'The nice culture and the good behaviour' state media and ethnic minorities in Lào Cai province, Vietnam

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In the northern highlands of Vietnam, a very specific official vision of culture is at the core of the modernisation projects of Vietnam Television VTV5 (*Đài Truyền hình Việt Nam*), a channel dedicated to educating ethnic minorities, and of the Lào Cai provincial branch of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST, *Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch*). These two state institutions jointly organise film screenings – for instance condemning the production and consumption of opium and heroin – in remote villages where they intend to modify cultural practices. These state social actors also produce films that represent what are deemed exemplary minority traditions for public consumption. Our observations of these media processes lead us to suggest that the subjects of these exogenous initiatives are adjusting strategically, activating patterns of quiet resistance to maintain their identities and subvert marginalisation.

Keywords: media; ethnic minorities; Vietnam; agency; resistance; television

Introduction

The achievements of social actors – or agents – are influenced by the particular contexts that define them and in which their actions unfold (Ortner 1984, 2006, Ahearn 2001, Rosenblatt 2004, Postill 2010). In the case of Vietnam, these achievements are influenced by an official vision of culture, itself a consequence of a classification project started under revolutionary rule (after 1954) and largely based on social and economic evolutionism (for a similar discussion in China, see Salemink (2000, 2008), Michaud (2009), and Mullaney (2011)). The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST, *Bộ Văn hóa, Thể thao và Du lịch*) and Vietnam Television VTV5 (*Đài Truyền hình Việt Nam*) are dedicated to educating and informing ethnic minorities throughout the country. These are state institutions through which chiefly Kinh[1] state agents promote and frame a media representation of developing, yet 'traditional' minority nationalities (*các dân tộc thiểu số*). Examples of this abound elsewhere in the Global South and North, each time a result of a dominant culture controlling the state and defining exclusively what the nation should look like (Ogbu 1995, Hansen 1999, Postiglione 1999, Cottle 2000, Kosonen 2005, Jonsson 2010).

In Lào Cai province, in the northern Vietnam highlands, this project takes shape within a cultural and political process coherent with the social and economic structures of Vietnam, and powerfully shapes the socioscape of ethnic minorities (Bourdieu 1972, Appadurai 1996, Bender 2002, MacDougall 2006). In Lào Cai province, our view is that minorities thus targeted, despite their relative small numbers, their lack of formal political representation, and despite their state of economic 'misery' compared to national standards (Sowerwine 2004, Michaud and Turner 2006, World Bank 2009), demonstrate contextualised agency by modifying, or adapting the state's objectives to their own needs. Not only that, the new media technology such as television, film and cell phones can also be diverted from their original functionalities and open new lines of identity maintenance.

This article is based on fieldwork in Lào Cai province by Philippe Messier during the summer and fall of 2008, and observations from the same region over the past 17 years by Jean Michaud. Among the 53 different 'minority nationality' groups catalogued in Vietnam, this research focuses chiefly on Hmong (*H'mông, Mông*) and Yao (*Dao*)[2] interviewees, who together account for 75% of the population of Sa Pa district (*huyện*), Lào Cai province, where the majority of this research was conducted. For the 2008 fieldwork, educational video workshops were attended in rural minority communities in the course of which 12 films (documentaries and fictions) have been screened and 2 short documentaries were shot. Interviews were conducted with a variety of agents of the state as well as from the private sector. More than 12 individual or group interviews with state agents (mostly men) and 8 interviews with ethnic minority women were performed during the video workshops. More than 20 interviews with minority men and women in various situations and discussions on VTV5 and television in Vietnam preceded and followed each event and were conducted in the communes targeted as well as in a few other communes of Sa Pa district. The 2008 interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, Hmong, Yao and English, with Vietnamese or ethnic minority interpreters whenever required (Figure 1).

'Selective cultural preservation' and modernisation

The Vietnamese state institutions MCST and VTV5 are instrumental in the country's 'selective cultural preservation' policy. This peculiar policy was designed after Reunification in 1975, as explained by Vietnamese state ethnologist Nông Quôc Chân (1978; see also Salemink 2001). Inherent in this policy is the elimination of cultural aspects deemed ill-fitting for the national model, while the state strives to preserve and collect the material side and aesthetic traits of minority cultures: dances, poems, colourful costumes, elements of architecture and music. Simultaneously, it actively discourages less desired elements such as animistic customs ('counter-productive' animal sacrifice in particular), customary forms of power, and ancient practices such as swiddening (McElwee 2004).

VTV5 came as a new branch within the broader national VTV network set up at Reunification in 1976 (Marr 2003, Nguyen 2008). When 'Economic Renovation' (*Đổi Mới*) was decreed in 1986, it became necessary to harmonise

Figure 1.   Map of Lào Cai province, 2012, Vietnam.

minority cultural preservation with a new context and objectives – a combination of market-driven economics, socialist politics, national solidarity and ethnic cultural uniqueness holding great potential for tourism (Koh 2004). The broadcasts of VTV5 started in 2002 and are screened in 13 different ethnic minority languages, in the form of both short documentaries and national and local news coverage, exemplifying the beneficial role of the state. The 'best' programmes of VTV5 production are rebroadcast as weekly ethnic minority shows on VTV1 (national news and politics) and VTV2 (education). Control over what is selected for films is shared with the MCST (Salemink 2003, pp. 284–285):

> The Department [MCST] seeks to improve cultural standards at community level throughout the country by means of activities in the fields of mass culture, propaganda and advertising, [. . .] It provides guidance to and oversees the activities of

provincial and municipal cultural centres throughout the country and co-ordinates the design and nationwide distribution of government propaganda posters.[3]

Since the early 1990s in Lào Cai province, economic growth that has been largely supported by the tourism industry and targeted cash crop expansion (Turner and Michaud 2008) reflects the official views on economic modernisation summarised here by state ethnologist Nông Quôc Chân (2001, p. 113):

> If the ethnic minorities could learn to make use of the dynamic laws of the market economy to develop economic strong points, such as in the use of forest resources, indigenous flora, minerals and animal husbandry, for example, then their awareness and their ability to preserve and revitalize their own cultural identities could be increased.

This modernist discourse as applied to the 'needy' minorities (Sahlins 1999) – notwithstanding the occasionally more liberal takes sometimes voiced in a few state offices in Hanoi – is entirely consistent with the interviews we conducted with state agents, Kinh as much as ethnic minorities, during our research. Still engrossed with the overarching project of socialist national solidarity,[4] while concurrently and somewhat paradoxically insisting on the importance of preserving traditional cultures, the aims of MCST and VTV5 are grounded in the perspective of market integration and modernisation (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, McElwee 2004, Hann 2005). No matter how unstable the 'dynamic laws of the market' might be in these uncertain financial times, these laws are relentlessly promoted by the state as the best way of lifting minorities out of their alleged misery.

In this article, we explore two ways in which the state acts to link modernisation and traditional minority cultures: first, through its display at the village level of official representations of 'good' minority behaviour, and second, through the production of representations of exemplary traditions for public consumption. In so doing, we will be able to understand how the subjects are adjusting to such media presentations and representations. Our analysis is inspired by what Couldry (2004, p. 126) has called the 'media-oriented practices' – in this case, the 'practices of using media sources in education' – that shape the media produced and screened. We propose with Couldry that 'the resulting text [or media] is only a facet of the overall practice' (Couldry 2004, p. 126) and assess whether part of the media process at least can be influenced by local subjects and their communities.

Projecting modernity

In Lào Cai province, until recently, Hmong and Yao individuals and households were chiefly subsistence agriculturalists with low to moderate involvement in the market (Figure 2). Of late, both have been facing incentives towards more complete market integration through agricultural expansion and intensification, wage work and the tourist industry (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009, Turner 2012). The MCST supports this movement vigorously.

Figure 2.   Image from the projection of films in Sừ Pán (Lào Cai province), July 2008 (photo: P. Messier).

One way the Ministry has elected to reach isolated communities in the mountains has been by sending teams of state agents (projectionists, sound technicians, local collaborators and MCST employees) to project nearly 100 films per year (*Vietnam News* 2007[5]), display photos, distribute complimentary booklets, and for good measure, sponsor the performance on the spot of traditional dancing and singing – albeit with redacted scores.[6] The director of MCST in Lào Cai province explained to us that MCST teams arrive in a given commune (*xã*) in the beginning of the afternoon to install and test equipment. These preparations are also an opportunity to share a meal and discuss with local collaborators. Once the sound and projection system is in place, the teams start broadcasting popular and traditional music to advertise their presence and entice the local population to attend. Local minority collaborators and local state officials also help with corralling men, women and children alike. The audience, usually segregated by age and gender, watch the projections, which are followed by traditional dances and songs performed until late in the evening. Thus, the singers end up promoting, for instance, marriage at a later age for young women or condemn the production and consumption of opium and heroin. Late in the evening, the teams pack up and leave if they have arranged to sleep in a nearby town, or when the village is remote, they sleep in the school building or in a lead state agent's house.

We attended such events from 5 to 6 July 2008 in the communes of Nậm Cang (Yao) and Sừ Pán (Hmong), in lower Sa Pa district. In this case, untypically

spreading over 2 days, we counted that out of a communal population of a few hundred, about 40 actively participated in dancing, singing or in the introduction speeches. We also counted around 160 Hmong and Yao men, women and children who came to watch one or more of the five to six films and look at photos and booklets.

Drug use and trafficking, namely the opium produced, consumed and sold in the province, was explicitly addressed at these events. The images shown were mostly photos displayed publicly and booklets distributed to villagers (Figure 3). This anti-drug campaign was reinforced with the screening of the film *Phòng chống ma túy nơi vùng cao biên giới* [Drug prevention at upland borders] (Ministry

Hãy phá hết cây thuốc phiện
Let's destroy all poppy plants

Đỗ Như Điềm
Số 180 Trần Thái Tông, P. Bồ Xuyên,
TP. Thái Bình, tỉnh Thái Bình.
Giải Khuyến khích

Nói không với ma túy
Say 'no' to drugs

Nguyễn Ngọc Linh
B84/13 Tôn Thất Thuyết, P16, Quận 4,
TP. Hồ Chí Minh.
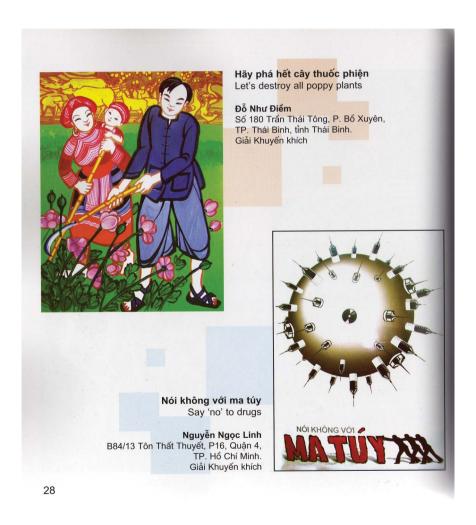Giải Khuyến khích

NÓI KHÔNG VỚI
MA TÚY

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Figure 3.   Images from Ma túy – anti-drug. On the left page, 'Let's destroy all poppy plants'.

of Culture, Sports and Tourism n.d.) about the risks of drug production and trafficking in the sensitive China–Vietnam borderlands.

Consistent with this public condemnation of drug production, ethnic minorities living in these borderlands are perceived in mainstream Vietnamese society as untrustworthy because they historically ignored state borders. Some still do, to exchange goods or simply news with relatives or friends living on the other side.[7] Kinh/minority relations are also tainted with what Salemink (2008, p. 264) has described as

> The politically dominant way in which the Vietnamese multicultural nation has been imagined in Communist Vietnam [. . .] in the neo-Confucian metaphor of the nation as a family of older (Viêt) and younger (ethnic minority) siblings, in which the older sibling must play a simultaneously benevolent and disciplining role.

This 'benevolent and disciplining role' transpired through most of the interviews we conducted with MCST employees, who repeated the mantra uncritically. Even if, during conversations in villages, some MCST agents acknowledged the complexity of national integration for ethnic minorities, that predicament was framed as an older/younger sibling, or a developed/underdeveloped binary. For instance, when creating materials for one of the free booklets, we were told that the images had been produced through a children's contest to create anti-drug posters, with the participants being almost exclusively Kinh. While it is beyond the scope of this article to walk this road farther, a critical analysis of the production process of this sort of imagery would certainly go a long way towards assessing what is underlying the standardised depiction of highland minorities in mainstream Vietnamese society.[8]

Another film shown in the two villages by the MCST, *Thăm và làm việc tại tỉnh Lào Cai* [Visiting and working in Lào Cai province] (Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism 2008), depicted what another employee described as 'the beauty of Lào Cai region', the province being praised as a scenic spot by lowland Vietnamese. This is not unrelated to the fact that it also harbours the highest peak in the country, Phan Xi Păng. Shots of mountains and rice fields in the spring season are a significant part of this documentary film and the assemblage glorifies the natural setting, a depiction consistent with the mainstream Kinh taste for highland resorts set in nature (Michaud and Turner 2006, Jennings 2011). Officially, the aim of this film was to make sure that minorities understood that the general project of developing the area was led by Nông Đức Mạnh, the then Chairman of the National assembly – and himself from ethnic Tày minority background. The documentary thus depicts the third visit of Nông Đức Mạnh to the province – his first as Chairman – where he speaks of ethnic minorities succeeding with the help of local state agents to overcome poverty and drug trafficking.

The imagery in such films often includes a pre-endorsed function whereby minorities are represented listening to and welcoming the state's message. Through *Thăm và làm việc tại tỉnh Lào Cai*, minority people are shown other minorities listening considerately to Nông Đức Mạnh's wise words. This is a

recurrent theme also to be found in the booklet *Người đàn bà cõng thân chết trên lựng* [The women are carrying death on their back] (Ministry of Culture and Information 2006; Figure 4).

It is difficult to assess with any certainty how these messages were received by the bulk of viewers in Nậm Cang and Sừ Pán. Open acquiescence was displayed, but we could also perceive dissenting intentions.

We did witness the resolve of minority individuals who play a role as local state agents, being keen to endorse the validity of the procedure. In Nậm Cang for instance, an important Yao leader was ready to be filmed while publicly reading the

Figure 4.   Image from *Người đàn bà cõng thân chết trên lựng* [The Woman carry the 'the god of death' on her back].

MCST educational booklets, deliberately displaying for all his fellow villagers – and the authorities – to see his approval of the state's educational project. In contrast, one young Yao laywoman glancing casually at the photographs on display showed mostly indifference to the state agent asking her about her understanding of some of the pictures. While she did respond to the queries, she appeared uninterested in the interview and, at the first opportunity, walked away.[9] We also observed individuals dancing and singing with noticeably less enthusiasm than others, children mocking some elements of the event, elders staying at a distance and a fair proportion of the communes' population being simply absent.

Visibly, a small group of local minority people double as local state agents whose role is to smooth contacts with the outside world, represented here by the MCST team. This position is conducive to frequent negotiations and obligations, notably in this case the obligation to accept and promote state priorities with reasonable fervour. Meanwhile, we also have a much larger number of villagers who seem to consider the event to be a chore, only some participating from afar, while a majority simply avoid the premises altogether. Acceptable excuses are plenty: too much to do in the fields, an inevitable trip to a faraway plot, visiting distant relatives for a wedding or a funeral, or having to stay home to attend a sick child. But there are also strong incentives to turn up. If villagers wish to make an impression, knowing all too well that the MCST agents will report on their visit, they will consider complying and behaving coherently with what is expected. This is not so much because repression is feared, but because most have understood for some time now that there are benefits to be earned from visible obedience, and not much to be gained from openly resisting demands from the authorities.

The shows efficiently highlight the necessary changes to be made to 'bad habits' deemed incompatible with the imperatives of national security, national solidarity and prosperity in modern Vietnam. The red boards set up by the MCST team are meant to depict what 'the nice culture and the good behaviour' should look like, as expressed to us in English by an MCST agent on location.[10] These top-down events do not include exchanging ideas with minority people about what can or should be changed, or which adjustments are possible to facilitate national integration. The main objective here is to convey, in a unidirectional manner, the ideas of modernity and conformity on the fringes of the nation.

Filming tradition

Another core component of the state's modernising push in the northern mountains consists of the airing on national television of selected representations of minority traditions. In minority villages in Lào Cai, we had the opportunity to follow and participate in cultural film shootings commissioned by MCST and designed for VTV5's national broadcasting. For our purpose here, we examine the filming process of a Hmong blacksmith in the commune of Bản Phố, Sa Pa district, who produces utilitarian tools such as knives and hoes for fellow Hmong villagers. This trade, along with silversmithing, alcohol making, customary dress

production and various forms of oral tradition, is now considered by Hanoi as part of the highlands' intangible heritage (Salemink 2001) and worthy of salvaging through films.

Figure 5a and b illustrate the staging process involved in shooting this video. The Hmong blacksmith was asked to set up his forge normally and get some work under way, his wife assisting him. While staging the production for the crew, the

(a)

(b)

Figures 5.   (a and b): Images of Bản Phố shooting with a Hmong blacksmith, August 2008 (photo: P. Messier).

couple seemed to understand well the fact that this kind of documentary video was necessarily a performance, a deconstruction of their daily activities and a process involving among other things the breaking down of the production process and repetition. For instance, several times his wife brought the recycled piece of steel to be heated and worked so that the cameraman could film its arrival from a range of angles. Later, due to delays between takes, bits of steel left in the fire were burned beyond use and had to be thrown away. A vast quantity of charcoal went up in smoke. But the couple played their roles without complaining.

In the chit-chat between bouts of shooting, we learned that the blacksmith was actually the father of the village's state-appointed headman. As the father, thus a figure of authority, of an important member of the commune, our blacksmith's status as a successful, yet traditional minority craftsman was no doubt appreci-ated by the crew. In all likeliness, he had actually been chosen for this shooting on the recommendation of his own son. To further perfect this picture, another relative invited all of us, Kinh and foreigners alike, to his house for lunch. Waiting for the food, he made a point of displaying medals earned from his time in the Vietnamese army, confirming the suitability of the whole family to be part of this state-sponsored salvaging of traditional Hmong knowledge.

Towards the end of the day when the filming process was wrapped up, our blacksmith invited all involved home again to sample his home-made rice alcohol, a much expected display of hospitality and friendship. It remains unclear if he and his kin genuinely enjoyed the experience and our company, but we suspect it might have been more a matter of showing the right signs of amenability and respect expected from a minority farmer in the presence of powerful urban Kinh (and foreigners) from the capital.

Much could be said about this filming process. The cameraman was, thanks to his technological know-how and experience, the leader of the group of five typi-cally sent for these shootings. The friendly relationship we established with him, through our sharing of common interests and technical tricks, led to a better assess-ment of his vision of film production. Confident of the complexity of his trade, he let us know that while some could play at lending small amateur cameras to ethnic minorities for research – which was part of Philippe Messier's methodology for his own research there (Messier 2010) – asking minorities to operate a big profes-sional camera like his own was unthinkable. Such a statement implied an array of underlying assumptions commonly found among urban Kinh state agents sent to the highlands: highland minorities are uneducated, unskilled and not fit to under-stand technological complexity, and their capacity to reason logically is inherently limited by backwardness and superstition (Salemink 2001). To this cameraman and his elite baggage of specialist knowledge, the complexity of the numerous steps of film production (conception, staging, filming, visual design and editing) contributed to reinstate the limits of local participation in the highlands to the production of these 'cultural preservation' videos.

What we witnessed in that process refers to the 'struggle' between what Peterson (2003) called the primary and the secondary levels of media production.

The primary level includes the desire to entertain, to educate or to inform, whereas the secondary level consists of social actors acting in a field of media production that is not separated from other social fields. As Peterson (2003) puts it, this is where one is 'raising status, increasing wealth, affirming identity, fulfilling fantasies, pursuing pleasure, and so forth' (p. 191). Here, the act of media production by the cameraman reaffirms his ethnic identity and his elite status while trying to educate and inform the (ethnic minority) viewers.

In many ways, the classical 'staged' and 'realist' approaches used in the documentary work of the cameraman also contributed to reshaping the 'social landscape' (or 'social aesthetics') of ethnic minorities (Schiller 2001, Peterson 2003). MacDougall (2006, p. 99) suggests that 'appeals to the aesthetic sensibility may also be a means of social control, as in totalitarian states that create a powerful repertoire of public rhetoric and ritual. [. . .] Their attitude is more likely to be conservative and prescriptive'. The filming process and its outcome demonstrate the prescriptive aspect of VTV5 and MCST's intentions to limit, adjust or simply eradicate certain cultural and economic practices. In so doing, these processes are concurrently promoting a particular social landscape by reinforcing boundaries through a carefully selected reorganisation of space, time and practices. In other words, the process of creating and determining the adequate space and time frame for minorities on film, even if temporary, is concomitant with and echoes the general policy of selective cultural preservation applied on an everyday basis.

An interview a few months later with a VTV5 journalist from Yao origins, a cultural translator in the sense of Engle Merry (2006), usefully adds to the picture. This journalist-cum-interpreter had to balance her state commission with her minority identity. She had to take into account the hopes and demands from viewers at home who, she said, frequently reacted to the programmes she had been involved with. Yao viewers would ask why she did not take part in the dances being filmed, instead of assuming the position of the outside observer. Others regretted that she did not give scientific advice to an interviewee lamenting his buffalo being sick. But others still wanted to express their gratitude to her – and enquire whether shooting in their own villages might be possible at all in the future.

Her ability to access this remarkable position for a Yao minority woman was in part linked to her family connections within the state and the Communist Party. As a vanguard of her minority peers, she had also had the opportunity to earn a university degree in journalism. In more ways than one, she was an escapee from her own group. But at the same time, she felt that she was not readily accepted as a normal agent within the government office she worked for. As Mueggler (2002, p. 6; see also Schein 1997) remarked about ethnic minorities in southwest China, such individuals have 'learned to participate in the self-reflexive symbolic activity of cultural politics, taking an external view of themselves and treating their culture as a "thing" to be strategically deployed'. In Vietnam, these still rare bouts of participation by minority individuals are deeply embedded in a structure of

mediatisation and political representation (Rambo and Jamieson 2003, Marr 2003, Zingerli 2004). Their capacity to act, their agency as minority state agents, follows a straight and narrow path and is constantly under scrutiny.

On media, technology and resistance

The relations minorities entertain nowadays with media representations are symptomatic of larger debates. Schein (1997, 2004) and Leepreecha (2008), himself a Hmong, note the impact that film production by the Hmong diaspora outside Asia can have when it reaches Hmong in Asia, including Lào Cai province. In the United States, France and Australia in particular, through aid and missionary organisations with satellite bases in neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, diaspora Hmong aim to send 'back home' messages of identity preservation, cultural vivacity, resistance to domination and pride in Hmong accomplishments around the world (Julian 2010). These low-priced DVDs circulate from hand-to-hand within the community (Figure 6). They are becoming hugely popular among local Hmong, and, as observed before (Michaud 2012), are often perceived as a sign that Hmong culture can overcome hardship and adversity. DVDs are seen as new forms of communication to better understand and spread Hmong history, folk tales and myths while strengthening Hmong literacy (see also

Figure 6.   Watching diaspora Hmong videos on the Internet in Sa Pa district, August 2008 (photo: P. Messier).

Chi 2010). They also cater to a variety of viewers. In Sa Pa district in particular, Hmong music videos produced abroad are becoming evermore popular with Hmong youths alongside mainstream Chinese, South Korean and Thai fictional works. These VCDs and DVDs are watched in Hmong villages throughout Sa Pa district (see also Phạm Mạnh Hà 2007).

Research regarding these marginal highlanders, long cast in the role of 'primitives' awaiting modernity, has recently highlighted the capacity of local subjects to find ways to get around, or at least mitigate, the impacts of the often rigid, one-size-fits-all state strategies for social, economic and cultural integration (Salemink 2001, McElwee 2004, Sturgeon 2011, Swain 2011, Turner 2012). Whereas state and market unquestionably yield a multifaceted and powerful influence locally, and while the pressures to adjust to a prescribed modernity increasingly limit the space for minorities to invest locally 'the nice culture and the good behaviour', the situation appears to be less one-sided than often thought.

Our evidence suggests that in the cases presented here, a form of indigenisation of modernity is at play (Sahlins 1993, 1999, Merry 2006, Pace 2009, Rosenblatt 2011). Sahlins (1999) states that what we may be witnessing 'is not so much the culture of resistance as it is the resistance of culture' (p. XVI). The resistance that is effective is not so much a concerted movement aimed at defeating forces from outside, but more an accumulation of localised small acts of disagreement and quiet defiance that may lead to alterations of the original intention of modernity's promoters (Scott 1990, Kerkvliet 2005, 2009). Much as is the case with the economic adaptation of minority groups in this transborder region (McElwee 2008, Turner and Michaud 2008, Bonnin 2012), we are being shown here how the state media exhibition and production processes, determined by the larger political context, can now and then trigger local patterns of dissent and veiled resistance: only pretending to be interested, making fun of the event, foot dragging, staging agreement in the face of state agents, not following up on the messages transmitted once the outsiders have gone and so on.

The beauty of such actions, as seminally emphasised by Scott (1990), is that most outsiders will not readily recognise these as a form of resistance. Based on recent research in the region by Turner (2012), Michaud (2012) and Bonnin (2012), we feel we are able to say with a degree of safety that everyday resistance does exist, even if it is not everyone who participates in the process. Media and new communication technologies, with all their perverse potentialities, are also now part of the tactical toolbox available to these marginal groups.

Indeed, over the past few years, the impact of virtual communication and social media cannot be underestimated. The uses of Internet-based sites, video sharing websites, discussions via *Skype* and email take the highlands to a new universe for socialisation, exchange and political maturation that would need more research if we can hope to assess its full potential in remote peripheries. Through affordable cell phones flowing in from China combined with an ever increasing number of Internet cafes, these new communication tools offer steady access to ethnic

minority Hmong and Yao to the outside world and its views on local and global reality (Messier 2010, in press).

Back to MCST and VTV5, when one considers more globally the perspectives on regional minority development, a link appears between the mediatisation and integration processes by these arms of the state. The development imperatives underlying the selective cultural preservation campaigns through the filming and broadcasting of a certain vision of minority cultures need to be expressed nationally as much as it needs to sink its roots at the community level. The 2007 5-year Ethnic Minority Development Plan (CEMMA 2007) emphasises the communication directives and responsibilities of VTV5 in promoting poverty reduction and better infrastructure. The document *Need of assessment and communication capacity of stakeholders in program 135 (phase 2)*[11] states that 'the main objective of ethnic television is to disseminate information on propganda [sic] and policy of poverty reduction, livelihood of the people, local innovative models and best practices of local business and production'.

The (post-)socialist logic in Vietnam, which among other things implies the reduction of investments by the government and encourages competition with the private sector (Marr 2003, Hann 2005, Chari and Verdery 2009), is affecting the mediatisation process. At the moment, VTV5 is still devoid of advertisement from the private sector, most likely because it is not a very promising channel for businesses, given its target audience is among the poorest in Vietnam. In the view of the general VTV network decision-makers, thus from the state's viewpoint, this lack of appeal also makes VTV5 much less interesting to run than other advertisement-loaded VTV channels. Perhaps, therefore, this channel might be earmarked for removal once MCST considers that it has reached its goals regarding minority issues and national unities.

The main reason for VTV5's existence and the despatching of MCST educational teams to highland villages is to modernise minorities, attach them to the national project and stimulate economic development in the high regions of Vietnam. Increasing the quality and cultural, as much as political, relevance of the VTV5 channel for the subjects themselves could be another way forward, with possibly a more genuine inclusion of minority members into its staff and management on the model, for instance, of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in Canada[12] (Ginsburg 2003, Harrison 2008). But this may not be an achievable goal in the current political context.

'Minority nationalities' in Vietnam are fighting an uphill battle: they are heavily fragmented politically and they do not have mechanisms to consult and organise across distance and languages (McElwee 2004, Michaud 2006, 2009). Given episodes of armed suppression of minority activism launched by the state over the last decades whenever dissatisfaction has boiled up beyond a tolerable limit (UNHCR 2002, Trần 2009), one should not be surprised if ethnic minorities in Vietnam are tempted to keep their heads down and look for safer ways to assert their distinctiveness.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The Kinh (Viet) are the majority ethnic group in Vietnam at approximately 87% of the country's population (2009 census).
2. Hmong is the ethnonym used here according to international standards, although the names 'H'mông' and 'Mông' are used officially in Vietnam. Yao is also used here, although the official ethnonyms 'Dao' and 'Dzao' are used in Vietnam. Elsewhere, Hmong are also known as Mong, Meo and Miao, and Yao as Mien (see Michaud 2006).
3. The website consulted on 7 March 2012 at http://www.culturalprofiles.net/viet_nam/units/2053.html
4. On its website's opening page, the national Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas of Vietnam reprints a 1946 quotation from Ho Chi Minh: ' . . . Be they Kinh or Tho, Muong or Man, Gia-rai or Ede, Xo-dang or Ba Na and other ethnic minorities, fellow-countrymen are all sons and daughters of Vietnam blood brothers and sisters. [. . .] The country and the Government are common to all of us. Therefore, our people of all nationalities must unite closely to defend our country and support our Government. Rivers may dry up and mountains may erode but our unity has never diminished . . . '. The CEMMA works hand-in-hand with the MCST and VTV5.
5. MCST agents told us that the projections began on a regular basis a few years before the creation of VTV5 in 2002. According to *Vietnam News* (2007), around 33,550 people watched its films in 2006. On the radio channel *Voice of Vietnam 4* (VOV4), see also Nguyen Thuy Thi Thu (2008) and Ngô Thi Thanh Tâm (2010).
6. The booklets distributed are in Vietnamese, but the visuals facilitate the comprehension for villagers that are not literate. Most films projected are dubbed in vernacular languages with an audio track added on top of the Vietnamese dialogues, diegetic and intra-diegetic sounds and music. The songs are adapted by the MCST and interpreted by selected young minority leaders and representatives selected. Performances are rehearsed, but we noticed significant differences in the mastery of the gestures, lyrics and voices between participants.
7. On the transnational attributes of those groups, see also Oakes and Schein (2006) and Turner (2010).
8. Relating to this, Nguyên Van Chính (2010, pp. 3–5) has highlighted that the tendency in the national press to hold as truth, the 'need' for the state to alleviate ethnic minorities' social difficulties is still very much alive today.
9. Of course, we cannot rule out the possibility that this Yao woman was simply uncomfortable being seen in public talking to a male stranger.
10. This translation was inspired to that informant by a promotion banner stating in Vietnamese *Nét đẹp văn hóa trong ứng xử* installed by the MCST.

11. The working document of the State Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (2007).
12. http://www.aptn.ca

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