

The price of spice: Ethnic minority livelihoods and cardamom commodity chains in upland northern Vietnam

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The northern uplands of Vietnam are witness to rapidly developing commodity markets for a range of forest and agricultural products. Since the early 1990s the cultivation of black cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*) has become a source of cash income for a growing number of ethnic minority households in these uplands. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, and utilizing a commodity chain and livelihoods approach, this article investigates the contemporary dynamics surrounding the cultivation, harvesting and trade of dried cardamom fruit from Hmong cultivators in Lao Cai province to consumers elsewhere in Vietnam and beyond to China and the global market. We analyse the spatial and social structures of these commodity chains, drawing attention to a range of mechanisms of access. We find that these mechanisms are reliant upon specific ethnic relations as well as different forms of capital that together sustain economic advantages for particular actors. While focusing on the ethnic minority cultivators active in these commodity chains, we also call for more nuanced understandings of how the trade in forest products fits within local agricultural systems and household livelihood decision making processes in the Vietnam uplands.

Keywords: cardamom, commodity chains, Hmong, livelihoods, Vietnam

Introduction

Rural livelihoods, agricultural diversification and social relations are never static in Vietnam's northern uplands. With the added complexity of members of 31 out of the county's 53 ethnic minority groups living in the region (Khong Dien, 2002; Michaud, 2006), some such individuals are embracing new market opportunities while others remain more cautious, maintaining greater confidence in their centuries-old agricultural methods. Yet few are completely isolated or immune from the increasing reach of commodity markets and commercial intensification, both of which have been given impetus by newly constructed roads, information communication technologies and market liberalization. These are contributing to new upland dynamics and tensions, with growing interest in one notable commodity: cardamom.

Cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*), a product growing in forested highland regions of Vietnam, Laos, Burma and southwest China, has been traded since Chinese imperial times and is one of the world's most expensive spices by weight (Buckingham & Tu Minh Tiep, 2003). Used as an ingredient in over 30 traditional Chinese medicines to treat stomach-aches, constipation and dysentery among other ailments (Aubertin, 2004), it has a potential 1.3 billion consumers in Asia alone, in addition to the Chinese diaspora and other consumers around the globe (Zhou, 1993). Given the high value and rising demand for this forest product, an analysis of the unique spatialities of the commodity chains involved in its cultivation, marketing and consumption and how they transpire within the context of a global market economy is important for understanding how this trade is bringing together multiple interlinked and socially situated

actors at the local, regional and global scales. In the multiethnic, developing country context of Vietnam, we investigate the cultivation and marketing of this commodity, revealing complex webs of social relationships, uneven power structures, and diverse economic returns among actors attempting to access key resources along these chains (cf. Leslie & Reimer, 1999).

The main cardamom cultivators in Vietnam are ethnic minority Hmong¹ living in the northern upland provinces. Having migrated from southern China since the 1700s, the Hmong have maintained and developed economic practices, political approaches and cosmologies that reflect their distinctiveness from the majority Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) (Michaud & Turner, 2000).² While traditionally horticulturalists practicing swidden based subsistence agriculture, Hmong livelihoods in the northern Vietnam highlands are now increasingly those of sedentarized peasants (Corlin, 2004; Turner & Michaud, 2008). Nevertheless, commerce has always played a part in their economy and these highlanders have frequently made contact with inhabitants of neighbouring valleys and beyond to exchange forest products, opium and other goods for salt and metals (Rambo, 1997). More recently, this commerce has diversified as some Hmong have entered into new market opportunities including the small-scale highland textile trade, local tourism activities and the trade in forest products, most notably cardamom (Turner, 2007).

Beginning in the mid-1980s the Vietnamese state embarked on a series of 'economic renovation' strategies collectively better known as *doi moi*. In an effort to revitalize the country's stagnant economy and cope with failures associated with the previous rural collectivization and co-operative systems (as well as the collapse of the USSR), *doi moi* shifted the national economy from being planned and centralized to more market oriented. The 1990s then paved the way for further important restructuring of the northern highland political economy. In 1992, the government, via Decree 327, banned all forms of slash-and-burn practices along with the production and sale of opium, a historically important source of cash for upland minorities (Di Gregorio *et al.*, 1996; Michaud, 2000). Such changes in market opportunities, land rights and tenure practices are raising important questions about ethnic minority livelihood responses and trade opportunities (on the northern uplands see for example Donovan *et al.*, 1997; on the Nung see Henin, 2002; on the Black Thai see Sikor & Dao Minh Truong, 2002; on the Hmong see Corlin, 2004; Turner, 2007; Schoenberger & Turner, 2008; and on the Yao see Sowerwine, 2004a; 2004b).

With these dynamics in mind, our aim here is to analyse the complex sociospatial structures of contemporary cardamom commodity chains that involve ethnic minority Hmong in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province (Figure 1). We ask: what are the spatial dynamics of these commodity chains? Who are the actors involved along their numerous nodes? What are the cultural, economic and social relations linking these actors' cultivation to consumption processes? And who stands to benefit the most from this trade? To answer these questions we develop a conceptual framework drawing on rural livelihoods literature with a focus on access and commodity chain analyses. Second, we detail the local environment of Sa Pa district and introduce the Hmong cultivators of this commodity. Then, utilizing our framework, we focus upon the cardamom cultivation and trade networks operating in Vietnam, while also noting their continuation into China and beyond. We subsequently determine the main financial beneficiaries of this trade, while questioning whether the economic returns from cardamom hold similar value for all those involved. We conclude that policy recommendations regarding upland livelihoods require a nuanced

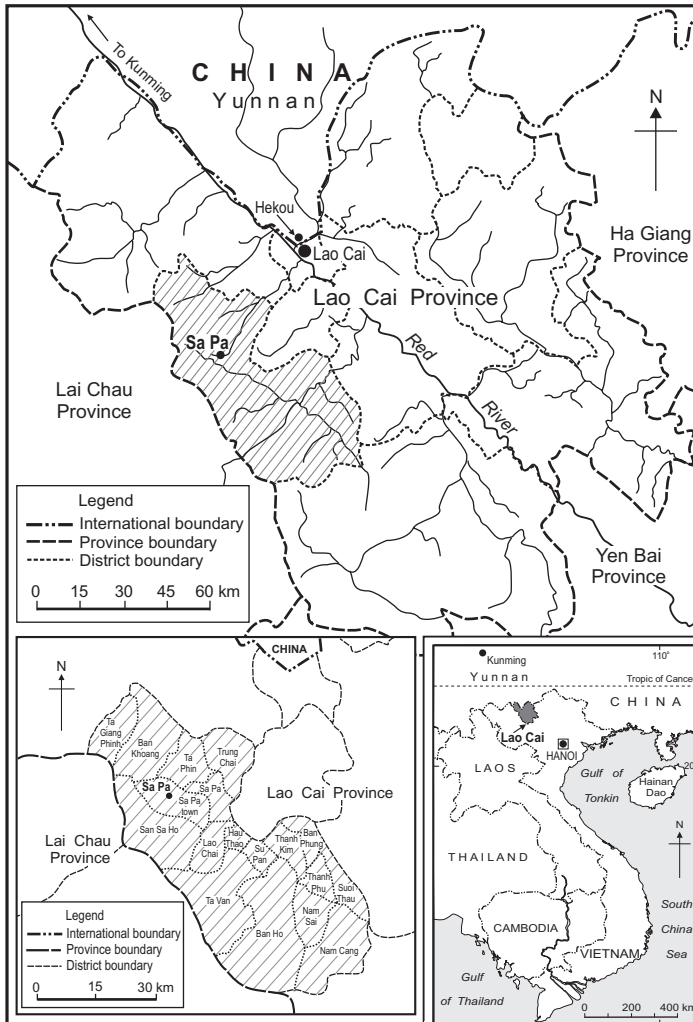


Figure 1. The locations of Sa Pa district in Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam (adapted from Michaud & Turner, 2000: 87), and the study communes (boundaries adapted from a photo displayed at Hoang Lien National Park headquarters, 2007).

comprehension of such livelihoods, which must take cultural understandings of success into account.

This study is supported by longitudinal ethnographic fieldwork among ethnic minority communities in the northern highlands ongoing since 1999 (cf. Michaud & Turner, 2000; 2006; Schoenberger & Turner, 2008; Turner, 2007; Turner & Michaud, 2008). The specific fieldwork for this study includes in-depth interviews undertaken by both authors during May–July 2006 (with the help of Hmong interpreters), with follow-up interviews by Turner from January to June 2007 and the same period in 2009. In total the paper is informed by over 40 in-depth conversational interviews and oral histories with Hmong cardamom cultivators in eight communes within Sa Pa district. Additional interviews were undertaken with cardamom traders and wholesalers of Kinh, Giay and Tay ethnicities in Sa Pa district ($n = 18$), as well as with Kinh in Lao Cai city (the

provincial capital, bordering China) (n=3) and in the national capital Hanoi (n=6). From the data collected, this study draws attention to the specific constellations of interests, values, and access to resources that mould the actions of a diverse set of interlinked actors along these commodity chains (Long & Villarreal, 1998; Long, 2001).

Rural livelihoods and commodity chains

While discussions regarding the appropriateness of different frameworks for unravelling the multifaceted and fluid nature of rural livelihoods in developing countries continue, a number of central themes are apparent (cf. Bebbington, 1999; Bouahom *et al.*, 2004; de Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Rigg, 2006). These include the necessity to recognize assets and vulnerabilities (the existence or lack of material and nonmaterial capital, including social, human, financial, physical and natural),³ as well as strategies (how people utilize or take advantage of existing assets), and access or barriers to resources (defined by such factors as social relations, ideologies, and institutions) (Chambers & Conway, 1991; Scoones, 1998; Ellis, 1998; 2000; de Haan & Zoomers, 2005). Within developing countries, livelihood studies contribute to enhancing our understandings of individual survival mechanisms and household income generating strategies, including how rural households become integrated into, or indeed resist, the market (Alther *et al.*, 2002; Dorward *et al.*, 2003; Luong Van Hy & Unger, 1998; Rambo & Tran Duc Vien, 2001; Tran Duc Vien *et al.*, 2006).

Access is a crucial factor constantly reshaping people's livelihood portfolios. Access analysis places the *ability* to benefit, instead of the *right* to benefit from an activity or good at the centre of attention (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Proponents of this approach argue that institutions, social and political-economic relations, and ideologies result in certain people benefiting from particular resources or activities while others do not (Ribot, 1998; Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Within a livelihood analysis, a focus on access highlights the different mechanisms actors use to control and maintain power over particular resources or forms of capital. This allows us to unravel the power struggles within highland cardamom commodity chains and identify the mechanisms by which actors gain and control the flows of economic and social benefits.

We also adopt a commodity chain framework to highlight the complex interethnic exchange networks governing the cultivation, processing, distribution and consumption of cardamom in and beyond Lao Cai province. Within the commodity chain literature, three broad approaches are commonly identified: global commodity chain analysis, commodity circuits and systems of provision (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1986; Leslie & Reimers, 1999; Hughes, 2000). Here, we draw on the systems of provision approach with its emphasis on the distinct relationships between material and cultural practices spanning the production, distribution and consumption of goods (Fine *et al.*, 1996). We can thus explore the different nodes of the cardamom 'journey' while unravelling the social fabric of actor interactions, as they process and move the cardamom from source to market. In tandem, livelihood and commodity chain analyses help us to understand the complex array of social interactions, intertwined with local customs, cultures and prejudices that shape the economic exchanges for actors involved in this trade (Hughes, 2000).

Lao Cai forest resources and cultivators

The landscape of Lao Cai province where these cardamom commodity chains commence is characterized by large basin areas, narrow valleys and high mountain ranges.

One of the latter, the Hoang Lien mountain range, the highest in Vietnam, straddles the western border of Sa Pa district with a topography that creates the relatively cloudy, cool and humid climate in which cardamom thrives. Encompassing the last remnants of old growth forest in the entire northern upland region, part of this range is now incorporated into the Hoang Lien National Park, a protected forest (Le Van Lanh, 2004).⁴

Growing wild in and around this National Park, cardamom is an herbaceous, perennial plant within the ginger family (*Zingiberaceae*).⁵ Under natural conditions, cardamom plant densities are relatively low, but with the propagation of young rhizomes, one cultivated hectare can yield 50 kg of dry fruit annually (Kvitvik, 2001; Aubertin, 2004). Consequently, cardamom is increasingly being cultivated under the shade of trees by ethnic minorities in Lao Cai province and other northwest provinces, with a switch from wild to cultivated harvesting reducing the distances needing to be traversed in the forest to gather a promising yield (interview, Phan Văn Thang, 22 May 2006; Sowerwine, 2004a; 2004b).

In 1999, at the time of the last official census, the Hmong – the most numerically significant cultivators of cardamom in the region – comprised just under one million of the country's total population of 83 million. Within Sa Pa district, the Hmong number about half the total population of 37 905 (SRV, 1999). Hmong food systems in highland northern Vietnam derive from five main sources: terraced rice fields, upland cultivation of dry rice, corn and swidden crops, animal husbandry, horticultural gardens and forest products (interview, Shu, 15 July 2006; also see Corlin, 2004).⁶ Within Sa Pa district, wet rice cultivation generates the main staple food, complemented by subsidiary crops such as corn, dry rice and cassava. Hmong also manage and collect forest resources for a variety of purposes such as food (plants and hunted game), building materials and herbal medicines, the latter traditionally including cardamom.

As noted earlier, with recent bans on opium production and tree felling (SRV, 1992; 1993), a number of Hmong households have searched for alternative sources of income, and cardamom is emerging as a substitute cash crop, one that requires little labour to cultivate relative to staple food crops such as rice and corn. Moreover, cash earnings from cardamom – if negotiated in advance as credit (discussed below) – can be secured at a strategic time (June/July) when some families experience food shortages. The income from cardamom can therefore play a valuable role for Hmong households looking to complement their in-kind income from rice and horticultural fields and maintain a buffer to 'smooth' household needs throughout the year.

Commencing the cardamom commodity chains

While traditionally collected in the forest for medicinal and culinary uses, in the 1990s, with rising market demand and prices, an increasing number of Hmong households in Sa Pa district intensified their cardamom cultivation under the forest canopy. These households opened new cardamom fields, scattered in different parts of the Hoang Lien mountain range, where, four or five years after planting, cardamom start bearing fruit. In Sa Pa district, cardamom is harvested from August to late October, depending on the microclimate. It is then usually dried *in situ* in the forest – typically smoked over a fire for two or three days – using fuelwood collected nearby. Hmong cultivators in the district reported producing on average 70 kg of dried cardamom each season. Though traditionally a male task, harvesting and drying the fruit sometimes involves women depending upon harvest size and the number of working age men within the household. Furthermore, as cardamom cultivation essentially relies upon unpaid family labour, smaller families often depend on reciprocal labour arrangements with extended kin or friends.

Cultivation competition and conflicts

Hmong cultivators frequently expressed concern over the lack of land suitable for expanding cardamom cultivation which has resulted in increasing competition among families. As explained by Mao (interview, 23 June 2006), a Hmong producer in Sa Pa commune, 'there isn't enough [forest] land for everyone in the village'. Mao reasoned that because his village was 'older', with a greater population concentration than several other Hmong villages he knew of, there simply was not enough appropriate land for cardamom cultivation within walking distance. Conversely, Mao explained that in San Sa Ho commune households could often establish new cardamom fields because hamlets there were more recently established and located closer to the forest.

Hmong households in Sa Pa district also face important problems as many are illegally harvesting cardamom and the fuelwood to dry it within Hoang Lien National Park. In Vietnam, logging, game hunting and collecting any plants or animals are prohibited within forest reserves and national parks (MARD, 1997).⁷ To date the Hmong have maintained the *ability* to benefit from access to their cardamom plots despite their lack of *rights* to do so, but this remains a fragile balance. Hmong informants acknowledged having cardamom fields located within the park's old-growth forest which offers ideal growing conditions. For their part, park officials (interviews, 2007) expressed concern that in addition to collecting forest products illegally, Hmong collect fuelwood and dry cardamom over fires within the forest. This, Hmong interviewees explained, is because dried cardamom is far lighter to transport than the fresh fruit, hence their preference to dry it *in situ*, where firewood is more easily sourced. To date, those harvesting cardamom do not appear to have been the target of Hoang Lien National Park authorities who could confiscate their harvest, as has happened to Hmong collecting other forest products to sell in local marketplaces (Hmong interviewees, 2006). It may therefore just be a matter of time, with increased personnel, before these conflicts between highlanders and state officials escalate.⁸

Cardamom fields, including those located outside the national park, fall outside the framework for legal property rights – or 'red book' certificates⁹ – and the majority of Hmong interviewees did not possess any recognized title to their cardamom fields. Insecure and contested forest rights are further complicated by disputes among cultivators that can escalate into violent conflict. As one Hmong man, Kao (interview, 23 June 2006), explained:

People often steal cardamom from each other. It is very hard to do anything about it because you cannot catch people easily. Sometimes when there is a lot of drinking, people start fighting and accuse each other. Last year, two or three times. . . accusations broke into a fight. Generally, people can't do anything about it but in bigger cases, people go to the people's committee to complain.

When a dispute arises over cardamom theft, villagers are required to report the incident to the local people's committee. In practice however, this reporting seldom occurs, first, because people committee members are often Kinh who Hmong individuals do not necessarily trust to deal with their conflicts appropriately; second, because the thieving often takes place in illegal fields within the national park's boundaries; and third, because of the monetary costs involved (interviews, Cham, 13 June 2006; Mee, 31 January 2009). Hmong cultivator Lim (interview, 28 June 2006) explained that 'when there is a big fight, people should go to the village leader. Previously, people did not have to pay. However today, the village leader [government

official] asks for 50 000 to 100 000 dong (roughly USD 3–6)¹⁰ to resolve the dispute . . . so most people don't say anything'.

To avoid such theft, Cham, an elderly Hmong woman (interview, 13 June 2006) noted how men make multiple trips to their fields in July, often staying overnight to keep a close watch on their maturing cardamom fruit. As an additional precaution, anxious household members sometimes harvest cardamom earlier in the season than is optimal as, Cham noted, 'the fields are very far from our house so we have to pick them early . . . but if we wait longer and no one takes them, then we can harvest more'. This defence mechanism, substantiated by other Hmong interviewees, results in a loss in both the quality of the fruit and the financial capital secured, since fully mature fruit of superior quality command higher prices.

Moving cardamom along the commodity chains

Kinh and Hmong elders recalled both legal and illegal trade networks for cardamom existing during the early independence and socialist period (1954–86). Some of these trade networks were formally recognized – with the state buying cardamom from ethnic minorities for the domestic pharmaceutical industry – while others developed illegally. In contrast, the contemporary cardamom trade relies on a complex web of private individuals – cultivators, intermediaries, wholesalers in Sa Pa town, Lao Cai city and across the Chinese border in Hekou town, manufacturers in Yunnan province, lowland traders in Vietnam, and a gamut of consumers in Vietnam, China and beyond – shown in Figure 2.

Cardamom intermediaries

Every year during the August to October harvest months, Hmong cultivators (Figure 2) receive visits from cardamom intermediaries, the majority of whom are Kinh or Giay¹¹ women, inquiring if the Hmong have cardamom to sell. These intermediaries are either based in Sa Pa town or are operators of the small general stores found in most Hmong

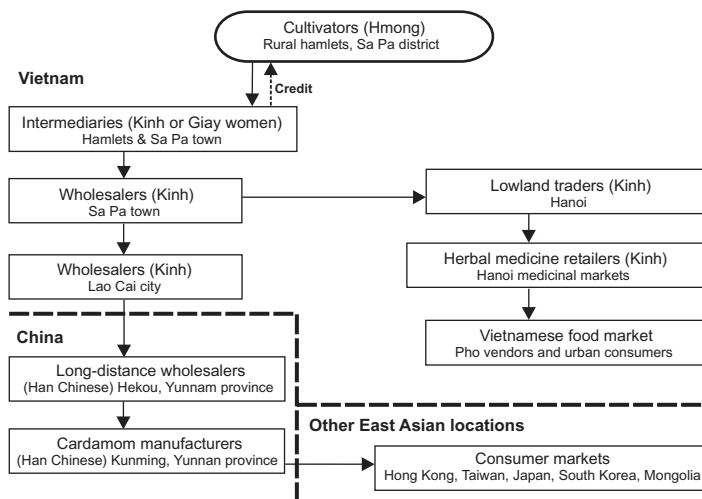


Figure 2. Cardamom commodity chains starting in Sa Pa district, in the Hoang Lien mountain range in Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam.

villages in the district; the latter are often the best placed to purchase cardamom harvests given their everyday interactions and familiarity with Hmong households.

Credit transactions are common, revealed Mai Pham, a Kinh wholesaler in Sa Pa town, (interview, 3 July 2006): 'Most people [intermediaries] give cash first to the Hmong, before the cardamom is harvested'. In Sa Pa commune, another intermediary, Yung (interview, 26 June 2006) detailed how during lean months (June/July) Hmong villagers purchase rice and other dried goods on credit, selling their cardamom 'in advance' for a reduced price of VND 40 000/kg (USD 2.50).¹² This process of 'tying traders', not uncommon in such market relationships, clearly gives intermediaries bargaining power over their Hmong suppliers in terms of financial returns (cf. Bush, 2004: 42).

Kinh wholesalers in Sa Pa and Lao Cai

Once purchased by such intermediaries, the cardamom is transported by motorbike or jeep to Sa Pa town for sale to wholesalers. These wholesalers – almost exclusively middle-aged Kinh women – who depend on having a well developed clientele of intermediaries, are also in regular telephone contact with other cardamom wholesalers based in Lao Cai city who are ready to travel by jeep or truck to Sa Pa town and other districts during the cardamom season to collect this prized product.

In contrast to the Hmong cultivators and Kinh and Giay intermediaries, Kinh wholesalers in Sa Pa town and Lao Cai city are strategically placed to access market information on cardamom prices and supply and demand trends in China – the major player in determining worldwide market prices for this commodity (Zaifu, 1991). Indeed, market information is essential for these wholesalers, in addition to established trade networks across the border for those based in Lao Cai city. A diverse occupational experience in trade appears to be an important prerequisite for the success of these wholesalers, providing them with the networking and communication skills required for cross-border negotiations and crucial access via human, social as well as financial capital (interview, Kim Ly, cross-border trader, 4 July 2006).

Processing and consumption in China

The majority of cardamom cultivated in Vietnam is destined for the Chinese pharmaceutical industry. Once across the border, the fruit are transported by Han Chinese wholesalers to Kunming city (capital of Yunnan province, some 470 km away from the border), for distribution to different pharmaceutical manufactures operating there.

The Chinese pharmaceutical industry buys, on average, 2000 tonnes of cardamom annually. While China-based cultivators are able to produce about half this quantity, the remainder is imported from neighbouring Vietnam, Laos and Burma (Zaifu, 1991). At processing factories in Kunming the fruit are ground into a fine powder or pressed into essential oil before being incorporated into various pharmaceutical products. These are then distributed to the major consumer markets in East Asia (Figure 2).

Processing and consumption in Vietnam

According to retail herbal traders in Vietnam, the domestic market for cardamom remains limited, with the largest consumer market by far being China and other East Asian countries. Yet an alternative small-scale domestic trade flow of cardamom begins with Sa Pa-based Kinh wholesalers (Figure 2) who receive visits from lowland Kinh traders commissioned by herbal medicine retailers in the capital Hanoi. In Hanoi dried

cardamom capsules are sold along Hai Thuong Lan Ong and Thuoc Bac streets in the city's ancient quarter and in the Dong Xuan marketplace, as well as in Ninh Hiep village on the capital's outskirts.¹³ These herbal medicine retailers sell cardamom to local consumers, while food vendors, small restaurants and eateries throughout the city purchase cardamom as an essential ingredient for making pho (noodle soup). Consequently, these cardamom commodity chains – originating in the forest undergrowth of highland Vietnam – are completed by a diverse array of consumers, both domestic and international, who expand the geographical scope of this chain while acquiring cardamom for a multiplicity of purposes.

At what price spice?

Similar to the case in neighbouring Laos regarding the sociospatial changes in fish trade networks there, in Vietnam we witness cardamom trade networks that have evolved from being an 'artisanal trading system characterized by a large number of small-scale exchanges with low levels of supporting infrastructure to a trans-border investment-driven trade system that is socially-mediated and spatially contingent' (Bush, 2004: 42). While historically collected in the wild for personal use and small-scale (legal and illegal) transactions, cardamom is now carefully cultivated and its trade involves an increasing number of intermediaries with a commercial reach across East Asia and beyond. As such, cardamom trade networks in northern Vietnam have become increasingly spatially fragmented with the participation of numerous social actors, some of whom derive considerable economic gains from this trade, while others appear to benefit less so.

Hmong cardamom incomes

Hmong cardamom earnings play a variety of economic roles differentiated to a degree by a household's wealth. For poorer households – the Hmong emic definition being those unable to grow enough paddy rice to cover their yearly consumption – cardamom earnings can be used to purchase extra food supplies, thus serving as a form of household insurance; for wealthier households cardamom earnings are more often used for conspicuous consumption.¹⁴

In the Hmong communes of Lao Chai and Ta Van, average household production of cardamom was 70–100 kg in 2005 and 2008, roughly equivalent to VND 6 million (USD 375) per family.¹⁵ While Hmong informants in some hamlets reported yields as low as 20 kg, a few in San Sa Ho and Ban Khoang communes harvested and processed up to 200 kg per year. In addition to purchasing supplemental rice supplies, cardamom returns are used to buy complementary goods such as meat, vegetables, salt, cooking fat, monosodium glutamate, oil, and small treats for children. For wealthier households, the cash earnings can be used for more substantial expenses, such as house construction or agricultural intensification (purchases of fertilizers and seeds) (interview, Cho, Hmong cardamom cultivator, 6 July 2006). There are also signs of conspicuous consumption, with purchases of 'luxury goods' such as a radio or motorbike after more immediate needs are met. Indeed, one Hmong interviewee, Foua (interview, 27 May 2006), confirmed that families in Seo Mi Ty – a Hmong village located closer than many others to the forest, and with a comparatively low population density – were able to buy televisions and motorbikes with their cardamom returns. Finally, cardamom returns are also used at times to purchase items for ceremonial purposes, such as for weddings, funerals and the Hmong New Year.

Intermediary and wholesaler returns

While Hmong cultivators produce on average 70 kg of dried cardamom in one season, Kinh and Giay village-based intermediaries in turn collect 1–5 tonnes of cardamom from Hmong cultivators each season. Operating with an average return of VND 5000/kg (or USD 0.30), these intermediaries earn approximately VND 5 million/tonne (or USD 312) of cardamom bought and sold (minus transportation costs, mainly fuel for motorbikes).¹⁶

Sequentially, Kinh cardamom wholesalers based in Sa Pa town, buying cardamom from various intermediaries, demonstrate even higher financial returns. These wholesalers amass on average 20–40 tonnes of cardamom annually. One Sa Pa wholesaler, Ha Tam (interview, 18 July 2006), commonly bought and sold between 30 and 40 tonnes of cardamom each season. Operating with an average return of VND 5000/kg (USD 0.30), her gross income was VND 175 million (just over USD 10 000) before deducting a series of costs such as transportation and fuel. After 10 years in business she had saved enough money to buy a jeep – a purchase Hmong cardamom cultivators have not yet been able to consider.

While financial profits are gained throughout the different nodes of the cardamom commodity chains, these are notably dissimilar. In contrast to Hmong cultivators and Kinh/ Giay intermediaries, Kinh wholesalers in Sa Pa town and Lao Cai city derive considerably greater profits, with their average income being at least 10–20 times greater than incomes earned by the Hmong who, to date, have remained as cultivators in these commodity chains.

These cardamom commodity chains therefore encompass individuals whose mechanisms of access involve very different levels of financial, physical and social capital. Given the spatially dispersed nature of this trade, one can see how Hmong cultivators – lacking access to financial capital to purchase a jeep, and lacking social capital, given their weak ethnic affiliations or trust relations with the Kinh¹⁷ – cannot easily move up these chains.¹⁸ As such, they gain only marginal returns for their harvesting efforts, while the economic value added at other stages of the commodity chains is reaped by Kinh and Giay, and, most prominently, Han Chinese manufacturers and international distributors. Indeed, while Hmong were receiving USD 3.75/kg for their cultivated cardamom in Sa Pa district in 2005 and 2008, cardamom figured among the most expensive spice on the world market, alongside saffron and vanilla. In 2008 dried black cardamom pods were being sold in the US and Canada for between USD 20–24/kg, with one boutique store in Montréal, Canada retailing it for an astonishing USD 220/kg (authors' observations).

Livelihood negotiations

When examining cardamom production systems in neighbouring upland Laos, Ducourtieux *et al.* (2006) call for better understandings of how cardamom fits into local agricultural systems and livelihoods. Our analysis shows that while Hmong producers are able to obtain enough cash to complement their in-kind incomes, albeit on a limited scale, Kinh wholesalers in Sa Pa and Lao Cai benefit considerably more from a range of mechanisms of access enabling them to earn notably higher revenues (cf. Ribot & Peluso, 2003). These mechanisms are at times structural in nature, with Kinh wholesalers having direct access to more forms of physical capital including transportation (jeeps, motorbikes, trucks), as well as border and market access (cf. Schoenberger & Turner, 2008). Kinh also draw upon social capital in the shape of social ties of interdependence, reciprocity, trust and loyalty based on extended family, shared histories, ethnic identity and similar economic status. For example, Kinh intermediaries

mentioned relatives who had helped them establish trade linkages in Sa Pa and/or Lao Cai city. Intermediaries and wholesalers additionally benefit from human capital, including the technical and management skills to move cardamom along these commodity chains, while incorporating knowledge of market prices, and supply and demand fluctuations.

At first glance then, it would appear that it is Kinh, Giay and Han Chinese intermediaries, wholesalers and traders who are financially gaining the most from these commodity chains (not to mention that retailer in Montréal). However, if we appraise these findings at a different scale, that of the Hmong cultivator household, a different interpretation emerges. A household/micro level perspective of Hmong livelihoods indicates that some are able to derive important revenues from this trade to help improve their household food security while, for a few, cardamom incomes even lead to increased conspicuous consumption.

On a different note though, and perhaps even more crucially, Hmong cardamom cultivators constantly raised three major concerns, reflecting their apprehension of becoming further entangled in this trade, or regarding this income source as secure. First, competition for suitable land is resulting in many household members having to walk further into the forest to establish new fields, making labour tasks more strenuous. Second, Hmong households possess no user rights to land in the Hoang Lien National Park and thereby risk being labelled outlaws and unable to fully exercise their rights over much of their cardamom crop. Third, cardamom cultivation relies essentially on unpaid kin or family members, placing the elderly, women and smaller families without available labour from close kin at a disadvantage. Households therefore abandon cardamom cultivation at times when they perceive the risks are too great or the perceived returns to their labour are too low. A number of other concerns raised included neighbourhood clashes over cardamom crops, rising crop theft, increasing state pressure to reduce activities in the national park (including fires to dry cardamom), changes in relationships with intermediaries, local weather conditions, and fluctuations in global demand and price.

Indeed, time and again Hmong interviewees remarked that this crop is not the mainstay of their economy – wet rice is by far the most important component providing them with secure livelihoods, with the number of rice fields and their yield being the primary indicator of household wealth. Thus, while clearly not the main economic beneficiaries in these cardamom commodity chains, Hmong appear to have navigated their roles in these chains to best complement their broader livelihoods. Hmong involved in cardamom cultivation use it to help tide them over, especially at a time of year when their rice supplies might be running low, or if this shortage is covered they use the income to buy a multitude of items, from everyday goods to those less crucial. Many do not want to become further involved in this trade – rooted in local forests but spanning the globe – expressing numerous concerns about doing so and noting that their current involvement covers their needs. As Nao, one Hmong man (interview, 6 March 2006) put it:

I started growing cardamom to make some cash like the others [. . .] However, I don't like going far in the forest for days. Going deep in the forest is difficult and dangerous because of the animals, insects and the bad spirits. Sometimes it rains a lot or it is very cold and one can get sick.

Ultimately, what we are witnessing here is conceivably ‘nothing more than a healthy and expedient regard for survival. “Going for broke” can have little appeal in a context

in which the final word of this expression must be taken quite literally' (Scott, 1985: 248). As such, Hmong participation within these commodity chains complements a broader range of agricultural and economic activities, of which rice is the central and most vital commodity.

How then could one make policy recommendations regarding cardamom cultivation from such findings? Initially, one might think that Hmong livelihoods would be strengthened and Hmong households better placed in these commodity chains if outside actors were able to improve Hmong access to social, financial and human capital. Yet, as this study has shown, if there are to be interventions to promote cash cropping of cardamom by the Hmong, and further market integration, one needs to be cognizant not only of the specific problems that Hmong face in their cultivation of this forest product but, just as importantly, if not more so, that many do not actually express a desire to become further entangled in the global economic possibilities available. As such, this research highlights that a multiscale, ethnically sensitive approach when studying such commodity chains is essential. This reflects the assertion of Jamieson *et al.* (1998: 2), discussing development in the northwest highlands of Vietnam, that 'a crucial step is to challenge the conventional wisdom that shapes development models and replace it with new approaches based on observation and analysis'. Programmes that include careful consideration of the flexibility of Hmong livelihoods and their culturally rooted resilience must be at the centre of any potential interventions. While it is true that a number of Hmong are diversifying their livelihoods to take account of new prospects offered by the growing market integration of the highland economy into lowland markets, it must not be forgotten that they are doing so in ways that *they* themselves deem appropriate, not those necessarily based on so-called western-based market-oriented economic rationale.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ethnonyms used in this text follow the most widely accepted international usage, based on ethnolinguistic divisions. In Vietnam, however, the Hmong are officially named 'H'mông', while the Giay and Tay are named 'Giáy' and 'Tày' respectively.
- 2 Hmong in northern Vietnam live in monogamous hamlets and practice exogamy, with spouses found outside patrilineal descent groups, and hence outside the hamlet. Traditional Hmong society is bound by kinship with a group of patrilineal families worshipping the same ancestors (Culas & Michaud, 2004; Vuong Duy Quang, 2004).
- 3 For critiques of this asset approach see Conway *et al.* (2002) and Toner (2003).
- 4 The remaining forested land within Lao Cai province, including the Hoang Lien National Park's 'buffer zone', is administered by the Forestry Department and the local people's committees at the district and commune levels (Le Van Lanh, 2004).
- 5 'Cardamom' refers to species within three genera in the ginger family (*Zingiberaceae*) (Aubertin, 2004). There are five different known species of cardamom in Vietnam. The one with the

- highest value–weight ratio is *Amomum aromaticum* or *Amomum tsao-ko* (Buckingham & Tu Minh Tiep, 2003), common in Sa Pa district and the focus of this study.
- 6 All individual names are pseudonyms.
 - 7 Forests in Vietnam are divided into three categories: protection, production and special use forests including national parks and nature reserves significant to biodiversity conservation (McElwee, 2001).
 - 8 Although one might suspect potential collusion or bribery between park officials and those involved in the cardamom trade given the relative high prices obtained for this product, we have yet to hear of such arrangements (cf. Hoang Cam, 2007).
 - 9 ‘Red book’ certificates of ownership transfer five land rights to the household: the rights to exchange, transfer, lease, inherit, or mortgage land (Neef, 2001). This land includes that on which a house is built (and its immediate surroundings) and also agricultural lands such as rice paddy lands and corn fields, but not swidden land or land used for cardamom cultivation (Sowerwine, 2004b).
 - 10 The dong exchange rate used is VND 16 000: USD 1.
 - 11 The Giay, a highland minority group who are part of the larger Tai-Kadai linguistic group, have an important history as trade intermediaries between Hmong and lowlanders (Michaud, 2006); their continuing involvement here harks back to those historical ties.
 - 12 The average price for cardamom in 2005 and 2008 (as collected during fieldwork in 2006 and 2009 respectively) was VND 60 000/kg (USD 3.75); all market prices recorded here are for dried cardamom.
 - 13 Ninh Hiep, approximately 20 km north of Hanoi, is an historic centre for the processing and trade of medicinal plants from Vietnam’s northwest highland provinces.
 - 14 See Michaud (1997) for a comparable discussion of Hmong emic definitions of wealth in the Thailand context.
 - 15 Within a season/year, the net income for one Hmong household is calculated as to its gross income (quantity of cardamom multiplied by the price/kg) minus costs incurred (number of human-labour days devoted to production and transport). A similar formula is used to calculate the returns for traders and wholesalers. While prices varied across communes and from year to year, income and profits are calculated using cardamom prices for 2005 and 2008 (given in note 11 above).
 - 16 In 2006–7, motorbike fuel cost approximately USD 0.75/litre (about 3 litres fill a Honda Dream, a common motorbike in the highlands, alongside older two-stroke Minskis).
 - 17 A similar case was found by Sikor and Pham Thi Tuong Vi (2005: 423) investigating economic differentiation between neighbouring Kinh and Black Thai villages in the northwestern uplands, with Kinh benefiting from ‘shared ethnicity’ with Kinh traders and intermediaries from the lowlands or other district locales.
 - 18 For more detailed discussions of Hmong and Kinh relations see van de Walle and Gunewardena (2001), Koh (2002) and Sowerwine (2004a).

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