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## Remaking markets in the mountains: integration, trader agency and resistance in upland northern Vietnam

Christine Bonnin and Sarah Turner

As part of an ongoing agenda by Vietnamese lawmakers and local state officials to accelerate market integration in the northern mountains, rural marketplaces are being physically and managerially restructured according to standard state-approved models. Moreover, these market directives are coherent with the ‘distance demolishing technologies’ that James Scott (2009) suggests the state has implemented to bring these uplands more directly under its panoptic gaze. This integration strategy seldom meshes well with upland livelihood needs. In this paper we examine a number of power contestations currently unfolding as upland market traders – both Vietnamese and ethnic minorities – negotiate or resist these developments while striving to maintain meaningful livelihoods.

**Keywords:** Vietnam; ethnic minorities; marketplace trade; market integration; resistance

Political scientist James C. Scott argues in his book *The art of not being governed* (2009) that the Southeast Asian Massif (or ‘Zomia’, following van Schendel 2002) represents ‘The Last Enclosure’. Scott proposes that while these vast highlands southeast of the Himalayan Plateau – shared today among eight countries – have been loosely linked to lowlands via trade historically, modern states have vigorously pursued their enclosure. He suggests that modern states have accomplished this by incorporating the uplands in processes variously branded as ‘development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration’ (Scott 2009, 4). In northern Vietnam, one could argue that this enclosure or legibility (Scott 1998) has involved market integration, replacing common property with private land use rights, pressing shifting cultivators to become settled farmers, and the introduction of hybrid seed technology and cash cropping. The aim, Scott continues, is less about making upland individuals more productive than it is to ‘ensure that their economic activity [is] legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that [are]’ (Scott 2009, 5). In this paper, we suggest that this relationship between lowland state policy makers and those living in the Vietnam uplands – the majority

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of whom are ethnic minorities – continues today, yet with a twist. The result is a context in which ethnic minorities work to sustain agrarian-based livelihoods while attempting to avoid the gaze of local state representatives. Concurrently, government-sponsored enterprises extract valuable natural resources, lowlanders arrive seeking new economic opportunities, and officials operate to their own specific directives (Sikor 2011).

The vast majority of ethnic minority residents of these northern uplands maintain semi-subsistence livelihoods, predominantly based on rice and maize cultivation and supported by the collection of forest products, home gardens, livestock rearing, and small-scale trade and barter. Yet, since the mid-1980s, residents have been increasingly persuaded by state propaganda, or have decided on their own accord to become more integrated into the market economy (Jamieson *et al.* 1998, Sikor 2011). Concurrently, they have been unevenly informed of central political decisions and have been somewhat randomly exposed, often depending on their particular cultural heritage and geographical isolation, to new technology, trade opportunities, communications advances and societal changes (Turner *et al.* forthcoming). While the broad agrarian shifts that encapsulate these changes are becoming better documented (Michaud and Forsyth 2011, Sikor *et al.* 2011, Bonnin and Turner 2012, Turner 2012a,b), less well understood is how these processes have impacted on upland trade, the livelihoods of tens of thousands of small-scale marketplace traders and, in turn, their reactions. This is the focus of our paper.

Historically, periodic marketplaces in upland northern Vietnam have been important nodes for commercial exchange and socialization. During the late 1800s, upland markets were described by French military observers as central trade hubs, especially valuable for the colonial powers to assert their monopolies over opium and salt. Ethnic minority groups practicing clanic exogamy (such as Hmong and Yao) also relied – and continue to rely – on marketplaces as sites for exchanging information and gossip, and finding marriage partners, in addition to their trade function (Michaud and Turner 2000). In post-independence Vietnam, the relevance of these markets for the livelihoods of upland residents endures. Moreover, given market integration imperatives in other upland livelihood sectors – including the state-sponsored introduction of hybrid seeds and the subsequent need for cash to purchase seed and related inputs yearly – marketplace trade is becoming increasingly important for upland households to expand the cash portion of their livelihood portfolios (Bonnin and Turner 2012). Far from static, traditional vestiges of the past, we argue that upland marketplaces in northern Vietnam are dynamic sites which support rapidly transforming agrarian livelihoods while framing and embodying a number of contestations of power.

The aim of this paper is to examine the processes of contemporary market formation in upland northern Vietnam, the impacts on marketplace trader livelihoods and the responses of ethnic minority and Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) traders. Upland ethnic minorities are not well understood among the Kinh majority, oftentimes depicted as ‘backward’ or ‘lazy’ (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001, Duncan 2004, Salemink 2011). Differences between minorities and lowland Kinh are frequently essentialized by the state, reflected in current development policies (Sowerwine 2011a). Of particular importance here, ethnic minorities are often stereotyped by government officials as lacking acumen and interest in business. In turn, ‘the misunderstanding that minorities are autarkic has led to an emphasis on markets and infrastructure’ in current state policy (World Bank 2009, 46). Only with state support and guidance, it is argued, will ethnic minorities learn to trade and engage with the market economy (see also Bonnin 2012, iSEE 2013). Upland trade sites are now being restructured by state development agendas regarding location, design, organization and regulation based



Figure 1. Lào Cai province, Vietnam.

on these assumptions and representational practices. In turn, upland market traders seek new opportunities and work to defend or improve their livelihood strategies as they negotiate or resist this changing trade landscape.

Focusing on rural, daily and periodic marketplace trade, we pay special attention to questions of agency and the capacity of traders to interpret, adapt to and remake their conditions. We begin by developing a conceptual framework drawing on marketplace, livelihood and resistance literatures. Due to the fact that the Vietnamese state deems physical marketplaces to be one of the ‘missing links’ to upland market integration and development, numerous recent state directives strive to modernize, stabilize and formalize marketplaces. We critically analyze this contemporary ‘development’ discourse, examining how national and provincial policies are often defectively executed at the local scale by individual state officials. We explore how these local actions acutely impact traders and in turn are contested, resisted or evaded via a number of overt or more subtle strategies.

Our analysis is based on annual fieldwork since 2007 by both authors in the northern Vietnam province of Lào Cai, bordering Yunnan, China (Figure 1). According to the latest national census, the population of Lào Cai is just over 610,000, with ethnic minorities

accounting for 64 percent. The Hmong (22 percent), Tày (15.8 percent) and Yao (Dao)<sup>1</sup> (14.5 percent) constitute the largest ethnic groups, while Kinh lowlanders comprise 35.9 percent of the provincial population (GSO 2009). We have completed over 200 conversational interviews with marketplace traders and local resident consumers and over 20 semi-structured interviews with marketplace, district and provincial officials. Interviewees have been Hmong, Tày, Yao, Giáy and Nùng as well as lowland Kinh and cross-border Han traders. Our interviews were completed with the aid of Hmong, Yao or Kinh research assistants or independently.

### **Conceptualizing marketplace livelihoods and trader resistance**

Market studies have long been conceptually divided according to two fundamental distinctions: as market principle or marketplace. As market principle, markets are understood as theoretical abstractions based on universal laws of neo-classical economics, such as supply-and-demand and price. The more empirically rooted marketplace view recognizes markets as geographically situated and socio-culturally embedded sites wherein economic exchange and social gatherings take place (Bohannon and Dalton 1971, Plattner 1989, Dillely 1992, Bestor 2001, Slater and Tonkiss 2001). Our study draws largely from the latter conceptualization to demonstrate how marketplaces are contested fields of power that are socially constructed and re-composed through the efforts of human actors.

Indeed, the last few decades have witnessed a lively discussion within geography, anthropology and sociology on the social construction of markets and trade. This has been underpinned by a renewed interest in the concept of social embeddedness, originating from Polanyi's (1944, 1957) notion that the formation of modern markets 'disembed' economic transactions from other – such as cultural, social, political, ethnic and gendered – dimensions. Also influential has been Scott's (1976) related idea that market forces displace community-oriented 'moral economies', or the customary morals, norms and values, structuring 'traditional' societies. Current authors are clear to point out that all economies, even 'developed' capitalist ones, are socially embedded and infused with social values and norms (Barber 1995, Hann and Hart 2011). We concur with this point, but also suggest that the conflicts and contradictions arising from the development trajectories of upland markets in Vietnam reflect particular tensions over the convergence of marketplaces and market principle. This is observed here through specific attempts by the Vietnamese state to apply a 'market model' to new environments and the responses of traders striving to 'remake' markets more on their own terms.

In the Vietnam uplands, marketplaces continue to assume a critical place in the livelihoods of tens of thousands of residents. While a range of livelihood frameworks have been discussed and critiqued over the past 50 years (Scoones 2009), shared themes indicate the strengths of drawing upon a livelihood approach. First is the consensus that we must understand assets and vulnerabilities (often discussed in terms of the existence or lack of forms of capital: human, physical, natural, financial, social), strategies (the ways people use these assets or resources to pursue particular economic activities), and the socio-cultural, economic and political processes mediating access to these resources (see Chambers and

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<sup>1</sup>Ethnonyms used here are the most widely recognized in international usage, based on ethnolinguistic divisions. In Vietnam, Hmong and Yao are officially named 'H'mông' and 'Dao' (Zao) respectively. For ethnological information on Vietnam's national minorities see Condominas (1978) and Michaud (2006).

Conway 1991, Ellis 2000, Bury 2004, de Haan and Zoomers 2005, Turner 2012a). When analyzing marketplace trader actions in the Vietnamese uplands, it is particularly important to examine how individual and household livelihoods are shaped by ‘local and distinct institutions (e.g. local customs regarding access to common property resources, local and national land tenure rules), and by social relations (gender, caste, kinship and so on), as well as by economic opportunities’ (Ellis 2000, 6).

Livelihood frameworks are frequently applied within development policy and practice with the overall purpose of strategizing economic development. In so doing, the particular reasons why local actors – in our case marketplace traders – might sidestep, resist, accommodate or modify specific aspects of ‘development’ and market integration, and the complex ways that they might accomplish this, are often overlooked (Scoones 2009, Turner 2012a). Thus, to incorporate local, culturally informed interpretations of livelihood responses and focus upon how upland residents exhibit agency, we draw from the extensive resistance literature. Of interest here, in the context of ethnically and spatially marginalized peasant traders within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, are concepts of ‘rightful resistance’ and everyday forms of covert resistance. Within Vietnam, civil society remains highly circumscribed and examples of overt resistance by market traders are not commonplace.<sup>2</sup> Instead, popular complaints and contentions over state actions are sometimes articulated through what has been termed ‘rightful resistance’ (O’Brien 1996, O’Brien and Li 2006). Rightful resisters are not calling into question the authority of state laws or the state’s core principles. Rather, their complaints lie with the failure of the state to follow through on its duties to citizens in protecting their rights to a livelihood (Labbé 2010). Rightful resistance is vocal and aimed at direct recognition by the state or powerful elites. These actions tend to take place through institutionalized routes as resisters ‘work the system’ by drawing directly upon state law, rhetoric, propaganda or polices in order to legitimately seek redress for wrongdoings (O’Brien 1996).

Contrasting with the rightful resistance approach is Scott’s concept of ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ (1985). This incorporates a wide range of far less visible, subtle maneuvers used by individuals or groups to defend their material and physical welfare such as ‘foot dragging’, sabotage and minor disruptions. These acts are not public or formalized and are often difficult to identify. It is precisely this furtive nature that makes everyday resistance achieve its intended outcomes, setting it apart from more overt forms (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Kerkvliet 1990, 2005, Caouette and Turner 2009). We contend that marketplace actors in upland Vietnam draw on both approaches, as the situation demands. In both cases, we adhere to the idea of relational power, rather than to dichotomies of structure and agency, opening the door to analyses of livelihoods that involve strategies that are ‘constantly shifting, relational and uneven’ (Sowerwine 2011a, 68).

Together, these conceptual entry points help us to illustrate that upland marketplace traders in northern Vietnam are conscious of the fact that they do not have the power to appreciably challenge the state’s discourse on how upland development ‘should’ take place. Still, traders respond to and navigate interventions by adeptly modifying their livelihoods in multiple, shifting ways, in order to grapple with current demands from state regulations and officials. These social practices demonstrate that traders are far from passive and powerless actors.

<sup>2</sup>But see Leshkowich (2005) writing on Kinh traders in urban south Vietnam.



Figure 2. Market day trading within the grounds of an upland market square.

### Contextualizing markets in Lao Cai province

Since at least the mid-1800s, ethnic minority, Kinh and Han traders in northern Vietnam have been actors in a vast network of markets with trade extending to the lowland Red River delta and across the border far into Yunnan (Turner 2010, Salemink 2011, Li Tana 2012). French military archival documents have recorded that upland market trade was conducted in basic conditions; goods were displayed on the ground, sometimes with thatched roofs and bamboo stall structures that traders constructed to protect their goods from inclement weather. More recently, since the mid-2000s, we have observed dramatic structural changes occurring. Numerous upland markets, including the majority in Lào Cai province, have undergone upgrading. While variations in physical layout remain, the common structure nowadays is a series of buildings with concrete foundations and pillars supporting corrugated iron or tiled roofs, set within the grounds of a main plaza. Inside these buildings, traders rent a fixed stall or space and sell everyday goods such as fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, dried foods, household utensils, textiles and clothing (Figure 2).

Within Vietnam there is a three-tier marketplace stratification: wholesale markets (Grade 1), daily markets (Grade 2) and periodic markets (Grade 3). The latter two are far more common in the uplands and are the focus of this paper. In 2012, Lào Cai province had a total of 71 official marketplaces, accounting for nearly 40 percent of all goods traded within the province and contributing nearly VND10 billion (USD 470,000) to the provincial state budget (UBND Lào Cai 2012). The spatial distribution of marketplaces within the province is uneven, but on average there is one marketplace for every three communes (Dept. of Commerce and Tourism provincial representative, interview).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>There is no Grade 1 market in Lào Cai province, while there are 13 Grade 2 markets, five in Lào Cai city and one each in the capital towns of the remaining seven districts. There are 57 Grade 3 periodic markets located within the 163 communes (Dept. of Culture provincial representative, interview).

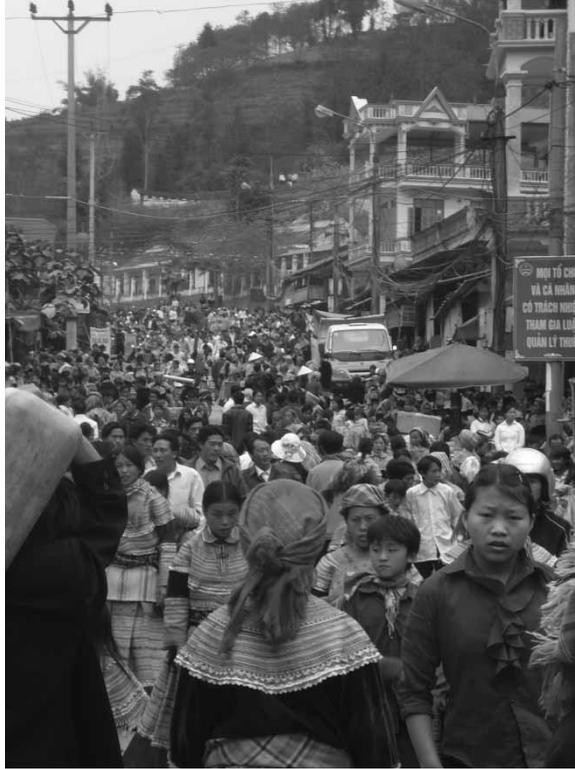


Figure 3. Crowds arriving for the main market day in Si Ma Cai town.

Our fieldwork reveals that Kinh comprise the majority of daily traders at Grade 2 district markets in the province, often operating from permanent kiosks rented from the state, sometimes on long-term leases accessed through competitive bidding. Yet, adding to the complexity, Grade 2 marketplaces also function as periodic markets (*chợ phiên*), with peak market activity occurring one or two days a week.<sup>4</sup> On ‘market days’, the number of attendants and transactions spikes dramatically – we have witnessed well over 1000 visitors – with ethnic minorities from the district and beyond surpassing daily Kinh traders as the majority of merchants and customers (see Figure 3). Seasonal differences are also notable, with higher trader and customer numbers during post-harvest months and leading up to New Year celebrations.

Grade 3 periodic markets feature a wide range of local and long-distance traders, numerous commodities and a variety of services (UBND Lào Cai 2012). Ethnic minorities from the surrounding hamlets are the most prominent traders, gathering to sell surplus seasonal produce, forest products, homemade alcohols, livestock, textiles and cooked foods, as well as to socialize (Figure 4). A small number of ethnic minority traders have also explained to us how they move through a weekly circuit of these periodic markets selling ethnic minority-oriented goods such as textiles, agricultural inputs and equipment and Video Compact Discs/Digital Video Discs. Meanwhile, itinerant

<sup>4</sup>Lào Cai provincial authorities have continued the colonial French system of a fixed weekly market schedule, whereas pre-colonial market days followed the lunar calendar.



Figure 4. A food stall section in a periodic marketplace.

Kinh traders sell manufactured clothing and dried foods. Market days are a short-lived affair. Merchants arrive from 5:00 am, the market buzzes with activity from around 8:00 to noon, and traders usually depart by 1:00 pm.

### **Market integration pursued: policies and programs**

As part of the broad enclosure strategy suggested at the outset of this paper, we argue that national unity, state security and the assimilation and sedentarization of ethnic minority groups have remained pivotal concerns for the Vietnamese state since independence, expressed through overt or subtle policy guises (see also Michaud 2000, World Bank 2009, Sowerwine 2011a). Since the mid-1990s, with Vietnam's gradual turn from a centrally planned to a more market-oriented economy (*đổi mới*), remote upland areas have become targets for state-supported socio-economic development and market integration. This targeting is concurrent with ongoing security concerns in mountainous and borderland areas (Phan Si Man 2005). Efforts to bring the livelihoods and lifestyle practices of diverse ethnic groups living in these frontier regions under control and regulation – to make them more legible – are now expressed through multiple targeted programs run by different state ministries.

The most recent national socioeconomic development plans (SEDP)<sup>5</sup> emphasize the expansion and improvement of physical marketplaces throughout the country, with particular attention given to rural, remote and mountainous regions. Additionally, a number of national policies promulgated since 2000 pertain directly to marketplace development. A brief review of core decisions and decrees shows the degree to which upland trading

<sup>5</sup>These include the 10-year (2001–2010), five-year (2006–2010), and current draft version (2011–2016) SEDPs.

sites have been targeted. The national-level *Decree on the development and management of marketplaces* is the guiding policy, with a procedural framework for the development, investment, classification, organization, regulation and management of all marketplaces (SRV 2003). More specifically, the national *Decision of the Prime Minister approving the program on the development of marketplaces until 2010* established a series of goals, including developing pivotal market centers for key commodities; upgrading urban marketplaces and developing supermarkets; constructing or ‘modernizing’ marketplaces in rural, mountainous and border areas; ‘professionalizing’ the management of marketplaces, and ensuring that marketplace organization is ‘ordered and disciplined’ (SRV 2004). The more recent *Decision approving the scheme on rural trade development during 2010–2015* places additional emphasis on the development of wholesale, commune and border markets and market networks (SRV 2010).<sup>6</sup>

The lack of access to a formal marketplace for commodity trade is described in state documents as a key barrier to the development of commercial production, market expansion and the ability of local populations to exchange goods in an efficient manner (SRV 2003). Remodeling trade organization and the infrastructure of marketplaces is argued to help promote socio-economic development, eliminate hunger and reduce poverty while encouraging sedentarization (see for instance SRV 2008a). As such, the objectives of all these policies can be summarized as: first, to develop and expand marketplace networks; second, to renovate and upgrade marketplaces; third, to facilitate market integration by increasing the circulation of goods and services, and fourth, to improve marketplace organization and management. Although these plans are national in scope, special priority is given to marketplaces in border and upland ethnic minority communes, where state officials have decided marketplaces are an urgent need (SRV 2004).

Mirroring national objectives, a key goal of the current (2008) Lào Cai provincial *Master plan on socio-economic development to 2020* is:

To build permanent markets; [and to] strive to reach the target that by 2010 all makeshift markets will be abolished. From 2008–2010: to renovate and upgrade 11 markets; build 18 new markets; and develop 8 new markets. From 2011–2020: to renovate and upgrade 20 markets and develop 15 new ones. (SRV 2008b)

Significant headway towards these targets has been made, with over 30 permanent market buildings built in commune centers, and 23 market buildings renovated since 2005 (Văn hóa 2012). However, the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD 2010) reports that state construction funds for market infrastructure have been insufficient and state targets have not been reached. The same document states that in 2010, of the 71 marketplaces in Lào Cai province, 12 were still ‘semi-permanent’, while 14 were ‘temporary’, something the state wants rectified as quickly as possible (IPSARD 2010).

We suggest that through the market development policies and plans described above, the Vietnamese state is working to bring upland marketplaces more effectively under the control and surveillance of local cadre. Foucault’s concept of governmentality, including

<sup>6</sup>Additionally, since 1998, the main national poverty alleviation programme (Program 135) has stressed the planning and development of markets in upland areas (Vu Tuan Anh 2005). Under this programme, by the end of 2003, of the 2362 communes covered, 48 percent had either constructed or improved market halls (CEM 2004). Aside from state and private investments, key sources of funding for marketplace development have been the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank (Department of Industry and Commerce official, interview).

'the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit complex form of power' that seeks to regulate the relationship between people and things, seems particularly apt here (Foucault 1991, 102). This exercise of power takes place through the state's regulations concerning the design and building of new markets, as well as renovations, upgrading and market relocation. Furthermore, the organization and administration of individual marketplaces is being increasingly formalized. To justify these state approaches, marketplaces are depicted as chaotic elements of society that require state authority in order to maintain their order and effective functioning. As the state works to modernize markets, part of this process entails eliminating what are regarded as 'uncontrollable' elements of marketplace trade. For instance, marketplace organization or trade sites that originate independently through the initiative of local people – meeting local needs and priorities – are deemed to be of concern and in need of evaluation. The 2003 national *Decree on the development and management of marketplaces* explicitly notes the importance of 'preventing and putting an end to the state of marketplaces emerging spontaneously or built in contravention of planning' [Decree No. 2/2003/ND-CP (SRV 2003); reiterated a year later in Decision No. 559/2004/QD-TTg (SRV 2004)].

### **On-the-ground realities: plans lost in translation**

The on-the-ground realities of how these policies and plans are implemented are even more complex, as national plans must percolate down through a hierarchical provincial, district and commune structure. Very briefly, at the provincial level, marketplace *development plans* for Lào Cai are based on the national planning framework, and development investments are decided upon and drawn up by the provincial People's Committee with the advice of the Department of Industry and Commerce (Department of Industry and Commerce official, interview). These plans are then disseminated to districts, which in turn repeat the process at the commune level. Commune officials produce local market plans to meet these broader directives, which must then be approved by the district or province before they can be implemented. In terms of *market operations*, following *đổi mới* the government decentralized market administration and founded Market Management Boards (*Ban Quản Lý Chợ*) as the designated agencies to oversee individual marketplace operations (SRV 2004). Market Management Boards usually have three or four staff members, consisting of a head, the vice chairperson(s) and an accountant (SRV 2008a).<sup>7</sup>

Provincial and district officials have often acted with urgency to put national plans into effect, leading to dire results due to a lack of prior research and consultation with locals, as we expose shortly.<sup>8</sup> Our fieldwork illustrates that upland residents are overwhelmingly left out of these decision-making processes. They become frustrated bystanders, watching as markets are constructed in inconvenient or inappropriate locations where they are not wanted or needed, leading to barren markets and wasted funds.

<sup>7</sup>In Lào Cai, official interviewees recognized that market management officials have poor work conditions. They are often employed part-time with low pay, with a high turnover rate and frequent staff transfers between different markets (Department of Industry and Commerce official, UBND Lao Cai 2012). Moreover, in many periodic markets, there is no dedicated market management board, with staff from the commune People's Committee doubling as managers (Department of Industry and Commerce official).

<sup>8</sup>One could hypothesize that the widely acknowledged kickbacks available in the construction industry in Vietnam may be linked to this eagerness to start construction.



Figure 5. An abandoned handicraft market area in Tả Phìn commune, Sa Pa district.

Criticism of this market development model has arisen within Vietnam from traders, local officials and the broader media. Local state actors we interviewed – district People’s Committee and Grade 2 and 3 market board officials – often only had a vague idea about future market plans. While local officials might be aware of general re-development schemes, they rarely knew when marketplace projects were going to occur, how or why. In one instance, when we requested information about a plan to construct a central marketplace at a new location in an upland town, the market management official replied: ‘At what time the new market will open depends on a lot of things. I am not allowed to take part and give my ideas to the committee for the new market because there is a board to negotiate and discuss the plans and I am not a participant’.

Yet these market cadres are in direct contact with traders in local marketplaces and are the only official spokespersons from whom traders can receive information and ask questions about marketplace operations and future plans. This exclusion of local officials from planning meetings and lack of communication results in hostilities, tensions and confusion for local traders. At the provincial level, one official noted bluntly:

The reality is there are just too many leading players and investors involved in the business of building markets in remote areas: the district People’s Committee; managers of the poverty reduction program; the Department of Agriculture and rural Development; and the immigration and resettlement of ethnic minorities program. Most of these players have little specialized knowledge; their site survey and construction plan may not follow correct procedures. Their building design can end up being inappropriate for locals’ practical needs. The end result is an irony that some markets get built but nobody comes to them! After a review, it is later revealed that the wrong location was picked or that the size of the market is inadequate, so nobody ends up trading there.

The Vietnamese media, usually fairly averse to criticizing government strategies, has also been vocal, arguing that the lack of a sound policy mechanism has prevented appropriate

market investment. A highly telling news article from 2010 reports that there are at least a dozen newly-built market structures abandoned in Lào Cai province, describing some as ‘left fallow’ for drying cassava or for children to play football (Dan Tri 2010). A newly built ‘handicraft market’ in Tả Phìn commune – designed in a ‘traditional’ style to appeal to tourists – has similarly never taken hold (Figure 5). Here, Yao and Hmong local handicraft traders we talked with prefer to follow tourists around their village, trying to entice guests to visit their homes for a sale, or wait at the car park where tour buses unload.

Trader critiques make it clear that provincial and local state planning is oftentimes at odds with or fails to take local livelihood concerns into account. Poor communication, delays and complications surrounding the completion of such ‘improvements’ leave local traders particularly frustrated. Two cases highlight this point.

### *Marketplace construction*

With a total investment of over VND12 billion (USD 570,000), the major overhaul of Bắc Hà town’s marketplace commenced in September 2006 and was expected to be completed by the end of 2007 (see Figure 6). Eleven months after the expected completion date, we witnessed a few new buildings, but major construction was still underway and traders still occupied temporary stalls. One trader explained that there had been a ‘big push’ before the May 2008 Bắc Hà Tourism and Culture week, prioritizing the construction of certain market buildings. These included a giant wok for cooking a traditional meat soup (*thắng cố*), three meters in diameter and weighing 1.6 tons, which won a Guinness Book of Records award; an admirable feat no doubt, but hardly useful for local traders (Văn hóa 2008, Kinh trader interviews). It was not until March 2009, 13 months after the original expected completion date, that most of the new market buildings had been finally built.



Figure 6. Construction to renovate the Bắc Hà marketplace still underway in August 2008.

Not surprisingly, traders were aggravated by this lengthy, drawn-out construction period, during which time they had to make do with what they considered to be inadequate, temporary structures. Mr. Nam,<sup>9</sup> a Kinh daily market trader, was highly frustrated with the state's handling of the new market construction project. Upset by the lack of follow-through on promises made by local state cadres, he was also resentful of being obligated to pay for a temporary stall space, which he then had to upgrade himself for it to be functional. He detailed:

I'm very upset with the temporary market we were relocated to. Before we were moved, the government promised we'd be given support with a small amount of money. We were also told we wouldn't be asked to pay rent for our stalls while in the new temporary market. But in fact, the market board still collects money from us for fees and rental space! So in comparison with the old market, the total amount of money we have to pay now is even greater than before. My wife and I paid a lot of money to rent our stall for a fixed lease period in the old market. This means that in the new market we should be entitled to have a spot for a few more years, as per our rental agreement. But I don't think the new market will provide enough space for all of the traders who want to work there. This will cause many difficulties for people applying for a space. The District offered us two solutions. People who still have time left over from their rental agreement in the old market will be reimbursed a certain amount of money. Or, they will be provided a spot in the new market for the duration they have left on their rental agreement, if there's room. But me and most of the others don't want the money back and prefer to be given a new spot for trading in the new market ...

Likewise Mr. Dang, trading in the same market, noted that the District had built a very poor temporary market that had included no waste disposal or sanitation. Security was also an ongoing concern: 'Many traders sleep in the marketplace because they need to protect their goods from being destroyed or stolen since the stalls are so flimsy. In the old market, we could feel safe to lock the door and keep our goods in the market at night'. Mr. Dang was also quick to point out inefficient and wasteful planning:

Only a few years ago, an NGO [non-governmental organization] built a water supply system for the market but now it's been torn down. The previous market was just built in the 1990s and it's now been demolished again! It was built with solid materials but was destroyed when the government decided they wanted to build another one. In my opinion, this seems a big waste of money and time. The authorities aren't taking traders' needs into consideration properly ...

This level of everyday insecurity, ongoing uncertainty and the risk of losing the right to productive capital via market stall space prevent traders from making long-term plans and investments. Their livelihoods – already unstable and uncertain – become more so due to poorly executed state actions to upgrade the market environment. Such striking sentiments were also voiced by another Kinh merchant, Mr. Thanh, who felt that his district government's priorities lay more in developing the area for tourism than in improving the marketplace to assist small traders. In a clear example of rightful resistance, he reasoned:

I think that the government's main purpose for building the new market is to draw more tourism; we already had a good market here! Tourists were coming to this market because they were attracted by the traditional characteristics of it and the culture of the people, so they don't want to see it change. Traders here called the District People's Committee to the Provincial Courts in order to complain about having to relocate to this temporary market because the compensation and the design of the temporary market were unacceptable to us ... I feel that the state policy is often good, but in practice the actions of the People's Committee are not.

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<sup>9</sup>All names are pseudonyms.

**Marketplace relocations**

Other conflicts between state development goals and local interests occur directly over marketplace relocations. This is clearly illustrated by the case of Cốc Ly periodic market, Bắc Hà district. Situated on the banks of the Chảy River, the market has been in operation for decades. In 2005, a nearby construction project to build a hydropower plant commenced. Construction lasted five years, with access roads in increasingly poor condition and severe noise and dust pollution. Official documents cite that a total of 866 households (4449 people) have been affected, including 66 relocated households (325 inhabitants). All those impacted are recorded as having been compensated for land, agricultural crops and resettlement (CDM 2011).

Local resident informants were aware that resettlement was going to occur and the marketplace relocated. However, during construction, trader informants had no idea of precisely when this was to occur or how they would be compensated. This confusion was voiced by Ms. Ta May, a Yao food trader in 2007:

I know this market is going to be relocated to Lùng Xa, at first. This will be temporary until they build a new bridge, then they'll relocate us again to Thâm Phúc. I don't know when the market will move because a few months ago they told me I would already have to be moved by now, but it still hasn't happened. All the residents of this community will have to move eventually. But local people are waiting for their compensation from the government before they'll move. I'm not sure of the amount we'll be given, but maybe they'll determine it based upon hectares of land? I've heard each household might receive VND30–40 million (USD 1800–2400 in 2007). I'll move, but only because I have to. I'd prefer to stay here because I'm familiar with this place and I know how to do business here. If I move to a new place I'm afraid I'll have to start all over again and won't know how to deal with my livelihood ...

Contradicting Ms. Ta May's account, a planning representative for the dam construction company interviewed in 2007 stated that Cốc Ly traders were blatantly refusing to move to the new market site. The company representative stated in disgust that the traders 'are aware that a new market now exists for them, but they refuse to go there until December when this area will be flooded!' We found traders were confused about the plans and the existence of a new market, but also seemed to be holding out for as long as possible in the old familiar location, a classic example of everyday foot-dragging resistance. A lack of knowledge regarding trade conditions, as well as rumors regarding the lack of infrastructure at the new market site, were making them hesitant to move. According to Ms. Ma, a Hmong itinerant market trader:

There is a new market now ... but it doesn't have water for sanitation or cooking in the food section. The People's Committee wants us to move there but traders want to stay [put]. We prefer it here. I like this place better because I'm comfortable with it and if I move to another place I worry that I may not be able to do as well over there ... I just don't know.

It was not only traders who were concerned about the closure of this market. Local officials too expressed anxiety as to how this would affect tourism. One commune official reasoned, 'I think the relocation will have an impact on tourism here. Tourists come to this market because the surroundings are picturesque, and maybe the new market location will not be as beautiful'. Given that the 'cultural preservation' and 'cultural heritage' of ethnic minorities are recognized by Lào Cai provincial authorities as important, both intrinsically and for tourism purposes, the plan to destroy what was a vital, vibrant market space attracting numerous tourists, both overseas and Kinh, appears incongruous (an

interpretation echoed by the Director of the provincial Dept. of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Vietnam News 2010).

In another case, marketplace traders in one of the province's towns are watching the construction in 2013 of a large, multi-storied market complex located on the urban outskirts. Traders have no idea as to when it might be completed, but remarked that 'we hope it'll take at least another five years' so that trade can continue at the existing market spot. Confusion also reigns over what will happen to the current, centrally located market, with rumors ranging from it being turned into a supermarket, to becoming a tourist market where officials will raise rents considerably. Traders and officials alike know that the new marketplace is poorly located for local and tourist customers. When asked if they had been consulted about the new marketplace, one Kinh trader noted vehemently, 'they don't care about us'.

Significantly, a number of minority traders in the same town also highlighted ethnic-based barriers to accessing state planning information. As Hmong trader Ms. Kou stated:

We'd love if someone came here to tell us what's happening – to explain if we'll have to move, pay more fees, and how we can deal with this change – but so far no one has come. Something might have been said on the public loudspeaker but that's only in the Vietnamese language, which many of us can't understand.

Moreover, ethnic minority traders worry about losing their access to market space, based on previous experiences. For instance, according to another Hmong trader, Ms. Vu:

Around 2006, a new outdoor market was built that was supposed to be for us minorities to sell in. However, soon, new, fancier stalls were rebuilt where our stalls used to be. These stalls were for the Vietnamese people selling barbeque, and the minority people ended up being kicked out. Maybe the same thing may happen again – maybe the new market will end up being only for the Vietnamese people and those who can afford it.

Such statements echo important concerns raised by many other ethnic minority traders who perceive themselves as being displaced from newly improved, more highly regulated markets by Kinh traders who tend to be more adept at dealing with state officials and regulations. This serves to expose how the market engages different categories of social actors in different ways, of great consequence in this multi-ethnic space, as we shall see shortly.

### **Market trader agency: covert and rightful resistance**

Traders have not passively accepted these changes, criticizing these unwelcome intrusions into their livelihoods through various resistance techniques. Dynamics between individual state actors and traders reflect a social interface where contestations over value, meaning and power frequently come to the fore (cf. Long 2001). Ongoing tensions between market officials and traders are not only visible in market planning flashpoints such as reconstructions and relocations, but can also be seen when officials are performing their rounds to collect fees and monitor operations. On these occasions, actors carefully manage their identities, representing their positions to one another in a way that best achieves their own specific objectives.

For the most part, market officials we interviewed tended to echo the central state's vision of markets as potentially disordered spaces that need to be structured (cf. Leshkovich 2005). In some markets, officials maintain a personal distance from vendors to establish and uphold a relationship of authority. In other markets, we observed officials who have

developed a more friendly or joking manner with traders in order to help smooth over the aspects of their position that make them unpopular, like fee collection. This seemed to backfire for one young male Kinh official when, in the cultural section of the Sa Pa marketplace dominated by female ethnic minority traders, several elder handicraft traders banded together to cajole him into not bothering to collect their fees for the day because the amounts were ‘very small and unimportant’. In a manner that appeared jovial, but could be taken as a subtle act of resistance, a few made the official feel uncomfortable by pinching him and slapping him on the bottom, sexualizing him as a young male and thus marginalizing his power by asserting that this was a female space. He collected the fees nevertheless, but then beat a red-faced, hasty retreat.

What we define as ‘identity management’ forms a more overt resistance tactic among traders who deliberately, even angrily, express their dissatisfaction at having to pay market fees to officials, or in the case of ambulant vendors, oppose having goods confiscated by the police. In these cases, traders often manage their identities publically in a specific manner, such as highlighting their victimization directly, claiming to officials that they are poor women earning very little while trying to care for their families and should thus be exempt from fees.

Everyday resistance tactics occurred in the livestock section of the pre-relocation Cốc Ly periodic market, where traders were required to pay a market fee, but only if they were able to sell an animal. A market official complained to us, ‘I have to wait around here and watch them all day because some traders will lie and say they didn’t sell an animal when they actually have, in order to avoid payment’. In another periodic market, we witnessed market cadres visiting makeshift bamboo stalls – erected by traders themselves – with measuring tape in hand to assess their size, while Hmong textile traders hurriedly packed up and reduced the dimensions of their displays. From 2010 to 2013, we witnessed Hmong and Yao female handicraft vendors selling to tourists on the sidewalks in Sa Pa town routinely instructed by authorities to move or their goods would be confiscated. While traders first made a show of quickly complying, once they observed that officials had moved well on down the road, they simply stopped packing and stayed put.

Moreover, traders often complained to us that they are not receiving the services that they pay for. For instance, in 2007, a small group of traders from the temporary Bắc Hà market moved out of the market to a new spot along the road within close proximity to the People’s Committee and other state offices. According to one female Kinh trader, Ms. Tuyet, ‘we came here because we can’t stand being in the market anymore as it’s so disgusting!’ Their decision to relocate and refusal to pay fees was a sign of protest against the state’s poor handling of the new market construction. On another occasion, several Hmong women in the Sa Pa marketplace were irritated because a theft of their wares had occurred. We observed them arguing vocally to market officials that there was no point in paying fees when no one was looking after their goods and that the market board was failing at its job of ‘maintaining security’ – again a case of rightful resistance.

### **Market trader agency: ethnically aligned consequences**

When one considers how markets are used by different groups of social actors in this multi-ethnic space, the incompatibilities between state agendas for marketplace development and traders’ livelihood priorities become more obviously culturally rooted. The ultimate goal of designing permanent, fixed-day market structures with set kiosks fits with an ideal of ‘modern’ marketplace organization rather than with the upland periodic market fairs that have comprised a core part of ethnic minority trade and socialization for centuries. As

we noted earlier, Kinh traders in modernized upland markets stand to benefit most from these transformations given their greater access to financial capital, market information and extensive trade networks. These factors afford them an advantage over ethnic minorities now having to operate and negotiate formalized market systems and approaches – notwithstanding our examples of how these projects have negatively impacted *all* traders (World Bank 2009).

The degree to which the naturalized understanding of ethnic minority traders as backwards and in need of education by Kinh state officials endures is clear (cf. Taylor 2008, Sowerwine 2011a). Kinh officials repeatedly suggested to us in interviews that ethnic minorities have not yet developed the skills necessary to be ‘fully fledged traders’. Officials clarified that a ‘modern trader’ sells in a market on a daily basis, from a fixed location, rather than selling weekly, on a seasonal basis, or according to a more flexible schedule. In one instance, where plans had been drawn for a new commune market, a Kinh People’s Committee representative explained that it had yet to be constructed ‘because the local people [ethnic minorities] in these areas still do not understand the concept of trading from a fixed, daily selling space’. Furthermore, a Kinh official from a district Chamber of Commerce and Tourism explained that ethnic minorities ‘should be shown the *proper way* to be involved in the business sector, have the correct documents, and be provided with information on how to do business in the correct way’. The ‘correct way’ to trade is constantly interpreted as involving formal channels, full-time trade engagement and being correctly licensed (also see Văn hóa 2012).

Hmong, Tày, Yao and Nùng traders in Lào Cai province with whom we have spoken continue to prioritize, and economically and culturally value, the agricultural core of their livelihoods.<sup>10</sup> As such, it is important that livelihood diversification strategies be oriented and timed around this core. By imposing greater formality, new state market arrangements ignore the flexibility that these ethnic minority traders and households have been accustomed to and require for their broader livelihoods. This flexibility has, through time, enabled uplanders to adapt to changing circumstances and take up new opportunities as they arise (cf. Turner and Michaud 2008). A less temporally and spatially elastic timetabling of trade does not make sense for many ethnic minority households who carefully shift their livelihood activities according to seasonal agricultural calendars.

Flexibility is also important in relation to gendered access to markets. This is particularly relevant as new, gendered trade opportunities have opened in the last decade for minority women, particularly Hmong women, due to cultural tourism’s demand for handicrafts as well as upland consumers’ desire for manufactured Hmong-oriented textiles and dress from China (Bonnin and Turner 2013). Many minority women traders explain they are best able to take up these marketplace opportunities through a flexible engagement that accommodates the blending of productive and reproductive labour as household circumstances necessitate. We are concerned that the push for market modernization may inadvertently close important new market access channels for minority women who find themselves gradually displaced from increasingly rigid, formalized markets.

Likewise, in contrast to the modern trader discourse repeated by officials, Hmong, Tày, Yao and Nùng individuals and households participate in a variety of exchange and market

<sup>10</sup>This is less the case for Giáy traders, many of whom have become full-time traders. This is not surprising given that the Giáy, part of the Tai-Kadai linguistic group, have an important history as trade intermediaries between upland groups such as the Hmong and Yao and lowland Kinh (Michaud 2006).

systems that are small-scale, involve barter and other reciprocal exchanges, can occur outside of marketplaces and, since they often deal in commodities oriented to minority consumers, are of little interest to the national economy (such as certain rice seeds, livestock and textiles). These alternative approaches are frequently ignored by state development plans. As such, state officials continue to misunderstand ethnic minority householders as autarkic and poor at business and market interactions, and therefore in need of being ‘taught’ how to trade with outsiders (McElwee 2008, World Bank 2009). All this is in spite of the fact that upland ethnic minorities have a long history of engagement in regional trade networks, as noted earlier. Nevertheless, the official invisibility of some of these economic spaces enables ethnic minorities to continue to engage in economic transactions free from the burdens of regulatory fees and other formal access constraints, such as the limited availability of market stall spaces.

### **Concluding thoughts: remaking markets**

The current agrarian transition unfolding in these uplands is characterized by increasing, yet spatially and socially highly uneven, levels of market integration (Bonnin 2012, Turner 2012a,b). How such processes come to bear upon upland traders’ everyday lives and livelihoods, and how traders in turn respond to these new pressures and opportunities, is still relatively unknown. Therefore, in this paper, we have attempted to shed light on the rather elusive and fuzzy concept of market integration through the lens of everyday processes of upland marketplace development. We have shown how the everyday livelihood activities and struggles of small-scale traders reflect concrete practices of market formation, contesting in turn any notion that market forces ‘penetrate’ these uplands as exogenous forces (see also Sikor and Pham Thi Tuong Vi 2005).

When state plans impinge on culturally and locally relevant approaches, livelihood strategies often include resistance at some level. What is needed, therefore, are more studies that illustrate the diverse means by which locals can negotiate change and that ‘help alter the patent victimization trope that dominates much of the literature on upland transformations and ethnic minorities, opening up new possibilities of interpretation’ (Sowerwine 2011b, 184). As such, we have focused here on the agency of upland traders, both Kinh and ethnic minorities, as they interpret, react to and at times resist the market integration policies being implemented around them. We see little evidence of state marketplace and market integration plans assisting traders, as traders – Kinh and minorities alike – are denied information and decision-making power, and as delays beset already ill-conceived market structures and sites incompatible with local trade routines. In reaction, examples abound of traders remaking markets – drawing upon both rightful resistance approaches and everyday forms of covert resistance as they work to maintain culturally appropriate and livelihood-relevant trading approaches. Rightful resistance approaches include protests, petitions, commentaries and arguments with officials, while more covert approaches include teasing, foot-dragging during relocations, resizing stalls and moving out of sight of officials. Traders are creating multiple new spatial practices of trade and avenues of mediation and struggle with state officials.

Finally, to return to our initial argument: if these plans and policies seem to be doing so little to help individuals on the ground, as seen by the reactions and resistance that they provoke, what then is their real purpose? Of course, we might just have a case of poor policy and implementation, communication breakdowns and continuing cross-cultural misunderstandings. But perhaps we are also observing state enclosure of upland trade practices,

with market managers, fees, licenses, and fixed marketplaces and trading days all working to increase legibility, or reduce opportunities for traders to operate flexibly or ‘under the radar’. Today’s official market directives are coherent with the ‘distance demolishing technologies’ that Scott (2009) suggests contemporary rulers in the Southeast Asian Massif continue to implement in trying to bring these uplands under the state’s panoptic gaze. In upland Vietnam, we observe traders who deal with and adapt to this expansion of state control with a diversity of responses. While traders remain ever mindful of their livelihood needs and of their positioning within ethnic-based dynamics, they draw on nuanced perceptions of broader state-society power relations to carefully remake market processes. Doing so through a broad range of overt and covert actions, alternative trade imaginaries continue to exist as market practices are actively reconfigured.

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