai, who helped cross-check the transcripts, the youth did a commendable job. This was even more remarkable given the fact that this was the first time many had participated in such a project or had interpreted extensive dialogues on varied topics.

Concluding Thoughts: Retelling and Constructing Upland Histories

The Hmong Voices Project has provided insights into the history of this upland region that challenge the Vietnam state's preconceived narratives and discourses regarding this locale. State policies and literature continue to be overwhelmingly based on assumptions of primitivism, stagnation, and unproductivity regarding upland minority populations (Lieberman 2010). While there is a growing body of literature attempting to counter such interpretations of the lives and livelihoods of Hmong communities in Lào Cai province (e.g., Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015; Delisle and Turner 2016; Bonnin 2018; Garber and Turner 2022), the Hmong Voices Project revealed a number of new findings, further illuminating historical and contemporary processes and relations. These included details about individual and household mobility patterns and resilience during the China-Vietnam border war, the historical use of forest products for household food security, and the impacts of rapid economic change in these communities. For example, we learned far more than previously documented about the role of opium in local livelihoods when it was being promoted by the Vietnamese state prior to the early 1990s. We were also provided with important, nuanced details regarding the impacts of the China-Vietnam border war on local livelihoods, mobilities, and especially the emotional toll during that period of upheaval. We also learned about the local impacts, including concerns over land sales, of lowland to upland migration waves of Kinh migrants. These details have enriched work that we have published since the Hmong Voices Project (e.g., Turner and Oswin 2015; Michaud and Turner 2017; Turner 2022), and such details have been part of ongoing discussions with local social enterprise members, as well as with Vietnam-based academics and students. Of course, we need to be mindful that there were stories that were left out too, perhaps too painful to recall, considered irrelevant due to the rapid changes under way in the uplands, or deemed too political to discuss (cf. Creef 2000).

James C. Scott (2009, 230–231) notes: “Because oral traditions survive only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups.” As shown above, these interpretations are further influenced by who they are told to, how they are then understood and—in our case—how they are then shaped into oral history stories. These stories of the elders involved in the Hmong Voices Project have been impacted yet again by the broader political context and the need to safeguard individuals and locales; they are socially constructed narratives with inevitable distortions and omissions. Yet, as Grele (1991, xvi) persuasively argues, oral histories are recognized as having a key role in “getting a better history, a more critical history, a more conscious history which involves members of the public in [its] creation.”

Our discussions above regarding positionality revolved around fairly immediate concerns about the impacts of gender, age, ethnicity, family positioning, and socioeconomic status of ourselves, the youth interviewers, and the elders involved. Yet such considerations often avoid uncomfortable debates regarding the rights of Global North researchers to undertake research in the Global South and the structurally unequal power relations, different agendas, and possible misinterpretations and representations that come with such research. There are critical scholars who would thus declare that it is best not to be subject to possible accusations of "appropriating and exploiting a powerful story for their own personal and professional ends" (Kohl and Farthing 2013, 91). We struggled with such concerns (and continue to do so), and yet we saw value in attempting to create accessible oral history stories for a broad audience to access. We hoped to support local Hmong individuals who had *asked us* for ways to safeguard the compelling stories of elders in their community, and we wanted to show solidarity with those with whom we work, "becoming closer while respecting the distance that remains" (Brabeck 2004, 52). Our commitment was to create a conduit for these stories to be told when they otherwise would not have been. Did we succeed? Probably not very well; the oral history stories continue to gain "hits" on the Sapa O'Chau website, more than eight years after they were uploaded, but they are not promoted in a very enticing manner. In hindsight, we probably should have also recorded them in *Hmong Leng*,[2] the local Hmong dialect, as well as in English, although at the time smartphones and internet access were not common in local communities. On the other hand, however, elders noted that they enjoyed the process and seemed proud of their final stories, intergenerational ties appeared to have been strengthened, and youth interviewers said that they would be keen to be involved in a similar project again, as Chi explained:

> SARAH D: Would you be interested in doing something like this again in the future?
>
> CHI: Yeah!
>
> SARAH D: Yeah?
>
> CHI: Yeah, I'm interested.
>
> SARAH D: Great!
>
> CHI: Because you ask questions and I can learn also.
>
> SARAH D: You learn things too?
>
> CHI: Yeah, you know, when you ask questions, the first person to understand [the answers] is me. I understand more than you. So I interpret to you.

Finally, by placing the final oral histories onto a website rather than working them into an academic article, it could be argued that we avoided the erasures and significant editing sometimes required by reviewers and journal conventions. The stories hence remain in a fairly "raw state" compared to if they had been analyzed for a typical academic publication. Clearly, they are still hybrid narratives, but they are also collaborative ones, striving to have minority voices heard.

Notes

1. "Hmong Voices," Sapa O'Chau, accessed October 30, 2023, http://sapaochau.org/sapa-trekking-and-homestay/hmong-voices.

2. Most Hmong in the Vietnamese uplands self-identify as Hmong Leng (also known as Green or Blue Hmong; Hmoob or Moob Leeg in the Romanized Popular Alphabet).

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