Spice Trade 3.0: Exploring the Modern Spice Trade in Vietnam's Northern Frontier

THROUGHOUT ITS LONG HISTORY, including the antiquities (what we are calling Spice Trade 1.0) and the colonial era (Spice Trade 2.0), the spice trade story has shaped land, politics, and societies, and captured imaginations around the globe. But the spice trade is not simply something of the past. The contemporary trade—Spice Trade 3.0—has significant geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic imprints and impacts. In Vietnam's northern frontier, on the border with China, numerous life stories and livelihoods are being shaped by the production, processing, and sale of three particular spices—black cardamom, cinnamon, and star anise. Our broad research project follows these spices along their trade routes, from seedlings in remote fields on both sides of the border, to their wholesaling and shipment to world markets, and their final consumption. This work is underpinned by debates from political ecology, livelihoods literature, and commodity chain analyses, and draws on ethnographic fieldwork spanning the past twenty years in these uplands. In this brief piece, we focus on the voices and livelihood concerns of the spice cultivators at the start of these commodity chains in Vietnam's uplands. Why these three spices in particular? Because they not only are increasingly shaping upland livelihoods for thousands of ethnic minority cultivators in the region but are also considered essential ingredients for Vietnam's ubiquitous breakfast soup, *phở*.

Context: Vietnam's Northern Frontier

The highlands of northern Vietnam, a key cultivation region for the three spices focused upon here, are a rather unforgiving locale. Until the eighteenth century, they contained no roads, only rough footpaths, and fell largely outside any official administration. Only households with few alternatives elected to live in this area. Yet increasing demographic pressures in the surrounding mid- and lowlands, combined with a near-constant state of civil war in southwest China, uprooted populations elsewhere and forced many to migrate. Those who arrived in the higher reaches of this region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had little choice but to try to make their livelihoods work (Turner et al. 2015).

This area is part of the Southeast Asian Massif, a broad expanse of highlands extending southeast of the Himalayan Plateau and shared today among ten countries. James C. Scott (2009) has dramatically argued that this vast area represents "the Last Great Enclosure." Scott has proposed that these uplands, while linked to lowlands via trade relations for generations, have in recent centuries become increasingly enclosed by modern states through processes of incorporation variously labeled as "development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration" (4). For most local residents, this has meant the replacement of communal property with private land-use rights, the introduction of cash cropping (such as these three spices), and a push to turn shifting cultivators into permanent farmers. Scott adds that the state's motivation for these changes has largely been to make the economic activities of upland individuals "legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace [them] with forms of production that were" (5).

Today, much of this relationship between the state and those living in the Sino-Vietnamese upland fringes continues. Rural, household-based farmers attempt to build sustainable livelihoods as best they can while making use of their indigenous knowledge of food systems, agro-ecological limits of the land, and forest resources. Concurrently, they must cope with and adapt to socialist state-sponsored strategies of agricultural change and market integration. National policies, many supported by international funds, are explicitly molding highland spaces across this Vietnamese frontier by establishing biodiversity conservation areas and regulating access to forestland and

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forest resources, often limiting ethnic minority farmer options (Sowerwine 2004). Such state-endorsed modernization trajectories, which can be considered a form of territorialization, combined with extreme weather events and growing land scarcity, are rapidly changing livelihood dynamics in these uplands.

Black Cardamom Concerns (Patrick Slack)

In a sleepy border town in Lào Cai province, just west of where the Red River enters northern Vietnam from China, there are few restaurants, so I am relieved to find one open on a cool, foggy morning and also to find it offering *phở*. After slurping my soup, I tell the owner that his broth is the best I have tasted because of its richness and smokiness. With a grin on his face, he recounts his long journey, sampling many *phở* broths throughout Lào Cai province, to determine others' recipes and develop his own. Obviously proud and emboldened by my comments, he fetches his cloth bag of spices and herbs and carefully recites the recipe for me to take back home—a recipe that contains 24 black cardamom pods for an initial 80 liters of water—what he believes to be the ideal proportion of black cardamom (Figures 1a and 1b).

Black cardamom (*Amomum tsao-ko*) is endemic to the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands and requires high-elevation, closed-canopy forest cover, as well as a cool and humid climate to thrive (Aubertin 2004) (Figure 2). Compared to the other spices cultivated in these borderlands, such as cinnamon and star anise, black cardamom is the most expensive by dry weight and also remains one of the most costly spices in the world, behind saffron and vanilla (Omanakutty and Joy 2007). Harvested in October and dried over an open fire, black cardamom embodies a smoky flavor with strong and spicy herbal undertones. As demand for both cash (for changing upland livelihood inputs) and black cardamom has risen, upland minorities—especially Hmong, Yao (Dao), and Hani—in Vietnam's northern frontier are ramping up what was once a household-level collection for medicinal use to large-scale plantations of black cardamom for trade. Now, black cardamom is a significant component of the livelihood portfolios for many local households.

While considered by some as the "new opium" in terms of the potential cash income for minority cultivators, the situation is growing increasingly fragile. With devastating extreme weather events occurring with more intensity and frequency, especially since the mid-2000s, black cardamom crops in these

FIGURES 1A AND B: *(Left) Dried black cardamom; (Right) A restaurant cook's special phở broth spice mix in Lào Cai province, Vietnam.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK SLACK © 2019

FIGURE 2: *Black cardamom growing under the forest canopy.*
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FIGURE 3: *Cardamom plants severely damaged by snow and abnormally cold temperatures.*
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uplands have been significantly reduced or completely decimated by snow, hail, and extended periods of cold weather that were rarely, if ever, experienced before (Figure 3) (Delisle and Turner 2016; Rousseau et al. 2019). Ethnic minority cardamom cultivators are now increasingly vulnerable given that a vital part of their livelihoods has been destroyed. With future weather and prices uncertain, many minority farmers are now hesitant to invest their labor in a crop that may not come to fruition. Yet, farmers are increasingly in need of cash sources for new agricultural inputs as the state relentlessly encourages upland farmers to "modernize"—hence household concerns are palpable.

Cinnamon Cassia Calculations (Mélie Monnerat)

It is mid-March and I am in a remote commune (subdistrict) in Yên Bái province, in northern Vietnam's uplands. The ethnic minority Yao villagers around me are talking animatedly about this year's cinnamon crop as the main harvest season will begin soon and already pre-season preparations are in full swing. This commune of Mỏ Vàng is renowned throughout the north as being the "original cinnamon commune" where Yao farmers have cultivated cinnamon for centuries. For lowland Vietnamese (Kinh), cinnamon is not only an important ingredient in *phở*, but is also a key spice in winter stews that heat the body "from inside." Throughout the country, these are especially enjoyed in January or February, when Kinh families gather around large meals to celebrate Têt (Vietnamese lunar new year). Moreover, *Cinnamomum cassia*, the species thought to grow in these highlands, has risen to become a significant commodity on the global market in recent decades, due to its use in a wide range of food, drinks, cosmetics, and medicinal products (Feldman and Bauer 2008). *Cinnamomum cassia* is a cousin of the prestigious *Cinnamomum verum*, or *Ceylon cinnamon* grown in South Asia (Ravindran et al. 2004; Oketch-Rabah et al. 2018). Much cheaper than *Ceylon cinnamon*, but fairly similar in taste and properties, the demand for Vietnam-sourced *Cinnamomum cassia* has risen steadily since 2000. Overall, cinnamon returns have been positive for the livelihoods of Yao, Hmong, and Tày ethnic minority cultivators in recent years, and the commune is dotted with new houses from cinnamon profits (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: *A Hmong family's house bought with the proceeds of cinnamon sales, Yên Bái province, Vietnam.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY MÉLIE MONNERAT © 2019

As I continue to talk with different farmers, however, the tenuous situation of their households becomes more clear. There is an ongoing juggling of complex economic decisions due to fluctuations in the prices for different cinnamon products. In early 2019, farmers noted that while it was worthwhile to trim branches to collect and dry the bark, the returns for leaves (used for distilling cinnamon oil) were far too low this season to be worthwhile, given the time and energy needed to harvest them. Cinnamon cultivators must constantly assess price fluctuation for the myriad cinnamon commodities they harvest, including leaves, twigs, and small branches for oil, and branches and eventually the whole trees for bark (Figure 5). Careful calculations are made with regard to the household's costs for the following year, including school and university fees for children, wedding costs, building a new family house, or saving for hospital fees, and of course, buying a pig for new year festivities.

Cinnamon hills surround me everywhere I travel in the uplands of Yên Bái province (Figure 6), and I reflect on this rapid transition from highly diversified livelihood portfolios, historically typical of ethnic minorities living in Vietnam's northern uplands (Turner et al. 2015), toward a less composite, cash-crop reliance. As a Hmong farmer told me: "I used to have cassava, dry rice, and a buffalo and cow, but I don't have grass and cassava to feed my livestock anymore; I planted all my land with cinnamon, so I had to sell my animals." This raises my concerns regarding the possibility of sustainable livelihoods based on cinnamon, and I hope for the prices of cassia and its global demand to remain stable in the coming years.

Star Anise Struggles (Sarah Turner)

I am staring at a tapestry of orange and blue tarpaulins on which star anise are being dried in the sun, in a remote village in Lạng Sơn province, bordering China (Figure 7). Yet when an elderly minority Tày villager stops to talk he shakes his head sadly, noting that he does not even bother to pick star anise from his trees anymore and is just saving the trees for his grandchildren. He mutters that the Chinese are ruining the market and that he has heard of an overseas drug company also having something to do with the recent drop in demand. As my confusion grows, I start to ask patient villagers even more questions.

FIGURES 5 AND 6: *(Left) Loading cinnamon bark onto a trader's motorbike. (Right) A Yao farmer's cinnamon plot.*
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MÉLIE MONNERAT © 2019

FIGURE 7: *Farmers sun-drying star anise, Lạng Sơn province, Vietnam.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH TURNER © 2019

FIGURE 8: *Star anise trees growing on steep slopes.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH TURNER © 2019

Star anise (*Illicium velum*) is a star-shaped pericarp that grows on an evergreen tree native to northeast Vietnam and southeast China (George 2012). With its distinctive aromatic flavor, star anise is not only an important ingredient in *phở*, but also in Chinese five-spice powder, many Indian curries, and a diversity of teas. Moreover, star anise has a long history of use in traditional Vietnamese and Chinese medicines, while in Europe it flavors liqueurs such as Sambuca and pastis.

In northern Vietnam's Lạng Sơn province, star anise has played an important role in the livelihood strategies of hundreds of ethnic minority households, predominantly Nùng, Tày, and Yao, for decades (Tiến Dũng 2015). Star anise cultivation requires a long-term commitment, with trees only bearing fruit after 10–12 years. There are two harvests a year and the fruit are harvested just before they are ripe, when the essential oil content is highest. During these harvests skilled workers pick up to 50–70 kilograms a day, climbing tall trees often planted on steep slopes (Figure 8). The fruit are then dried, either in the sun, deemed to produce a superior quality, or over a wood fire.

Prices for star anise were fairly stable in the 1980s and 1990s and farmers were beginning to enjoy the fruits of their labor, after the stricter "subsidy era" of the socialist government had come to a close. Farmers explained that instabilities in star anise prices then began in the 2000s as farmers just over the border in China became increasingly interested in the crop, while using chemicals and fertilizers to make their trees grow faster (an approach interviewees in Vietnam strongly disapproved of) (Turner et al. 2019). Another important twist was the outbreak of the global avian and swine flu pandemics in the 2000s. A little-known fact is that star anise is the principal source for shikimic acid, a key component in the anti-influenza medicine Tamiflu, for which the Swiss-based pharmaceutical company Roche holds the monopoly. When the H5N1 avian flu pandemic hit in 2005, Tamiflu was in high demand and Roche substantially expanded its Tamiflu production. As a result, global prices for star anise initially soared and Vietnam's star anise cultivators could not believe their luck. Yet Roche was concerned about possible disruptions to supply and biologists began to experiment and engineer alternatives. By 2012, "most of the shikimic acid used by Roche . . . to manufacture Tamiflu is now sourced from microbial fermentation" (ETC Group 2012: online). This synthetic alternative resulted in a dramatic drop in star anise prices, so low that a number of farmers in Lạng Sơn province have started to diversify to other crops in an attempt to sustain their broader livelihoods. Now, some farmers only retain their star anise trees for future generations, in the hope that the situation might improve again.

The Volatile Nature of the 3.0 Spice Trade for Ethnic Minority Cultivators

Price volatility and uncertainties for farmer livelihoods underscore the picture for all three groups of spice cultivators across these uplands. While extreme weather events have been the main cause of these concerns for black cardamom cultivators, uncertain market demand hinders the ability of cinnamon and star anise farmers to plan long-term livelihood goals. In all three cases, farmers who were once semi-subsistence cultivators, with a fairly limited need for cash, are now increasingly drawn into the market economy. Although not the only cause of this change, it is important to note that the Vietnamese state has been strongly encouraging market integration in these uplands with policies that encourage farmers to switch from traditional land-race seeds for staple crops, such as rice and maize, to hybrid seeds that require cash for chemical inputs and yearly seed purchases (Bonnin and Turner 2012). Hydropower schemes and reforestation efforts, strongly endorsed by the state and overseas funders, are meanwhile changing upland land holding patterns and use-right traditions. As Rousseau and Turner (2018: 134) note: "These initiatives themselves yield specific reorganizations of territory and space that activate and legitimatize capitalist expansion and cultural integration into frontier zones as well as subsequent land and resource enclosures" (see also Forsyth and Michaud 2011).

Of course, this is not to say that farmers in these uplands should remain in the past. They see the opportunities that cash crops like these three spices can bring their families, and they too yearn for "modern" agricultural implements to make their livelihoods easier, new consumer items, and so on. But our three cases here point to the volatile situation farmers find themselves in, while state efforts often seem all too focused on the "absorption of peripheral regions by an expanding capitalism" (Cleary 1993: 331), at the expense of supporting sustainable livelihoods for upland households. These preliminary findings thus point to the need for any state or nongovernmental organization initiatives that aim to support farmer livelihoods to be rooted in careful long-term analyses of profit patterns, local livelihoods, and farmer decision-making. Farmers may not necessarily wish to jump on a specific "cash-crop" bandwagon that outsiders offer them, given their recent experiences. Or they might "test the waters" with

increasing skepticism that the global agro-food market will provide them with sustainable livelihood options.

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