

FRONTIER LIVELIHOODS

Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE HIGHLANDS IN THE CHINA-VIETNAM BORDERLANDS ARE A craggy, rough, and unforgiving place. Until the eighteenth century, they contained no roads, only footpaths, and fell largely outside any local administration on either side of the border. Only those with few other options elected to live there. Increasing demographic pressures in the surrounding mid- and lowlands, combined with a near-constant state of civil war in southwest China, then uprooted populations and forced many to migrate. Those who arrived in the higher reaches of this border region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had little choice but to attempt to make their livelihoods work in difficult environs. For a while, these inhabitants existed largely apart from surrounding empires. But soon the adjacent states came to claim these mountains too.

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 these vast highlands represent “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 claimed by modern states through incorporating processes variously labeled as “development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration” (ibid., 4). For most local residents on the ground, this has meant the replacement of communal property with private land-use rights, the introduction of cash cropping, and a push to turn shifting cultivators into permanent farmers. The aim has been less to make upland individuals more productive than to ensure “that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were” (ibid., 5). Today, in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, much of this relationship between state rulers and those living in the upland fringes continues.

Still, endogenous modes of economic behavior in these borderlands

remain understudied and poorly understood, let alone appreciated. For the Chinese and Vietnamese states, knowing more about specific minority upland livelihoods was, and largely still is, an unnecessary burden, slowing down the pace of national economic integration and the desirable modernization of these “little brothers.” The nation has a promising future; the ways of the past have to give in. In these highlands, the result is a distinctive context in which peasants are turned into labor forces, government-sponsored businesses incessantly extract valuable natural resources, and lowland economic migrants arrive looking for new economic opportunities, while state officials enforce national directives and ethnic minorities maintain livelihoods as best they can.

This situation begs numerous fundamental questions. Why, and how, do such “tribal” people consent to modernize? What practices are they willing to let go of, and what practices do they decide to adopt? As ethnic minorities, do they have any power left to alter the course of their fates? And if so, how? These questions have stimulated our longitudinal studies among these highland societies, and this book is an attempt to glean some answers. This social space requires much more scholarly attention than it has yet received.

The segment of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands under study here is home to over two million people officially labeled as ethnic minorities. Many, like the Hmong, belong to kinship-based societies that are geographically dispersed as well as politically divided between countries. These high margins have long been considered by those holding political control over them as a remote frontier inhabited by inconsequential peoples who lag behind in national statistics, lack civilization, and are stuck in a state of chronic poverty. We contend, on the contrary, that these individuals and households have much to teach the rest of the world. Far from selling out and passively accepting the state’s project, they make do with the little they have to construct creative, adaptive, and resilient livelihoods that the state often knows little about. Theirs might be a remote place, but in our view it is far from just another fast-disappearing distant tribal corner of the world.

After two centuries of continuous presence in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, how does this particular, emblematic society, the Hmong, currently cope with the pressing demands to integrate into the Chinese and Vietnamese nations under heavily centralized socialist regimes and to step to the tune of the market economy? It is our contention, after two decades of observation and reflection, that Hmong livelihoods are much more complex and finely adjusted than is generally thought. Hmong individuals, households, and communities creatively blend active engagement, cautious choices, and, at

times, resistance. And by resistance, we do not suggest that Hmong in these uplands refuse change. That would be a simplistic depiction. Rather, they use their agency to indigenize aspects of modernity, and they set in motion forms of adaptation that make sense to them, which sometimes amount to subtle yet perceptible acts of resistance to modernization processes.

We also want to move beyond the confines of prevailing academic research that tends to focus solely on national settings. There is an urgent need to study societies such as the Hmong translocally and transnationally, to get at the ways in which their distinctive historical and cultural features persevere despite the fractures caused by national borders and policies made in distant national centers of gravity. Country-based studies on “national” minorities are abundant and helpful but tell only part of the story. Given the cross-border nature of Hmong livelihoods, translocal and transnational approaches to social space are needed, with observations, ethnographies, and viewpoints from both sides of the border. By placing agency at the center of our discussions, we explore what it means for Hmong individuals and households to share an identity across adjacent countries, to be confined within the restrictive definition of a “minority nationality” (*shaoshu minzu* in China; *các dân tộc thiểu số* in Vietnam), and to differ with the state and the nation on a wide assortment of livelihood choices and concerns—while never being asked about any of them. Our Hmong interviewees have often urged us to “please tell people in your country about us.” With this book, we are intent on giving a voice to these individuals.

This book is enriched not only by generous and tolerant interviewees, ongoing collaborators, and patient research assistants, but also by a range of secondary sources. Written documentation used to place the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands into an historical perspective comes from Vietnamese, French, and English archives, public reports, monographs, and studies, including a number of unpublished French colonial-era documents. Hmong communities in the Southeast Asian Massif historically had no written language; as such, Asian annals, colonial archives, and modern scientific works combine with oral histories, interviews, and observations to enrich our field investigations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our research in the Southeast Asian Massif began with Jean Michaud working in Thailand since 1991 and in Vietnam since 1995. Sarah Turner then began work in Vietnam in 1998, arriving from her prior research site

in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Since then, Jean and Sarah have completed yearly fieldwork in northern Vietnam. Christine Bonnin, previously working in the Philippines, transferred to Vietnam in 2006, and for the three of us, our research naturally expanded into Yunnan from 2008 onward.

Our expertise, as it were, lies in the margins: the frontier and its peoples. As a rough estimate, collectively we total six years of field time in these uplands. Our yearly visits to the region have facilitated long-standing connections with individuals ranging from official gatekeepers from whom we gain official authorizations to Hmong (Miao), Yao (Dao), Zhuang (Tày, Nùng), Kinh, and Han interviewees and friends. All three of us have conducted fieldwork, together, in pairs, or individually, across the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, particularly in the segments that are the focus of our study: Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang Provinces in Vietnam, and Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures in Yunnan.

The different positionalities that we bring to this work allow us to undertake something akin to researcher triangulation. In other words, we can reach certain, collective interpretations from different stances and opportunities. We also have differential access to distinct voices. Sarah, a forty-something pakeha (white) New Zealander, and Christine, a thirty-something Canadian-Filipina, have spent the most time with Hmong women of all ages, gaining insight into their daily work and their household livelihood decision-making approaches. Jean, a fifty-something Québécois from Canada, has greater ease of access to Hmong men and to understanding their livelihood priorities, dating back to his doctoral research in a Green Hmong village in northern Thailand. Our interactions with state officials are likewise never the same. While sometimes Christine, as a younger woman, might come across as less threatening and gain unforeseen access to official information, on other occasions Jean, as a white-haired male, elicits easier access to official voices and documents. It is truly team work.

Overall, our long-term engagement with residents in this region has helped nurture trusting relationships that in turn allow us specific insights into local cultures and livelihoods. We have learned from experience that initial meetings with a new informant usually entail being thrown the Party line, a prudent coping strategy that makes sense from the subject's standpoint. It is only with time, a fair dose of humility, and efforts to build rapport (often lubricated with homemade alcohol) that trust is gained. Slowly, through participant observation, informal conversations, shared meals, marketplace gossip, oral histories, and conversational and semi-structured interviews—as well as time spent together blacksmithing a blade, caring for a sick child,

transplanting rice shoots, attending a wedding, or walking to the market—we have heard the stories unfolding in the coming chapters, stories expressing the complex concerns of borderland minorities. We sincerely thank all of the individuals who have placed their trust in us, as well as the numerous Han and Kinh officials who have agreed to help along the way. All of the names of interviewees in this book are pseudonyms, following the American Anthropological Association’s code of ethics, for reasons linked to the rigid political contexts in China and Vietnam.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To carry out officially authorized social science fieldwork in China and Vietnam, one needs to obtain the correct research visas. Red stamps must adorn letters, and authorizations must be delivered by all levels of the state apparatus, from the national down to the provincial, prefecture, county/district, and commune levels. Over the years, we have been very fortunate to be able to secure the collaboration of willing and patient local partners to help us secure these stamps. In Vietnam, our fieldwork has been chiefly carried out in collaboration with the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) and Vietnam National University (VNU). In Yunnan, our host institutions have been Yunnan University of Finance and Economics (YUEF) in Kunming, and Honghe University in Mengzi. In particular we thank Đặng Đức Phương and Professors Phạm Văn Cự and James Chen Gang for their assistance and for their friendship.

Relying on the help of research assistants and, at times, interpreters has placed our work a long way from the myth of “lone ranger research.” Furthermore, as will become apparent in the course of this book, upland-lowland relations are not always devoid of tensions and biases, and discussing culturally sensitive matters is not always easy when accompanied by state-affiliated Han or Kinh research assistants, with their own politically and culturally rooted takes on upland minorities. Over the years, attempting to circumvent this predicament has meant undertaking more and more of our work directly with ethnic minority assistants, or with non-state Han and Kinh research assistants who have long resided in the highlands and who have gained a more sound understanding of life there. We would like to thank them all for their tireless efforts, goodwill, and humor in the face of endless questions and long field days, weeks, or months. We would like in particular to acknowledge Chi, Lang, Lan, Chau, Ly Ta May, Yau, Ly, Juu, Hoai, An Phuong, Tingbin, Chloe, Xiao Feng, Bang, and Dung. In Canada

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During our academic careers to date, Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud have had the opportunity to supervise a number of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who have researched northern Vietnam and southwest China. These include Clara Champalle, Candice Cornet, Sarah Delisle, François Fortin-Deschênes, Caroline Goulet, Bernard Huber, Victoria Kyeyune, Li Ya Juan, Lindsay Long, Philippe Messier, Pascale-Marie Milan, Nguyễn An Phuong, Richard Owens, Phạm Thị Thanh Hiền, Mathieu Poulin-Lamarre, Jean-François Rousseau, Laura Schoenberger, Watcharee Srikham, Claire Tugault-Lafleur, and Zhao Yawei. This book is informed by their work, which is cited throughout, and we extend our heartfelt thanks for their groundbreaking work in this little-researched area of the Southeast Asian Massif.

We also want to thank a number of colleagues and researchers with whom we have held discussions over the years. While too numerous to list everyone, we would especially like to thank Stevan Harrell (University of Washington), Timothy Oakes (University of Colorado Boulder), Natalie Oswin (McGill University), Oscar Salemink (University of Copenhagen), and Nicholas Tapp (Australian National University), as well as anonymous readers recruited by the publisher, for taking the time to read our manuscript and provide detailed feedback. Their comments have vastly enriched this book, prompting clarifications and adding valuable comparisons. We remain, as usual, responsible for any errors.

Finally, this whole research endeavor would not have been possible without the sound financial support, often repeated, of a number of funding agencies. These include, in the United Kingdom, the British Academy and the Economic and Social Research Council; in Germany, the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology; the European Science Foundation; in the United States, the National Geographic Society; in New Zealand, the University of Otago; and in Canada, the Fond de Recherche du Québec sur la Société et la Culture and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

1 UPLAND ALTERNATIVES

An Introduction

TWO HUNDRED MILLION PEOPLE, MORE THAN HALF OF WHOM ARE ethnic minorities, reside in the uplands of the Southeast Asian Massif, with livelihoods based predominantly on rural agriculture (map 1.1). In this book, we offer an examination of the predicaments, choices, and fates of members of one such minority group, known by its most common ethnonym, the Hmong.¹ There are approximately four million Hmong in Asia (Lemoine 2005), spread, in decreasing order of population, over China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, and conceivably Cambodia. More than a million Hmong live on the Vietnamese side of the Sino-Vietnamese border, and possibly as many live in Yunnan, on the Chinese side (map 1.2).

Relatively little is known about the livelihoods of these transborder Hmong individuals and households in China and Vietnam. Hmong residents of this frontier region face particular challenges as economic liberalization and market integration advance under the impetus of centralized political structures that maintain a strict communist leaning—a historically unique combination that specialists of Marxism might have thought paradoxical.² In these borderlands, both states have rapidly instigated a push for modernization through investment programs and economic development schemes, backed by multilateral financing and the work of nongovernmental organizations on the ground. Since the onset of reforms in the 1980s that loosened the grips of these communist states over their then-flagging economies, collective property has been replaced with private land-use rights, cash cropping has been encouraged, and shifting cultivators have been strongly advised to become permanent, settled farmers. New infrastructure works such as highways, airports, hydroelectric projects, and communication networks, all support this modernization drive, which is frequently labeled “development.”

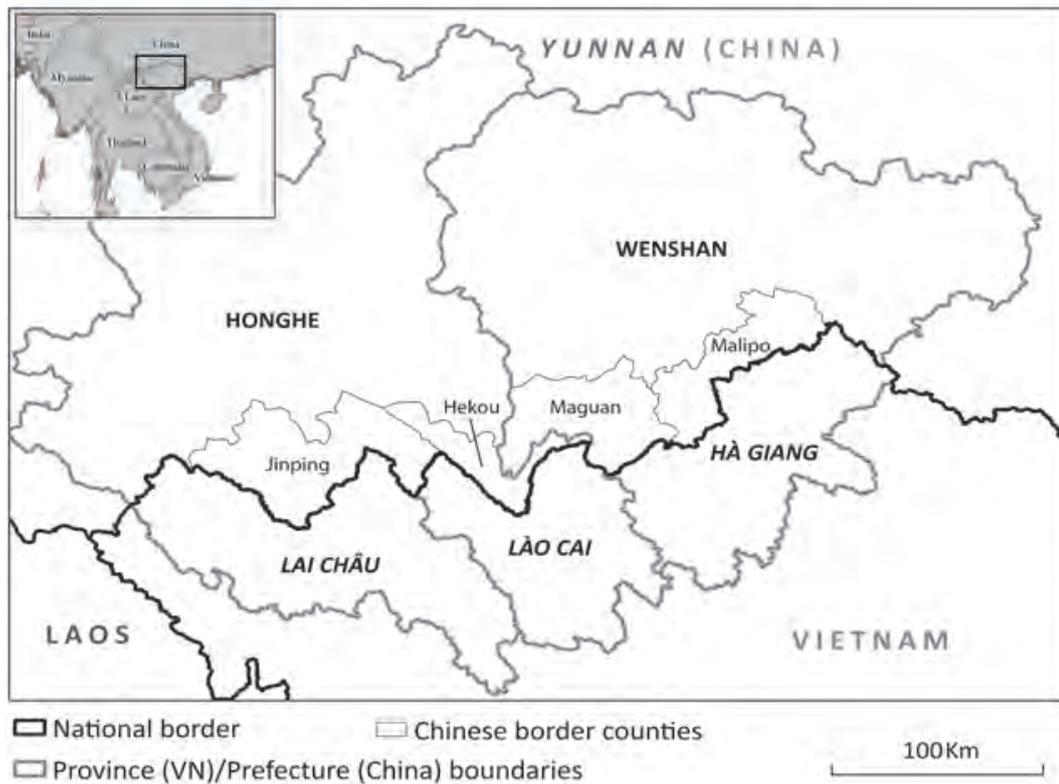
Dwelling at a distance from the seats of power, ethnic minorities on the physical, cultural, and economic fringes of China and Vietnam face tough choices. Their status is marginal, to put it mildly, which makes their



MAP 1.1. The Southeast Asian Massif. Produced by Jean Michaud.

task of evaluating livelihood options difficult. How can they, and how *do* they, combine and negotiate far-reaching choices regarding new liberal market economies, obligations, opportunities, identities, and livelihood diversification? Putting local agency at the center of our analysis, we ask: how do Hmong individuals, households, and communities in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands make and negotiate their livelihood decisions? In what manner(s) are they adapting, diversifying, or sometimes disguising their actions? How do they shift their strategies to take on new imperatives, constraints, and opportunities?

In the early twenty-first century, some scholars foresee a global narrowing of livelihood choices as inevitable. The dilemmas that Hmong farmers face, they suggest, are part of a well-documented process that has been occurring worldwide as rural inhabitants undergo an agrarian transition



MAP 1.2. The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands in 2014, a transnational space. Map by Phạm Thị Thanh Hiền and Jean Michaud.

toward wage work and large-scale cash-based agricultural systems designed to support increasingly urbanized and industrialized economies (Hart, Turton, and White 1989). This is even more pronounced in places such as China and Vietnam, where formerly collectivized communist economies rapidly switched to a market paradigm (Burawoy and Verdery 1999). Such syntheses of worldwide trends are useful, but their outcomes often seem entirely predetermined. While global processes can standardize practices on the ground, they also materialize with unique challenges across time, space, and cultures. These challenges can certainly trigger reactions of compliance, but they can just as well lead to debate, contestation, and struggle that require further scholarly attention (Edelman 2001; Hollander and Einwohner 2004; Kerkvliet 2009). Research by Willem van Schendel (2002) and the debates surrounding James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), for instance, show that there is more than meets the eye in the dilemmas at play in the Southeast Asian Massif.

Since the seminal works of Karl Polanyi (e.g., Polanyi 1944), many social anthropologists and human geographers have pleaded for the need to recognize “the cultural, historical, and spatial dynamics of rural livelihoods—in

addition to the more obvious economic dynamics” (McSweeney 2004, 638). Such recognition requires a nuanced understanding of a place’s social connections, embedded as they are in local histories, customs, and systems of regulation that shape economic exchanges and the decision making surrounding them.³ Only by factoring in these localized layers of complexity can any well-intentioned research on livelihoods and household endurance strategies in the Global South be effectively advanced and stand a chance of yielding lasting results.⁴

Social anthropologists, for whom studies at the micro level are frequently the norm, find this obvious, and many human geographers and progressive-development specialists concur. But many economists and experts of macro-development discard the approach as a well-meaning but naïve ideal, bound to waste precious time and energy in the face of pressing national programs, global economics, and environmental challenges. This book is aimed at such skeptics. We hope to show that there is much more to this intricate equation than global formulas and bottom lines.

Yet, a livelihood approach can be limited by its inclination to focus primarily on aspects of material access and capital, often ignoring less palpable social and political influences (Kanji, MacGregor, and Tacoli 2005; Scoones 2009; Carr 2013). Such an approach is prone to producing only a cursory examination of social factors, including gender and age, with regard to differential access to resources and decision making (Hapke and Ayyankeril 2004). Focused on recurrences and patterns as it is, the livelihood approach tends to disregard local peculiarities (deemed unreliable) in favor of well-tested generalizations (deemed functional). The mechanistic and somewhat positivist focus on identifying and analyzing five specific forms of assets or capital—an approach commonly adopted by global development agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP)—generally produces a “one size fits all” methodology that often fails to take into account agency at the local level. This focus also produces the potential for indiscriminating action by state agents on the ground (Arce 2003; Hinshelwood 2003; Staples 2007).

Consequently, calls continue to be made for more inclusive, culturally specific, actor-oriented approaches to livelihoods that consider microscale social relations and their embeddedness within local socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems.⁵ By listening to the voices and experiences of individual actors regarding homegrown knowledge of “development,” and the way actors adapt modern circumstances to their reality, one can bring to light the local, everyday practicalities of how people make and defend their livings and their visions of the world. This approach allows for a compre-

hensive recognition of locally rooted livelihood dynamics alongside broader structural forces (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 1999, 2000; Long 2000).

The decisions of Hmong individuals and households illustrate how livelihood diversification strategies might include engaging in new income opportunities, experimenting with different crops, or combining agricultural, livestock, and off-farm activities (Chambers and Conway 1991; Rigg 2006).⁶ Market integration, agrarian change, and globalization processes present unprecedented challenges for these borderland residents. In response, households adopt fluid and innovative diversification approaches to survive, remain resilient and secure, and prosper (cf. de Haan and Zoomers 2003; Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006). In this borderland context, the malleable nature of livelihoods has been largely overlooked by academics, state officials, and aid agency workers to date (Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004). Indeed, with broader economic contexts being in a state of flux, the degree to which livelihoods are continuously refashioned and negotiated—and the agency of those involved—has often been underestimated or misjudged.

Because the three of us have spent years talking with individuals at the receiving end of development schemes across the Southeast Asian Massif, and in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands in particular, and because we feel that the dominant mindset toward “developing them” is far from optimal, we offer a locally adapted, nuanced analysis of rural livelihoods. The first way we do this is by drawing upon the notion of agency (Ortner 2006). To disentangle what we mean by this, we highlight debates regarding alternative modernities and the “indigenization of modernity” (Sahlins 1999), in conjunction with actor-oriented approaches that draw on the concept of “social interface” (Long 2001, 2004). An important component of an individual’s agency is the ability to decide when to comply with or oppose outside influences, hence the relevance also of everyday politics and resistance (Scott 1985; Kerkvliet 2009). Second, we examine debates surrounding borders, namely the roles, relationships, and contestations of borderlines, borderlands, fringes, and frontier regions. In this way, drawing on livelihood and borderland debates as well as the implications of agency and the indigenization of modernity, everyday politics, and resistance, we suggest a framework to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how rural Hmong inhabitants in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands navigate, rework, contest, and appropriate specific facets of identity, modernity, market integration, and nation-state building as they go about creating resilient life-worlds and everyday livelihoods.

**THE IMPLICATIONS OF AGENCY
CREATIVE ADAPTATION, THE INDIGENIZATION
OF MODERNITY, AND AGENCY**

Modernity is one of those catch-all terms that is debated across disciplines.⁷ Perhaps the most recognized interpretation of modernity is societal modernization, which has been encapsulated by the modernization theory of development studies. This linear-trajectory approach includes the “emergence and institutionalization of market-driven industrial economies, bureaucratically administered states, modes of popular government, rule of law, mass-media, and increased mobility, literacy, and urbanization” (Gaonkar 1999, 2). In such narratives, a distinction has historically been made between the “West” and the “rest”—“traditional” or “premodern” societies. The economic development pursuits of the Chinese and Vietnamese governments overwhelmingly follow such an approach in their teleological drive for economic growth, the development of a bureaucratic state, and the eradication of “backwards customs and superstitions” (Qian Chengdan 2009; Li 2011). Proponents of this acultural theory consider the transition to modernity to be a collection of culturally neutral (and highly desirable) processes.

Alternatively, a slew of anthropologists and other scholars have examined the ways in which modernization as actualized is far from acultural. For instance, Charles Taylor (1999, 153) raises the possibility of a “plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices that define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like.” Instead of presupposing the decline and end of traditional societies and the ascent of modern ones, as acultural notions of modernity would, cultural theories attend to how modernity processes are inflected by culture, history, and politics (Featherstone and Lash 1995; Michaud 2012). They consider the ways in which alternative modernities are produced “at different national and cultural sites. In short, modernity is not one, but many” (Gaonkar 1999, 16).

For ethnic minority communities in the Southeast Asian Massif, modernity incorporates a convergence of institutional arrangements—such as a market economy and bureaucratic state—alongside a “divergence . . . of lived experience and cultural expressions of modernity that are shaped by what is variously termed the ‘habitus,’ ‘background,’ or ‘social imaginary’ of a given people” (Gaonkar 1999, 16). As such, our focus is on the “site-specific ‘creative adaptations’ on the axis of convergence” (ibid.).

The vast majority of Hmong households in these uplands are busy with

daily agricultural and rural livelihoods. Some are eager to take up new opportunities and diversification strategies that might make life easier, such as new farming techniques, high-yield crop varieties, cash crops, and trading networks extending beyond customary ethnic circles. Moreover, outside the mainstay of farming life across the Massif, many Hmong individuals are exploring their options, working for wages on construction sites, buying and driving taxis, engaging in transnational trade, texting their kin and chatting on QQ, setting up Facebook pages, learning European languages, or pursuing tertiary education nationally and abroad. Like any other minority group in these uplands, Hmong individuals are adopting market economic opportunities and state policies and programs as they see fit. However, these creative adaptations do not signal a straightforward acquiescence with modernization's wishes; to suggest that would be to close one's eyes to the existence of more subtle signs of diversion and dissent.

Sherry B. Ortner proposes that, "to some extent, and for a variety of good and bad reasons, peoples often do accept the representations which underwrite their own domination" (1995, 182). However, she adds, "at the same time, they also preserve alternative 'authentic' traditions of belief and value which allow them to see through those representations" (*ibid.*). Further, Marshall Sahlins (1999) developed the idea that modernity—or any global command—can be "indigenized" locally, suggesting that economically and politically weak groups are indeed changed by outside pressures, but also creatively use what power they have to interpret, adapt, and even subvert them (*cf.* Babadzan 2009). Our argument echoes Sahlins's proposition that "local societies everywhere have attempted to organize the irresistible forces of the Western World System by something even more inclusive—their own system of the world, their own culture" (2005, 47).

Considerations of how global edicts are invested locally with fresh meaning point to agency—the power to act—as a pivotal notion. Saba Mahmood (2004, 29) thinks of agency "(a) in terms of the capacities and skills required to undertake particular kinds of moral actions; and (b) as ineluctably bound up with the historically and culturally specific disciplines through which a subject is formed." Ortner similarly notes, "In probably the most common usage, 'agency' can be synonymous with the forms of power people have at their disposal, their ability to act on their own behalf, influence other people and events, and maintain some kind of control in their own lives" (2006, 143–44). Like Mahmood, Ortner argues that agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction: "Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency" (*ibid.*, 186).

As agency appears and evolves in context, it must be studied in relation to the circumstances that have formed the actors.

ACTOR-ORIENTED ANALYSES AND THE SOCIAL INTERFACE

In a similar vein, adherents of the actor-oriented perspective, anchored in the literature of development sociology and anthropology, have also reacted against earlier metanarratives that emphasize structural constraints. These metanarratives have been criticized for their inability to explain location-specific differences in development, while overemphasizing macroscopic economic determination (Korovkin 1997; Hebinck, den Ouden, and Verschoor 2001). Actor-oriented proponents argue instead that *any* transformation occurs via the mutual and inescapable interplay between internal and external factors, thus shedding new light on the power of human agency to mediate structural changes in creative and locally rooted ways.

Useful here is Norman Long's notion of the "social interface," which emphasizes that, as Arturo Escobar (2001, 139) puts it, "culture sits in places." Long argues that to fully comprehend the everyday processes by which "images, identities, and social practices are shared, contested, negotiated, and sometimes rejected by the various actors involved" (2004, 16), one must analyze the extent to which the life-worlds of specific actors, including their social practices and cultural perceptions, are simultaneously autonomous and "colonized" by the more extensive frames of ideology, institutions, and power. He suggests that it is these interplays of everyday life and wider structural forces that comprise social interfaces. Interface encounters can be in person between individuals or can be mediated via additional actors, even absent ones, who still influence local outcomes. At these interfaces, different life-worlds intersect and interests, values, knowledge, and power are challenged, mediated, and transformed. Long (2000) advocates for the documentation of these interfaces through careful ethnographic investigation—a call to which we wholeheartedly respond.

The refined actor-oriented approach of recent years allows us to engage across spatial scales of analysis to better understand structures that influence daily livelihood decisions, and to uncover the "micro-foundations of macro-processes" (Booth 1993, 62). We do not wish to underestimate the constraints that hierarchical structures impose upon Hmong livelihoods, nor overestimate the capacity of Hmong individuals and households to influence or alter changes that are taking place. We carefully weigh the balance between individual actions and institutional or historical constraints. As Ben Jones put it, "We try to remain open to individual interests while

understanding the ways in which cases relate to broader changes in the social landscape. Individuals, or groups, . . . are seen to use their relative power; their capacity to argue for certain outcomes; or their desire to privilege certain discourse; and are thus able to draw on past experiences in bringing new things into being” (2009, 29).⁸ Discrepancies in knowledge, power, and cultural interpretation are mediated, perpetuated, or transformed at critical points, whether these be points of linkage or of confrontation (Long 2001). These complex negotiations trigger the vernacularization—or cultural adaptation—of global commands and processes along the lines of local knowledge and belief systems (Long and Villarreal 1993; Engel Merry 2006; Michelutti 2007). Such mediations and transformations can occur through, among other routes, the use of everyday politics and resistance.

EVERYDAY POLITICS AND COVERT RESISTANCE

In trying to understand the complexities of making a living in the socialist Sino-Vietnamese uplands and how individuals there use their relative power to indigenize modernity, everyday politics and covert resistance deserve attention. In asserting agency, individuals draw on a variety of covert as well as overt actions while engaging with change. Yet, to date, the livelihoods literature has tended to underplay the significance of local peoples’ everyday politics, especially in unyielding authoritarian contexts such as communist regimes. In numerous cases of development policy and practice, a mainstream livelihood approach is typically mobilized to strategize economic development (Forsyth and Michaud 2011; Turner 2012a). By maintaining this focus, researchers and developers frequently lose sight of the reasons why local actors might accommodate, shirk, sidestep, avoid, or resist proposed elements of development and market integration. Closer investigations of rural communities across the Global South reveal instead that individuals and households respond creatively to economic opportunities, and that these responses are often not fully coherent with the market economy.

In this book, we draw attention to the various forms of everyday covert resistance and small acts of reinterpretation that take place in the context of a marginalized group on the geographical, cultural, and economic borderlands of two highly centralized socialist states. While there exists a wide range of literature on rural forms of resistance, accounts of overt forms such as social movements, protests, and rebellions—whether peaceful or forceful—have traditionally dominated discussions (Sharp et al. 2000; Amooore 2005; Edelman 2005). In these accounts, dissatisfied individuals and groups typically devise a course of action with the aim of changing or even toppling an

unequal situation (cf. Mittelman and Chin 2005). When nonconfrontational resistance strategies have been theoretically scrutinized, the focus has been on evident action seen through the lens of Gramscian counterhegemonic forms of war. In this framework, wars of movement contrast with wars of position, with the latter including milder types of resistance that some also associate with nonviolence (Fegan 1986). Yet one could postulate that resistance that is not overt, explicit, defiant, or aimed at toppling the conditions of domination can still be labeled “resistance” (Scott 1990; Turner and Caouette 2009; Michaud 2012).

Ben Kerkvliet defines his concept of everyday politics as involving “people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organized or direct” (2009, 232). Everyday politics, unlike official or advocacy politics, entails little organization, as it is carried out by ostensibly “powerless” individuals who are unlikely to consider their low-profile actions political.⁹ Significantly, Kerkvliet states, “people need not be organized to be political” (*ibid.*, 229). He suggests that everyday politics be divided into four categories, namely support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance (*ibid.*). Hmong individuals and households use all of these dimensions. As a complex set of actors, their everyday politics regarding livelihood decisions stretch across the full spectrum, although the proportions among these four categories may vary considerably.

In southern Yunnan and northern Vietnam, intricate forms of resistance by Hmong individuals and households have been crafted over centuries of proximity, quarrels, political and economic exploitation, rebellion, invasion, war, and flight (Culas and Michaud 2004). Hmong rebellions, some taking the form of messianic movements, have erupted through time and across space to invariably end in failure or bloodshed (Culas 2005; Lee Mai Na 2005). Yet, it would be rather astonishing if a society that has withstood the test of time and fortitude in such a way, succeeding against the odds to survive to this day, had not forged a spirit of resilience in the face of adversity and domination. This is a perceptive resilience, founded on an understanding that domination is a fact of life, that the stakes include cultural as much as physical survival, and that with each action comes consequences. In James C. Scott’s words (1990, 183), “The circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups in large part by design [is] a tactical choice born out of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.” As such, resistance to more powerful foes—the feudal state, warlords, colo-

nial forces, socialist administration, the global market—cannot be based on sheer force, which has proved futile. Instead, it is a resistance enacted through finesse.

Contemporary ethnic minority Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands are conscious of their state of domination and of the fact that they do not have the power to appreciably alter or openly resist the central states nor the profound and fast-paced economic transformations occurring as China and Vietnam join the fray of global market forces. Nevertheless, they are anything but submissive and powerless actors.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BORDERS

Our choice to work on two sides of an international border instead of within one bounded national entity begs explanation. By their modern definition, borders are geographically rooted lines that circumscribe discrete political entities—sovereign states. As a result, the state’s nominal power over the entirety of the territory thus delineated and its inhabitants is complete. This stands in stark contrast to precolonial models of state administration in the Southeast Asian Massif based on the mandala principle, in which a strong core in the heavily populated zones was surrounded by concentric layers of increasingly detached peripheries forming buffer zones between competing polities (Condominas 1976; Fourniau 1989; Winichakul 1994). Yet even in feudal times, tributary populations in the peripheries nearest to the cores inevitably started to attract steadier state attention, scrutiny that Scott (2009) suggests was a factor encouraging several upland populations, including the Hmong, to move farther afield to reach a state-free zone of “refuge”—now a thing of the past.

As a rule, when modern borders enclose one dominant ethnic group, a nation-state is born. When an enclosure places together distinct, smaller, or less powerful ethnic groups with one prevailing group, the product is a multiethnic state in which the dominant ethnicity, be it by numbers or by access to power, takes precedence in the definition of a national identity, ideology, and project. In southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia, modern borders have typically triggered these processes simultaneously. They have confirmed the dominance of major ethnic identities such as the Assamese, Burman, Siamese, Lao, Khmer, Kinh, and Han by enclosing their customary domain, while other ethnicities find themselves relegated to a role of “minority.” The more powerful minority groups, such as a number of Tai-speaking groups over a large part of the Massif (Ahom in Assam, Lue in

Yunnan, and Thái and Tày in Vietnam, for instance), have often then served as in-between power brokers.

Moreover, in the Sino-Vietnamese uplands, the border slices through the residential areas of minorities, dividing kin and long-time neighbors and throwing them into two (occasionally antagonistic) nations. Some groups have been completely enclosed within one country—in Yunnan, examples include the Bai and the Naxi—but more often, ethnic groups have been torn between countries. The Hmong (within the Miao classification in China), Yao (Dao in Vietnam), Tày and Nùng (both merged into the Zhuang in China), and Yi and Hani (respectively Lô Lô and Hà Nhì in Vietnam) are some of the groups now permanently split between the north of Vietnam and southern Yunnan.

Modern borders have thus turned what used to be roughly delineated buffer zones into clear-cut internal peripheries that must be controlled, secured, colonized, and put to profitable use. Ancient independent polities, such as the old Tai-speaking domains of Sip Song Phan Na (“Twelve Thousand Rice Fields” in the Dai/Lue language, now the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan) and Sip Song Chau Tai (“Twelve Tai Counties” in the Thái language) in northwest Vietnam (Le Failler 2014), had to be defeated, abolished, or rendered toothless.

Without getting too enmeshed in border study debates, it is important to remember that experts continue to contest the power that can be accorded to state borders. On the one hand, borders are often considered to function more and more as porous membranes that facilitate international socioeconomic interactions in today’s globalized world economy. On the other hand, it can be argued that contemporary borders remain fundamental symbols of state control over territories and population movements. Frequently, processes of globalization, market liberalization, and the opening of borders to trade are accompanied by a reassertion of government control at physical border sites.¹⁰

Examining the history of border dynamics through time (see chapter 2), it is clear that the Chinese and Vietnamese states retain a strong determining influence over cross-border flows of people and commodities. Contemporary state power constantly contradicts the romantic ideal of a “borderless world.”¹¹ These days, state actors rigorously delimit the territories over which heavily centralized Chinese and Vietnamese regimes assert sovereignty, acting as “screening agents” controlling who and what can legally flow between political jurisdictions and under what conditions (Clement 2004).

Friedrich Ratzel’s 1897 suggestion that “the fringe on each side of the

borderline is the reality of borders, while the line itself is the abstraction” (in Donnan and Wilson 1994, 8) is still valid today. This statement points to the tension between abstract lines drawn and redrawn on maps throughout history and the on-the-ground realities of boundaries rarely so neatly delineated. This tension is exemplified by ongoing conflicts not only in the Sino-Vietnamese highlands but also over maritime boundaries and the ownership of remote islands. Furthermore, Donnan and Wilson (1999, 15) suggest that borders incorporate three elements: “the jurisdictional borderline which simultaneously separates and joins states”; the agents and institutions of the state “who demarcate and sustain the border, and who are found most often in border areas but who also often penetrate deeply into the territory of the state”; and frontiers, the “territorial zones of varying width which stretch across and away from state borders, within which people negotiate a variety of behaviors and meanings associated with membership in their nations and states” (cf. Anderson 1996; Herzog 1990; Morehouse 2004). Indeed, this book focuses on the people making a living and trying to maintain their cultures and identity in this third space, the frontiers spreading on either side of an international borderline. The agents and institutions of the state that enable or disable the flows of goods and people across the borderline are also key actors in this story.

Jurisdictional borderlines rarely represent the reality of borderlands, the frontier territorial zones and cultural landscapes on either side. The identities of borderlands are instead shaped by inhabitants’ interactions with the boundary, that is, their transactions across it and with each other (Morehouse 2004). Border residents such as upland ethnic minorities devise highly pragmatic ways of negotiating borderlines and state policies, such that state efforts to establish the political and economic parameters for cross-border interactions are often unable to fully control everyday practices of “making do” (Morehouse et al. 2004). People and institutions at the local level are part of complex, interwoven relationships with other people, ethnic groups, and nations, both within and outside of their own state, as well as across time (cf. Donnan and Wilson 1994). This will become obvious as we detail cross-border negotiations over livestock, non-timber forest products, and textiles.

Country-based research addressing transborder societies is simply not enough here, especially when preset labels such as “minority nationalities” are being applied uncritically, as is routinely the case in both China and Vietnam (Michaud 2009). Without unduly playing down the importance of national contexts and their implications in terms of country-specific policies toward national populations, including minorities, we reason that

ethnic groups divided by international borders, such as the Hmong, gain much from being studied in their cultural integrity in a translocal way and not solely as part of one state. By doing so, as Ulrike Freitag states (summarized in Gottowik 2010, 180), “The focus is on the mobility of actors, ideas, commodities, and artifacts between different regions of the South and the consequences of exchange, circulation, and transfer beyond real or imagined boundaries. The emphasis is not on crossing national boundaries (as with transnational), but on overcoming spatial differences. . . . There is rather a multiplicity of borders, which are not necessarily political, but economic, social, religious, etc.” Scholarly consideration of the Southeast Asian Massif as a translocal social space helps to do all this (see Walker 1999; Sturgeon 2005; Diana 2013). Transborder studies help ameliorate the adverse effects of historical, political, but artificial divisions. These studies also contribute to raising international awareness of ethnic “minority” groups that otherwise have frequently ended up being misrepresented and thus disempowered. The mere fact that the Hmong in Asia number roughly the same as the whole population of Laos should prompt critical thinking on the very notions of nation and minority.

WHAT IS TO COME

The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands form a dynamic social space where variety, difference, and distinction often override uniformity, standardization, and commonality. Thus we have had to make some difficult choices when deciding what to include and what to exclude from our analysis of this vast region and the lives of its Hmong inhabitants.¹² We have concentrated on the daily decision-making processes of rural Hmong individuals and households that revolve around making a living through subsistence approaches, barter, reciprocity, and cash-producing activities. Other components, certainly not forgotten but toned down significantly, remain in the background in the shape of elements of context, historical narratives, explanatory features, and additional references, linking our findings to the wider body of Hmong reality as seen through Hmong eyes.

Having now situated our study conceptually, in chapter 2 we outline the political structures and social organization of Hmong households and lineages in these borderlands, while remaining careful to avoid the trap of essentialism. We then examine the dominant discourses of both the Chinese and the Vietnamese states regarding individuals in this frontier region who belong to this “minority nationality,” noting that any state shifts toward an

even-handed appreciation of minority cultures on their own terms have been slow to take place. Focusing on southern Yunnan in China and upland northern Vietnam, we explore a range of state development strategies and power dynamics that contextualize and underlie Hmong decision making today. We conclude with a look at the role and effect of the international borderline slicing across this sociocultural space, and at how local inhabitants negotiate this divide in their daily lives.

In chapter 3, we explain the structure of the modern composite agricultural livelihoods that form the core of most Hmong household economies in northern Vietnam and southeast Yunnan. Current farming approaches involve a mix of permanent terraced rice paddy fields, rain-fed rice and maize, rotating swidden plots, and small gardens. This agriculture is complemented by the collection of forest products, including fuel wood, herbal medicines, feed for livestock, honey, and small animals. Supplemental food crops such as beans, taro, pumpkins, and cucumbers are grown in small home gardens, while Hmong shamans and healers maintain specialized medicinal herb gardens. Hmong households also participate in commercial circuits through selected agricultural intensification practices, including purchasing chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid rice and maize seeds that supplement or replace their own customary rotating supplies. Such commodities require cash income, and our investigation shows that this need is increasingly becoming part of local livelihood equations, especially in areas where landholding size is under pressure. More so in China than in Vietnam, cash cropping options are also increasingly playing a significant role in composite livelihoods.

Livestock, to which chapter 4 is devoted, forms a fundamental part of Hmong livelihood portfolios. For many Hmong households, a water buffalo is a primary form of livelihood insurance—living capital—and a symbol of status and wealth. Buffalo are raised chiefly for plowing fields, reproduction, exchange among kin, and ritual sacrifice. In addition, ducks, chickens, pigs, and goats are used for household consumption, rituals, or payment for shaman visits. When a household needs cash urgently, livestock can be sold, but only in emergencies will a buffalo be traded. Focusing on water buffalo, we explore the complex trading practices that upland Hmong engage in to gain these important beasts of burden. Trade networks are rooted for the most part in kinship ties and social capital, and only the very daring engage in trade across provincial or national borderlines. Nevertheless, for Hmong traders with the skills and connections, we find that cross-border opportunities are growing as local communities deal with shortages due to extreme

weather conditions, while place-specific understandings of what constitutes a valuable buffalo create precise demands.

As with rice, Hmong households often cultivate several maize varieties, both traditional and hybrid, especially in the agro-ecological conditions east of the Red River. Maize is frequently used as the base for homemade alcohol, which is increasingly being sold on the market by specialized Hmong distillers, the subject of chapter 5. Here we find a number of complex livelihood factors, especially land holdings and family tradition, determining who becomes an acknowledged alcohol producer and trader. As upland Hmong alcohols become increasingly commoditized for local as well as lowland consumption, the claims and counterclaims of those involved are becoming increasingly complex, and tensions and rivalries are on the rise.

Another route by which Hmong households work to expand their access to cash income, and one that is equally fraught with conflicts and anxieties for local cultivators, is the harvest and trade of timber and non-timber forest products, analyzed in chapter 6. Lào Cai Province, northern Vietnam, is one of the important spots in these borderlands, where the highly prized and increasingly expensive cardamom spice is cultivated under forest cover, chiefly by upland ethnic minorities. The growth of the cardamom trade and its commercial networks in response to Chinese demand is placing Hmong cultivators in a specific niche. But the greatest economic rewards are being reaped by other actors who occupy places further along the commodity chains. In many respects, cardamom cash cropping bears similarities to historical poppy cultivation and opium production, both of which were common in these high valleys until the 1980s.

Expanding as rapidly as cardamom cultivation are the numerous trading networks for Hmong textiles, now global in scope, analyzed in chapter 7. In northern Vietnam, Hmong women are in charge of hemp and indigo plots as well as the fabrication, dyeing, and embroidering of customary hemp clothes. We describe how these detailed and carefully preserved cultural skills are opening up new trade opportunities as demand increases for secondhand Hmong clothing as “authentic” tourist handicrafts. Meanwhile, in China, calls for synthetic look-alike versions of traditional forms of dress are booming among Hmong communities, while enterprising Hmong and Han dealers are also trading these new commodities back to many Hmong consumers in Vietnam. It soon becomes clear that a global demand for handicrafts, along with state regulations reducing hemp production in China and strong desires among Hmong communities to retain textiles embed-

ded with cultural meaning, are creating a remarkable web of cross-border networks and trading channels.

Finally, in chapter 8 we weave these case studies together and offer our overall thoughts regarding the challenges of making a living on these margins. We explain, in short, that Hmong individuals, households, and villages engage in a wide scope of livelihood opportunities across these borderlands, with approaches that range from active engagement to cautious choices to everyday resistance.

2 FRONTIER DYNAMICS

Borders and the Hmong

SINCE 1981, CHINA HAS OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED FIFTY-FIVE “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu*). Thirty-two of these, with a combined population of more than sixty-five million, are indigenous to the southwest area. In Vietnam, fifty-three distinct “minority nationalities” (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have been officially recognized since 1979; forty-nine of these groups live chiefly in upland regions and number ten million individuals. Of these, six million dwell in the northern uplands of Vietnam (NBS PRC 2002; SRV 2010). Therefore, about seventy-one million people registered as ethnic minorities live in southwest China and northern Vietnam.

The Hmong, with approximately four million individuals in Asia, constitute one of the larger upland minority groups of the Southeast Asian Massif (Lemoine 2005). Hmong belong to the Miao-Yao language family, also sometimes called Hmong-Mien (Ratliff 2004). Dialectal variations exist within the Miao/Hmong branch of this family, but all dialects spoken around the Sino-Vietnamese border are mutually intelligible.

Chinese annalists have assigned inconsistent exonyms to the Hmong over the centuries (Lombard-Salmon 1972), and the current Chinese state does not officially recognize the subcategory “Hmong.” Instead, after the 1949 revolution, Hmong were artificially clustered with other subgroups of a broader Miao *minzu* (9.5 million individuals in China), with whom they have little in common in linguistic or cultural terms. A definite number of Hmong in China therefore is hard to come by, since the autonym “Hmong” is not permitted for national census purposes. Nevertheless, within the Miao category, estimates point to approximately three million Hmong individuals in China (Lemoine 2005), chiefly inhabiting the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan, with small numbers in adjacent prefectures within Sichuan and Guangxi (Lemoine 2008) (map 2.1). In Vietnam, the 2009 national census recorded 1,068,189 Hmong, 90 percent of whom lived in the country’s north.¹ Because of historical pressures and land availability, and possibly also by choice (Scott 2009), Hmong households tend to occupy



MAP 2.1. Approximate location of Hmong in Asia. Source: Adapted by J. Michaud from Lemoine 2008.

the highest lands, with dwelling areas fragmented across high valleys and mountain ranges.

Several other notable groups also reside in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. The Yao, who are close relatives of the Hmong and often dwell in the same upland locales, number approximately 2.6 million in China and 751,000 in Vietnam, where they are officially known as Dao (see Michaud

2006, 78–79, for a disambiguation of this term). The Tày, who belong to the Tai language family, constitute the most numerous highland ethnic minority in Vietnam, with a population of 1.62 million, followed in the north by their linguistic cousins the Thái (1.55 million), the Nùng (970,000), and the Giáy (60,000). All four are also found across the border in China, lumped together with several other Tai-speaking groups to form the massive Zhuang *minzu*, China's largest official ethnic minority, with seventeen million individuals (NBS PRC 2002; SRV 2010).

A SNAPSHOT OF HMONG SINGULARITY

Most Hmong in these borderlands self-identify as Hmong Leng (also known as Green or Blue Hmong; Hmoob or Moob Leeg in the Romanized Popular Alphabet),² with smaller numbers belonging to another important branch, the Hmoob or Moob Dawb, or White Hmong.³ Hmong in the borderlands are mainly rural, semi-subsistence farmers practicing a mixture of permanent and temporary agriculture, with production centered on household needs.⁴ Education has historically been based on apprenticeship with adults, with an expanding primary schooling component today.

Since Hmong did not produce an endogenous script and therefore have no written archives, the oldest records of their myths and oral history were recorded on location a century ago by European observers. French missionary François Savina (1924; see also Michaud 2007) placed the origins of the group in a northern snowy land of unspecified location, but no archeological, linguistic, or biological evidence exists to locate such an ancient homeland with any certainty. More specifically, anthropologists argue that Hmong have their indigenous roots in southwest China (Tapp 2001) and were among the scores of minority groups who were part of the social turmoil that plagued the region for hundreds of years starting in the sixteenth century. Local societies and feudal lords were pitted against one another and against the Han state, which was establishing footholds in these mountainous areas (Jenks 1994; Herman 2007; Yang 2009).

French colonial sources indicate that Hmong households settled the Vietnamese side of the frontier between one hundred and three hundred years ago (Culas and Michaud 2004). Vietnam was probably the first Indochinese country into which Hmong migrated from China. During the colonial period in Northern Vietnam (1883–1954), then called Tonkin, a number of Hmong joined the Vietnamese Nationalists and Communists, while numerous (often Catholic) Hmong sided with the French. After the Viet Minh vic-

tory in 1954, many pro-French Hmong migrated to Laos and South Vietnam or even France; those remaining in the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam (also known as North Vietnam) had to accept Communist rule. Hmong in Yunnan also had to accept Communism, in their case without the option of taking refuge in a former colonial-imperialist metropole.

The 1949 Communist victory in China represented a dramatic change for rural areas, transforming production relations and reorganizing society even to the country's borders. Economies on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border were collectivized at much the same time, though with minimal success in the remote highlands compared with the lowlands. Traditional trading in coffin wood and animal parts, as well as strategic trades such as opium, carried on quietly.⁵ As under French rule, the Vietnamese government retained a state monopoly on opium. This allowed Hmong producers to generate income in cash or coupons for use in state shops. In both countries today, collectives have all but disappeared in their former configuration, as economic integration and conversion to new cash crops are rapidly replacing the old system.

Customarily, Hmong are animists, allocating power and agency to natural elements and worshiping the spirits of their deceased ancestors. With exposure to lowland Asian belief systems, philosophies, and religions through the centuries, many have also integrated elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (Chindarsi 1976; Tapp 1989a, 1989b). With the arrival of Europeans in the nineteenth century, elements of Protestant, Anglican, and Catholic faiths have also been absorbed, with some local groups in both Yunnan and northern Vietnam having converted outright under missionary influence. Shamanism is widely practiced as a way to heal injuries or cure illnesses or to negotiate with the spirits for more positive outcomes (Moréchand 1968; Chindarsi 1983; Mottin 1984). Village-wide or group rituals can involve priests, while household rituals are normally performed by the eldest male. It is also worth mentioning that endogenous elements of messianism exist within Hmong animism, which have been cause for more than one uprising in the twentieth century—though always brief and localized (Culas 2005).

Hmong economic decision making in these borderlands is determined by vernacular social organization, that is, economic reciprocity achieved chiefly through kinship ties between households and lineages. Being acephalous, Hmong political structure bestows power to each (generally male) household head, who, in turn, accepts to mitigate this power through informal councils of household heads within the same lineage and, at times, within the same patronymic clan. Economic alliances, labor exchange, the move-

ment of people, and the circulation of capital through trade networks follow kinship channels even today. Another significant consequence of this social organization is that Hmong individuals prefer to interact with other Hmong when conducting trade and economic transactions that may affect their livelihoods. Any given Hmong in these borderlands will feel compelled to help and support another of the same family name (that is, belonging to the same clan), even across the border, which in large part explains the effective, cohesive, solid, and stealth-like quality of Hmong cross-border interactions and trade. At the local level, this preferential support materializes in every aspect of life, from agriculture to trade to labor; it facilitates unregistered barter, labor exchange, field swapping, seed and crop sharing, exchange of knowledge and favors, credit, contacts, routes, and even possibly profits, to name just a few benefits. These kinship networks are actively maintained through regular interaction and reinforced through exoclanic marriages. This does not mean, of course, that trading with outsiders is not possible; it is simply seldom the preferred choice.

Robert Cooper (1984) studied Hmong communities in northern Thailand in the late 1970s, a turning point at which large-scale opium production was no longer possible due to restrictive national regulations. There, Cooper has shown that Hmong families who had accumulated capital via the vibrant opium economy could then also adapt and become successful cash croppers of other produce, such as potatoes or cabbages, thus perpetuating their capacity to generate wealth. Interestingly, in the four villages Cooper studied, wealth was always poured back into the well-treaded sector of agriculture, with only marginal sums diverted toward new forms of consumption.⁶ These observations have implications for our analyses of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands today.

One can thus assert that individual Hmong living in these borderlands believe that they are bound to each other through ties of blood and geographical proximity, and the ways they ensure their livelihoods are intimately linked to who they perceive themselves to be. This identity far supersedes any feeling of being Yunnanese, Chinese, or Vietnamese. The ways these individuals interpret modernity—infrastructure, consumption, technology, knowledge, and education—bear important traces of their identity.

UPLAND POWER DYNAMICS

Han political culture in China has historically considered center/periphery relations to be a reflection of the distance from the civilizational core to

its less civilized margins, with borderland residents deemed culturally less evolved than Han, and of minor importance (Harrell 1995; Mackerras 2003; Lary 2007). Those living in China's borderlands are not only numeric minorities but have also long been considered barbaric, unruly and dangerous, the cause of wars, and deserving of punishment. Today, with Han power having indelibly shaped China, one could argue that mainstream sentiment toward these groups mirrors customary Confucian conceptions of older versus younger siblings, in that minorities "need" Han help to progress and develop (Harwood 2013). Simultaneously, a booming national tourism industry and its centrally controlled promotional discourse stages ethnic minority cultural differences as exotic, mysterious, and often erotic (Nyíri 2006).

Mainstream Vietnamese sentiment has been heavily influenced by China, with a similar majority-minority divide. Livelihood, cultural, and historical differences between upland ethnic minorities and lowland Kinh are essentialized by the state, a symptom of which can be seen in paternalistic development policies that reflect the relationship between big brother (the Kinh) and little brother (minorities), which has been described by several authors (see Koh 2002; Duncan 2004; Scott 2009; Salemink 2011). Since the country was reunified in 1975, the Vietnamese state has taken its responsibilities as the older sibling to heart and has worked consistently to integrate "poor" and "substandard" upland ethnic minority communities into the national economy.

To the credit of both China and Vietnam, some officials and scholars today do voice definite intentions to move away from these archaic views and the patriarchal discourse they entail. But in local and provincial government branches, as well as in far too many academic institutions, the old ways still prevail (Turner 2013a). Progress is slow toward a more balanced appreciation of minority cultures on their own terms.

YUNNAN, CHINA

The southwestern province of Yunnan, with a population of forty-six million in 2010, shares international borders with Vietnam, Laos, and Burma. It also adjoins four other provinces of China's southwest, namely Tibet (Xizang Autonomous Region), Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi (Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region). Geographically as much as culturally, Yunnan lies at the very heart of the Southeast Asian Massif. Despite four centuries of Han in-migration, 33 percent of its population officially belongs to non-Han indigenous minority groups. Yunnan is home to over twenty-five of China's official national minorities, including Miao, Yi, Bai, Hani, Dai, Zhuang, Lisu,

Hui, Lahu, Naxi, Yao, Jingpo, Bulang, Achang, Nu, Primi, Jino, and Derung, to name the more numerically significant groups.

Numerous political campaigns have directly affected Hmong populations in Yunnan. After the Communist Revolution, Mao Zedong launched a land reform that redistributed confiscated properties to self-farming households (Kueh 1995). This “remunerative” approach lasted from 1949 to 1952, until farm output was recovered. In 1953, Mao Zedong engaged the country in land collectivization, and farmers were required to fill delivery quotas set by the central government (*ibid.*). This then transformed into the Great Leap Forward (1958–60), which merged collectives to carry out agricultural production, irrigation projects, and industrial development with the aim of creating self-sufficiency across China. Instead, this two-year period of drastic reforms led to land degradation, deforestation, and the worst famine in China’s modern history (Shapiro 2001). The following four years (1961–65) saw the government focus on reorienting agricultural production toward income benefits for the collectives, and the subsequent Cultural Revolution (1966–76) witnessed an intensification of agriculture (Kueh 1995). Then, following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, Chairman Deng Xiaoping reinstated a remunerative approach that gave land-use rights back to individual farmers through the Household Responsibility System (HRS; *Jiating Lianchan Chengbao Zerenzhi*), which he established in 1984 (*ibid.*; Ho 2001; Göbel 2010).

By the 1990s, Beijing realized that the economic disparities between booming coastal regions and remote hinterlands such as Yunnan, and between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities, created the potential for social unrest on the frontier (Singh 2002). These social divides were an unexpected side effect of Deng Xiaoping’s economic liberalization since 1979, which had prioritized the heavily populated coastal provinces representing around 40 percent of the population but only 15 percent of China’s territory. These reforms aimed to use the coastal provinces’ new opportunities (heavy industry, textiles, construction, and wage work) to trigger the development of interior provinces (Lai 2002). This national strategy was only partially successful, and in the 1990s, Chairman Jiang Zemin (1993–2003) decided it was time to pay closer attention to economic inequality across China.

Under Jiang Zemin’s watch, the central government launched the Go West Campaign in 1999, an enormous effort to use the wealth accumulated by the central state in the coastal provinces during the economic boom to develop investment, infrastructure, and industry in the six provinces and five autonomous regions in the southwest and west (Holbig 2004). Beijing introduced

policies to speed up development in these areas, putting in place tax exemptions and concessions to help the western provinces catch up with the eastern ones. In 2001, this campaign was renamed the Great Western Development Strategy (also known as China Western Development, Xibu Dakaifa, or “Open Up the West” program). It was adjusted to encompass a three-phase platform spanning the next fifty years: 2001–10, 2010–30, and 2030–50.

The Western Development Strategy’s explicit goal is to strengthen the economy, but its political objective is to also deal with regional, ecological, and security concerns (Lai 2002; Lan Xinxhen 2010). Beyond its stated goal of equitable economic progress, critics see the Western Development Strategy’s embedded logic as part of an internal colonization scheme. Goodman (2004) suggests that the aims of the Western Development Strategy can generally be considered twofold: to secure China’s border regions, mostly inhabited by ethnic minorities (with 56 percent of the ethnic minority population in China concentrated in the west); and to protect and build infrastructure to tap into abundant natural resources—in particular water (including hydropower) and minerals—in order to respond to increasing population growth and depletion of resources in the east (see also China View/Xinhuanet 2006; China Development Gateway 2010).

A large percentage of Yunnan’s population, including many Han, is still engaged in everyday small-scale, household-based agricultural production (Miao, Xiao, and Wang 2008). Rice, maize, and wheat are the main food crops, while tea, fresh flowers, sugarcane, bananas, rubber, and tobacco are grown on large cash-crop plantations. As part of the Western Development Strategy, since 2001 a gradual increase in the service economy has occurred, thanks to large investments in tourism and related infrastructure, and in the manufacturing sector, which has focused especially on attracting foreign investment (Tapp 2010a). In 2005, Yunnan boasted the largest number of tourists in western China due to its seemingly endless variety of stunning landscapes and a hefty supply of exotic minority traditions (Nyíri 2006). Furthermore, as Gros (2011) points out, the 1998 enforced ban on logging forced rural populations in many areas to turn to tourism as one of the few available in situ livelihood opportunities from which to earn cash. Concurrently, out-migration for factory work in the coastal provinces is also increasing. Like the Western Development Strategy, the 2006 “Build a New Socialist Countryside” (Jianshe Shehui Zhuyi Xin Nongcun) policy aims to reduce social and economic inequality by channelling record levels of central government funding toward the provision of subsidized social services in rural areas, especially those in peripheral regions (Harwood 2013).

YUNNAN'S BORDER PREFECTURES ABUTTING VIETNAM

Of the sixteen prefectures and cities in Yunnan Province, two prefectures directly abut Vietnam: Honghe (Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture), with its new head town Mengzi, and Wenshan (Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture), with its namesake prefectural seat (see map 1.2). Bordering northern Vietnam for 848 kilometers, mountainous Honghe Prefecture has a population of 4,130,463, including a wide range of minority nationalities—in decreasing order of numerical importance, Yi, Hani, Miao, Zhuang, and Yao—of whom 82 percent live off agriculture (NBS PRC 2002; Yunnan Bureau of Statistics 2009). Immediately east of Honghe lies Wenshan Prefecture, with a common border with Vietnam of similar length and a population of 3,268,553. Illustrating the ethnic variety and hierarchy in this prefecture, a familiar local saying states, “Han and Hui live by the market [i.e., in urban settings], Zhuang and Dai live by the water [in fertile valleys], Miao and Yi live on the mountains [away from the first two], and Yao live among the bamboo [in wastelands].”

China's 1984 Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy and its 2001 amendment (People's Republic of China 1984 and 2001) apply to both prefectures due to their high proportions of minority nationality individuals. This law affords prefectural governments greater autonomy than elsewhere over certain policies such as taxation—although provincial authorities can override local decisions (Friberg 2005)—while the hiring of minority nationalities is theoretically prioritized in the state administration. In these two prefectures, as throughout China, ethnic minorities are also officially awarded certain affirmative action measures, such as exemption from the one-child policy, fewer taxes, and preferential university admission.⁷ Nevertheless, while primary education may be available in some local ethnic minority languages, one must be fluent in Mandarin to have access to higher education as well as to most off-farm employment opportunities.

Due to the significant demographic discrepancy between China and Vietnam, comparing entities called “provinces” on both sides makes little sense. In Vietnam, each northern province is in fact more logically compared (demographically, as much as for its physical size) to a Chinese county, the prefectural subdivision. In Honghe Prefecture, Jinping Miao, Yao, and Dai Autonomous County has a population of 316,171 (in 2000), of which 85 percent are non-Han, while Hekou Yao Autonomous County has a population of 94,451, of which 58 percent are non-Han. To the east, in Wenshan Prefecture, Maguan County has a population of 350,002, of which 51 percent are non-Han, while Malipo County has a population of 267,986

and a 41 percent non-Han population. Each has an eponymous head town, with populations of around fifty thousand each, which typically acts as the regional administrative and service center for the rural population (NBS PRC 2002). The exception is the city of Hekou (pop. 80,000), which sits right on the border on the highly strategic Red River and, in addition to being the regional service center for its county, also acts as an international border-crossing post boasting such facilities as starred hotels and an international casino. While the percentages of minority residents in these counties remain high, the majority of Han migrations to this frontier (with the exception of the more remote Jinping County), have been noticeably more vigorous than Kinh migrations on the Vietnam side.

NORTHERN VIETNAM

South of the border, northern Vietnam is where the largest portion of the field research for this book has taken place. The sociocultural worlds of the Vietnamese uplands are products of socioeconomic tensions and political power struggles that closely reflect what James C. Scott (2009, 20) noted regarding the Southeast Asian Massif (or Zomia, as he labels that space, after van Schendel 2002) more generally, “The postcolonial lowland states have sought fully to exercise authority in the hills: by military occupation, by campaigns against shifting cultivation, by forced settlements, by promoting the migration of lowlanders to the hills, by efforts at religious conversion, by space-conquering roads, bridges, and telephone lines, and by development schemes that project government administration and lowland cultural styles into the hills.”

Under imperial rule, which lasted until 1883, Vietnam’s center showed little interest in the populations dwelling in the mountain peripheries; unlike China, the Nguyễn state did not really seek to make use of or colonize this remote space. Then, after international recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954, the state became fully committed to incorporating all northern highland societies into the Viet nation, the Communist state, and the national economy (McElwee 2004a; Michaud 2009; Turner 2012a). This incorporation, which continues today, has been accomplished by the persistent extension of infrastructure, national education in the Vietnamese language, economic reorganization, and market integration.

Much as in China, upland ethnic minorities in Vietnam are not well understood among the lowland majority and are often depicted negatively. As authors of the World Bank’s 2008 *Vietnam Development Report* observed, “Government programs to reduce ethnic minority poverty are often built on

the assumption that activities which worked well for the Kinh and Chinese majority should also work well for ethnic minorities. When they do not, lack of understanding can lead to the conclusion that the target beneficiaries are backward, or unmotivated, or lazy” (World Bank 2007, 21).⁸ Such negative perceptions are strongly shaped by ignorance and historical distrust of “barbarians” on the periphery, as well as by the fact that in a country where the dominant group highly values recollecting and commemorating the past, most upland minority cultures do not have indigenous archives and are thus easily labeled as “peoples without history” (Wolf 1982; Escobar 1995). These groups’ voices are frequently silenced, and only benign aspects of their cultures are represented in official ceremonies, on cultural television programs, and at tourist attractions (Salemink 2001; Messier and Michaud 2012). A policy of “selective cultural preservation” appears to best describe the Vietnamese state’s approach to ethnic minorities’ distinctive identities. This is especially obvious on VTV5, the state-run television channel directed at ethnic minority viewers (Messier and Michaud 2012).

Following *Đổi Mới*, the economic renovation decreed in 1986, national rural development policy objectives underwent a clear shift in focus. The previous emphasis on large-scale agricultural production under collectivization was replaced by socioeconomic development initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty at the local level. Then, in 1993, international tourism and foreign investment were authorized in the north. With the more recent introduction of hybrid seeds for rice and maize, the highlands have seen a shift from agricultural extensification to intensification, while concurrently experiencing diversification initiatives and the advent of various forms of wage work for a newly mobile workforce.

State-commissioned studies undertaken in the early 1990s confirmed that the majority of Vietnam’s poor were concentrated in remote mountainous areas and were comprised of ethnic minority groups.⁹ These studies concluded that a common feature of these communities and a major contributing factor to the persistence of poverty was inadequate or absent basic infrastructure (Nguyen Sinh Cuc 1995; Do Hoai Nam and Le Cao Doan 2001). Especially in the northern uplands, the number of communes with access to electricity, roads, secondary schools, marketplaces, and other essential basic infrastructure was found to be extremely low, with slow progress toward national standards (Phan Si Man 2005). Upland development policies for targeted commune support were based on the need to improve living conditions, as well as to extend the state’s local presence to maintain political and social stability and ensure national security.

An array of resolutions and policy documents resulted that shaped subsequent upland socioeconomic development programs. By 1998, the Vietnamese government had twenty-one different national policies and projects focused on socioeconomic development and poverty reduction in ethnic minority and upland areas (Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch 2007, 1). While the list of programs remains extensive, many have since been streamlined and integrated into two key national targets. First, the Program for Socio-Economic Development of Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic, Mountainous, Boundary and Remote Areas (Program 135) targets socioeconomic development within what are categorized as “communes meeting with exceptional difficulties” in areas with high populations of ethnic minorities, as well as upland and remote border regions. Second, the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Program (HEPR, or Program 143) aims, in its most recent form, to reduce the poverty rate, abolish chronic hunger, guarantee that poor communes have access to basic infrastructure and social services, create new employment opportunities, and reduce the urban unemployment rate (Oxfam 2001; Nguyen Thi Thu Phuong and Baulch 2007).¹⁰ Both programs perceive the improvement of basic physical infrastructure in rural areas as assisting market integration and fostering economic development (CEM 2004).

Such socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation programs have not been the only means by which the Vietnamese government has attempted to bring the uplands under the state’s gaze (Scott 2009). Whether expressed through overt or subtle policy guises, the pivotal concerns of the Vietnamese state since independence have remained national unity, security, and the assimilation and sedentarization of “unstable” ethnic minority groups.¹¹

VIETNAM’S BORDER PROVINCES ABUTTING YUNNAN

Of the seven provinces in Vietnam that abut the Chinese border, Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang touch the prefectures of Honghe and Wenshan in Yunnan and are of direct interest here (see map 1.2). Despite their status as provinces, as mentioned earlier, their populations are modest, standing at 370,502, 614,595, and 724,537, respectively (SRV 2010). The head towns of Lai Châu (pop. 27,000) Lào Cai City (98,000), and Hà Giang (45,000) each have populations commensurate with their counterparts across the border. Lào Cai City also shares an international border crossing with its Chinese twin city Hekou. Together, these three provinces are home to over twenty distinct official ethnic minorities. The proportion of each province’s official

minority population is 85 percent for Lai Châu, 87 percent for Hà Giang, and 65 percent for Lào Cai (*ibid.*). Lào Cai stands apart because the fertile Red River Valley, colonized by the Kinh, crosses its center. This explains the presence of the larger urban setting of Lào Cai City, a magnet for migrants from the lowlands.

THE FORMATION OF THE SINO-VIETNAMESE BORDERLANDS

So how was this borderline between China and Vietnam demarcated? How have these two countries negotiated its administration over time? And what are the roles and effects of this borderline cutting through this sociocultural space? Let us wind back the clock a little. Although ancient milestones demarcating an approximate China-Vietnam border can be traced back to the third century CE, it was not until the colonial period that the upland border was precisely and definitely delineated (Abadie 1924). In 1895, Chinese and French authorities concluded the Sino-French Convention on the Delimitation of the Frontier, and over three hundred border markers were erected (Chen 1987; see also Lefèvre-Pontalis 1902; Lafont 1989), many in the zone this book investigates. As with colonial border mapping the world over, the sharp political division carelessly sliced through a broader cohesive social and ethnic space: “On both sides of this border are regions offering the same physical characteristics and on which tribes are settled that are in all respects identical” (Abadie 1924, 22).

The Kunming–Haiphong railway link, critical to long-haul trade, was completed in 1910 and made the twin border towns of “Lao-Kay” (Lào Cai) and “Ho-Khéou” (Hekou) an increasingly important commercial and customs hub. The railway significantly increased the circulation of goods and people in the borderlands, though this flow tended to be limited to adjacent towns and had only marginal effects on the surrounding uplands and their populations.

There exist detailed French colonial records of border life in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Michaud 2013). In Bát Xát, for instance, to the west of the Red River in today’s Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, French officials lamented, “For the most part, the inhabitants have a sense of freedom that they would not hesitate to pass on to China if we were to take anything from them—either by making them take part in coolie duty, or by making them buy essential items from us; we must therefore let this region be in its own way, and simply require the maintenance of the road used by the reconnaissance” (ANOM 1898, GGI 66105 Ba-Xat, Lieutenant Probst). From such eyewitness

accounts, we learn of substantial local cross-border trade in both directions. From China came horseshoes, nails, wire, needles, medicine, jewelry, and raw metals such as iron and silver. Ethnic minorities used these metals to fashion their own jewelry and, in the case of silver, to facilitate trade as a form of currency. An important commodity going the other direction was salt from Vietnam's coastal regions—marked up 50 percent after being taxed at the Chinese customs station of Hekou. In Vietnam's upland markets, salt was traded for opium or the colonial currency, *piastres*. However, “the smuggling of salt [was] practiced fairly easily since the Chinese customs officers [were] willing to encourage it in order to increase their resources” (ANOM 1898, GGI 66105 Muong-Khuong).¹² Fujian Cypress (*Fokienia hodginsii*), a highly sought-after rot-resistant wood for coffin production in China and Vietnam, was also a major export from the mountains (Turner 2010).

In the late 1880s, traders from China routinely visited markets in Vietnam. Uplanders on the Vietnam side traded poultry, eggs, fruit, and rice wine for manufactured goods brought by Yunnanese visitors to markets such as Bát Xát, Mường Khương, and Pha Long. Chinese traders also purchased black pigs for breeding. Cross-border transport of goods was carried out by foot with the help of small packhorses (ANOM 1898, GGI 66105 Ba-Xat). Colonel Maurice Abadie wrote of the northern Vietnam highland trade that “Chinese peddlers and merchants frequently make up caravans of pack saddle horses for transporting their merchandise: salt, opium, medicinal plants, rice, maize, European products, and so forth” (1924, 15). Elderly Hmong in Lào Cai today recall this as a period of relatively easy cross-border movement, when those in Vietnam were freely able to visit kin in China.

By the time of the Communist takeover of Yunnan and the outbreak of the First Indochina War in French Indochina in 1946, the Vietnam-Yunnan uplands had already been hosting a cohesive trading-scape for generations. By late 1947, French colonial forces, realizing how important these routes could be to communist sympathizers on both sides, had secured control of the main trade routes along the northern border—although small-scale clandestine trade in goods such as opium, medicine, and chemicals persisted (the magnitude and strategic importance of the opium trade should not be underestimated).¹³ In 1950, the newly established People's Republic of China became the first country to recognize the Việt Minh government in Vietnam, and China became a major supplier of troops as well as military and economic assistance for activities against the French colonial government (Roper 2000). A fair proportion of this assistance flowed from southern Yunnan into Lào Cai Province. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) in China

actively supported the Việt Minh during their 1950 campaign to drive out French forces occupying border areas.¹⁴ With the borderlands secured on the Chinese side, Vietnam's frontier rapidly fell under communist Vietnamese control. Routes to China were then opened, trade was encouraged, and tariffs that had been established by the French were reduced (Womack 1994). These new trade relations were formalized in a 1952 trade protocol and in the 1954 Protocol on Small-Scale Border Trade that established trade offices in China's border counties and in Vietnam's border provinces (ibid.; Turner 2013b). Elderly Hmong we have interviewed in borderland districts of Lào Cai Province remember that during this time, there continued to be access across the border via winding mountain routes, the Việt Minh's forces being far more concerned with the French threat than with small-scale cross-border trade.

Over the course of the Second Indochina War (1955–75), Chinese and Vietnamese leaders agreed to respect the old colonial borderline (Nguyen Manh Hung 1979). Starting in 1954, local border markets dedicated to small-scale trade were established, but these shrank during the 1960s due to restrictive political and economic circumstances on both sides, including the collectivization of virtually all economic activities (Womack 1994). Nevertheless, Chinese traders were allowed to travel ten kilometers into Vietnam and purchase up to ¥30 worth of goods on each visit. Kuah Khun Eng (2000) notes that such trade was primarily to deal with local shortages while disposing of agricultural surpluses. However, because of corrupt officials and a lack of border control, larger-scale trade of manufactured goods to Vietnam and raw materials to China still continued.

Through the 1960s and early 1970s, China was in thrall to the national tragedies of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, both of which had widespread effects that reached even the most remote areas—though with less force than at the core (Gros 2011). On the Vietnam side, much like during the First Indochina War, the state was now preoccupied with fighting the South Vietnam government and its Western allies. On both sides of the border, controlling transborder trade by local residents became a lower state priority. During this period, according to a Vietnamese official interviewed at the Mường Khương border crossing, the situation was shockingly simple: “There were no procedures to cross the border because the state did not have the resources to control the border seriously” (Schoenberger 2006, 71).

The mid-1970s saw major socioeconomic changes in both countries. In China, the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution came to an end; in Vietnam, the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975 resulted in the country's reunification. The return to a semblance of normal relations between the two

communist neighbors lasted only a few years, until, in 1979, China could not hold back its anger when Vietnam invaded Cambodia to uproot the Khmer Rouge regime. This event, along with a hardening of the treatment of Chinese nationals within Vietnam and Vietnam's gradual turn toward the Soviet Union for political and military direction, significantly soured relations between the two countries and laid the groundwork for the brief Sino-Vietnamese border war.¹⁵

The Sino-Vietnamese border war officially lasted from February 17 to March 16, 1979, when the Chinese troops that had crossed over into Vietnam returned to China. But until Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia ten years later, in September 1989, the tension dramatically altered the ability of local residents to move across the borderline. "The hostile relationship between the two countries prevented all but the most furtive and small-scale border activities" (Womack 1994, 498). According to Hmong borderland residents in Vietnam, this period in the 1980s, which also overlapped with the demise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and Vietnam's pressing need to reform its economy, was marked by hunger and poverty. Families have explained to us how they reverted to subsistence means, turning to the forest for food such as roots, mushrooms, and insects, as well as for shelter from the military presence in the region.

By the mid-1980s, the constant cross-border shelling was slowing, and Hmong individuals on either side began to cross the border again—often at night—to visit relatives and purchase goods. Womack similarly notes that during this period "trade gradually began to re-emerge, with goods carried along small paths snaking through the minefields by the minority groups living on both sides of the border" (1994, 499). By May 1989, the Chinese army no longer maintained a heightened border presence. However, the physical borderline continued to be a source of anxiety, as an ethnic Zhuang man who served as a Chinese army officer stationed opposite Pha Long, Vietnam explained; during this time his key role was to "make sure that Vietnam didn't move the border marker in that area."

To cope with the major shifts taking place within the Red Brotherhood, Vietnam introduced its economic modernization and liberalization, *Đổi Mới* (economic renovation) in December 1986—eight years after China had begun its own Four Modernizations (*Sige Xiandaihua*) in 1978 and launched its Open Door policy (*Gaige Kaifang*) in 1979. In November 1988, both countries officially reopened their land border between Yunnan and the Vietnam uplands. Interviewees have explained that, using a relatively simple registration process, those living in frontier villages were permitted to cross

in both directions to visit relatives and exchange goods (see also Chau Thi Hai 2000). In 1991, Vietnam-China relations were normalized, and over the next year, Vietnam adopted new border trade policies. Border exchanges were incorporated into national trade policy as a whole, and regulations were developed for the management of borderland marketplaces (Gu and Womack 2000). China responded with its own policies aimed at improving cross-border trade, and by 1992 had opened fifty-six border towns in Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces to cross-border trade and social interactions with Vietnam (Kuah Khun Eng 2000).¹⁶ A permit system was introduced for residents of the Yunnan-Vietnam borderlands, and cross-border trade in the remote highlands reemerged as an important aspect of ethnic minorities' lives. As for Han and Kinh traders, they tended to focus on using the Lào Cai–Hekou border crossing, where trade soon grew exponentially as both cities were energetically rebuilt after having been leveled by shelling during the border war.

Though Chinese and Vietnamese officials signed a border agreement to settle unresolved border issues on December 30, 1999, the precise location of many border markers remained uncertain. Nine years later, on December 31, 2008, a final agreement was reached on the exact borderline positioning, although there was some criticism in Vietnam that the agreement had been rushed and that perhaps the government had made too many concessions (Marr 2009; Nga Pham 2009; Xinhua 2009). In early 2009, the installment of 1,971 border milestones demarcating the 1,347-kilometer China-Vietnam border was officially celebrated.

CURRENT BORDER-CROSSING CATEGORIES

At the moment, Vietnam has a three-tier crossing classification system for its border with China. At the top of the hierarchy are international crossings, of which only one exists in our area of focus: the Lào Cai City–Hekou crossing on the Red River, where the only train link in the northern highlands also exists. Here, third-country nationals may cross with a passport and visa, as may Vietnamese and Chinese residents with a passport or permit. This crossing, however, is seldom used by upland ethnic minorities, who do not normally reside or work in the vicinity of the twin cities. Second are national-level or “principal” crossings, for instance near Mường Khương and Bát Xát (Lào Cai Province, Vietnam to Honghe Prefecture, China) or Thanh Thủy (Hà Giang to Wenshan), where any Chinese or Vietnamese citizen can pass with a passport or a permit but the crossing of third-country nationals is forbidden. For third-tier or “auxiliary” crossings (*cửa khẩu phụ*)

it has been extraordinarily difficult to obtain official figures despite the best efforts of our Vietnamese and Chinese research colleagues. At these crossings, all of which are located in relatively remote sections of the border, such as between Pha Long (Lào Cai)–Lao Ka (Honghe) and Si Ma Cai (Lào Cai)–Xiao Bazi (Wenshan), borderland residents alone are allowed to cross with a permit.¹⁷

On the Chinese side, there are four categories of cross-border movement: first, foreign economic and technical cooperation in the border region; second, border crossings purchased through tours; third, small-scale border trade; and fourth, trade undertaken by border residents. This last category, meant for local residents crossing the border to conduct small-scale trade or to visit relatives, covers “trade by those living within twenty kilometers of the border, in government-approved border crossings or designated bazaars, not to exceed officially regulated values and quantities” (UNDP 2007). Han small-scale traders have confirmed that to cross the border they need a permit issued for six months. This permit allows them to visit border markets in Vietnam, but only for two market days a week. One such trader noted that if you try to cross on another day, the border officials “will catch you.”¹⁸

The Sino-Vietnamese borderline itself is now a precise sliver of state control directly and centrally affixed in these uplands, while the borderlands too are becoming increasingly enclosed. This small section of the Southeast Asian Massif is no longer a “zone of refuge” (Scott 2009) but one where local inhabitants are progressively having to negotiate and at times outmaneuver state control, bringing to mind Norman Long’s (2001) social interface notion. Yet, despite the best intentions of the state to reduce the “friction of distance,” borderland Hmong citizens create livelihoods and conduct trade in a remote upland mountainous terrain where traveling between villages or marketplaces is still arduous, slow, and often physically dangerous. In these conditions, it is frequently more efficient or profitable for local residents to trade across the borderline than to negotiate with traders from other parts of their respective countries.

Yet the effect of the political borderline on local Hmong livelihoods cannot be ignored. In subtle ways, not only are local inhabitants negotiating this borderline using a variety of “border strategies” (Diana 2013), but state directives are also having direct and indirect effects on local household decision making. Various state policies and programs in both countries that relate to the borderline itself and to other regulatory domains have created new tensions, opportunities, and negotiations for local Hmong livelihoods.

3 BORDERLAND LIVELIHOODS

Everyday Decisions and Agrarian Change

SINCE ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION AND THE SUBSEQUENT DEMISE of collective farming in the 1980s, China and Vietnam's centralized states have turned toward agricultural commodification and, among other priorities, frontier development. Consequently, the agricultural sectors of southern Yunnan and northern Vietnam have been undergoing sweeping transformations. Upland farmers are increasingly exposed to the market economy and modernization, necessitating important shifts in agricultural production. This pressure to be more market oriented is being fueled by the rapid growth of cash cropping and agri-food businesses (Potter and Majid Cooke 2004).

Across these uplands, new hierarchies and inequalities are arising as new ways of accessing land, labor, financial capital, and technology are found. Some residents benefit from new opportunities, while others must face the negative consequences of emerging (or more evident) class divisions, diminishing rights, reduced resource access, and increasing cultural conflicts (cf. Moore 1998). The tendency of this agrarian transition toward individualized consequences also means that divergent outcomes are beginning to occur within villages, between neighbors, and inside households,¹ in some cases shifting the scale of the building blocks of the Hmong economy from the household to the individual.

It is well known that agricultural intensification has been a major contributor to the agrarian shift in China and Vietnam (Caouette and Turner 2009; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Wang et al. 2013). What is less well understood are the specifics of how these changes are occurring in upland rural areas, as in-depth local studies are still relatively rare (Sikor et al. 2011; Owens 2013). The implementation of high-yield grain varieties, alongside intensified cropping, a heavy dependence on irrigation in addition to rain, and an increasing reliance on industrial inputs such as fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides are all affecting local ways of farming and, more broadly, of making a living. Technological changes, state interventions, migrations,

and increasing market integration are in turn fueling the ongoing agrarian transition (cf. Rigg 1997).

Hundreds of thousands of minority farmers in the Sino-Vietnamese uplands are being introduced to increasingly open markets, but they are unevenly informed of central political decisions and are somewhat randomly exposed (depending on their particular cultural heritage and their degree of geographical isolation) to the less formal routes of new technology, diversified trade, communications advances, and societal changes.

HMONG UPLAND LIVELIHOOD ESSENTIALS

Throughout their history, Hmong uplanders have developed particular economies, political methods, and cosmologies that distinguish them from many of their neighbors as well as from the lowland Han and Kinh in the areas surrounding their highland habitat. In an acephalous society—that is, a society without political leaders or hierarchies—the kinship affinities among households, lineages, and clans are vital cementing elements that play into all significant interactions. For Hmong traders and travelers, the benefits of kinship ties persist over time and space, creating geographically expansive transborder networks that are fundamental expressions of social capital (Lee and Tapp 2010).

Lineage members prefer to live in close proximity to each other when feasible, as intralineage interaction occurs daily and is a key shaper of identity (Cooper 1998; fig. 3.1). Even married Hmong women retain support networks with their natal families (Symonds 2004). The household is the core economic, ritual, and social unit, and tends to work toward economic self-sufficiency as much as possible. As a rule, households of the same lineage will assist one another in activities such as crop preparation, harvesting, house building, and so on (Cooper 1984).

For decades, the bulk of Hmong agriculture in the uplands has consisted of paddy rice and maize, along with mountain (or dry) rice in more remote areas. In most communities, where household land is divided among sons upon marriage, self-sufficiency in rice and maize production is considered a reflection of wealth and industriousness (cf. Michaud 1997a; Turner 2012a).² This inheritance practice also means that Hmong women's customary entitlements to land usually hinge on their conjugal relationship status as wives or mothers, which can become tenuous after a divorce or a husband's death.³ Separated or widowed women may find it difficult to maintain land



FIG. 3.1. Hmong lineage hamlet in Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, 2007.
Source: Sarah Turner.

access. As Ly, a Hmong woman from Lào Cai Province in Vietnam, put it, “Hmong people here see the land as for the boy only, not for the girl.”

Other factors also have an effect on local Hmong livelihoods, such as proximity to kin, barter in kind and labor through non-monetized exchanges, bride wealth, ownership of farming implements, specific forms of wealth accumulation, sharing of knowledge and expertise, the cost of animal sacrifices and ritual feasts for weddings and funerals—the list goes on and on.⁴ Our focus here is on the agricultural sector, which for virtually all Hmong we have interviewed remains—and will probably remain for some time to come—the mainstay of their economies in these borderlands.

Except for those who have turned entirely to cash cropping—which so far has happened predominantly in China—Hmong in these borderlands tend to base their livelihoods on rice and maize agriculture, as their land access, soil, and topography dictate. Rice and maize constitute the staple foods of the household’s diet, complemented by cassava, other crops, livestock, and forest products, in a composite approach (Vuong Xuan Tinh 1997a, 1997b; Leisz et al. 2005; Huyin Huai et al. 2011). Table 3.1 depicts a typical annual

TABLE 3.1. Typical seasonal labor calendar for Hmong households with rice as their core crop, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam

Month	Activity
January	Prepare for Hmong New Year
February	Recover from New Year; prepare corn and rice fields
March	Prepare fields for corn and plant fields at end of month; prepare rice fields and sow nurseries of rice seedlings
April	Prepare rice fields; start transplanting rice
May	Transplant rice
June	Complete rice transplanting
July	Check cardamom fields; harvest hemp
August	Check cardamom fields; harvest corn; pick indigo
September	Harvest and dry cardamom; start to harvest rice
October	Harvest rice
November	Complete rice harvest; collect firewood; prepare clothes for New Year
December	Collect firewood; prepare clothes for New Year

Source: Sarah Turner

labor calendar for Hmong households in the borderlands where rice is the staple crop (in this example, in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam).

Dominant gender ideologies afford Hmong men higher social status and greater formal power than Hmong women and influence intrahousehold livelihood decision making and resource access. Men are more visible in the public sphere and its official, customary, and ritual institutions, while women are strongly tied to obligations of social reproduction within the home. Customary household divisions of labor also result in designated livelihood tasks for men and women, as well as a few tasks that are shared, such as rice planting and harvesting.

Women are generally responsible for all household activities, including food preparation and cooking, childcare, healthcare, cleaning, feeding animals, and collecting firewood. Women, often assisted by their children, also maintain their families' daily food supply through household gardens. Some Hmong women additionally play an important role as healers, and have a vast knowledge of medicinal plants. Women also spend substantial amounts of time producing customary textiles, sewing, and embroidering

the garments worn by their families (and, in some areas, also weaving cloth from the hemp they grow).

Men's key roles involve clearing and plowing agricultural fields, building and maintaining houses, hunting in the forest, collecting firewood, and managing water buffalo and other large livestock. Men also tend to be the main caretakers of valuable non-timber forest product crops such as cardamom. In the customary gender-ascribed labor roles of the Hmong seasonal livelihood calendar, men are usually engaged in the more physically demanding but shorter-term activities, while women's workloads tend to be ongoing and more time-consuming, notably including most of the day-to-day labor for subsistence (see also M. Lee 2005).

In most of the borderlands, due to elevations in excess of eight hundred meters and the resulting cooler temperatures, households have only one annual crop harvest. In March and April, households prepare and plant their maize fields, while those with rice paddy fields plow and give fields a boost with organic and/or chemical fertilizers. Water buffalo or cattle provide plowing power, since the slopes are often too steep, and hence the terraces too narrow, for mechanical plows to be easily moved and repositioned. All hands are on deck for the transplanting of rice seedlings in May and again when harvesting occurs, from the end of September through October, after the maize harvest in August. To diversify and maximize yields, Hmong households constantly experiment with different combinations of rice seeds from household to household and year to year. In particular, Hmong women and elders play a major role in the safeguarding and exchange of traditional varieties within the community, largely because of their knowledge of the health properties of specific local rice types. Traditional "Hmong rice," both plain and sticky, is still strongly preferred over industrial varieties for its taste and for use in customary events. Yet farmers recognize the benefits of hybrid varieties and selectively take advantage of these, balancing the productive capacity of their farmland with cultural preferences. If a household finds itself lacking sufficient rice-growing land, members often pool resources with kin. If this is not possible, they may purchase additional rice fields, although more commonly these are rented by a diverse range of procedures, including labor reciprocity, barter, and cash-based arrangements.

Nonterraced dry rice—that is, rain-fed rice—has been an important upland crop from time immemorial, as this is the simplest way to grow rice in the swiddening tradition (Schmidt-Vogt et al. 2009). Although dry-rice practices have subsided with sedentarization and the adoption of more



FIG. 3.2. Steep and rocky limestone terrain in Mèo Vạc District, Hà Giang Province, Vietnam, also found in parts of adjacent Maguan County, China, 2010. Source: Sarah Turner.

productive wet-rice cultivation in fertile valleys, it remains prevalent in large portions of the borderlands due to slope and soil conditions.

Terrain matters. Among Hmong households in steep and rocky limestone terrain such as Hà Giang Province, Vietnam (fig. 3.2), and adjacent Maguan County around Lao Ka in Yunnan, maize forms the core of the daily diet (see also Tapp 1989b, 45–46). This crop, imported from the Americas by the Spaniards in the sixteenth century (Meng et al. 2006), has proven extremely handy all over the Massif, as it can be planted on steep slopes on which wet rice cultivation would be impossible, or in small pockets of soil peppered throughout large limestone formations; here too, there is only one harvest per year. Beans combine well with maize, twisting up and supporting maize stems. Maize is consumed by humans and livestock, especially pigs, and is the main ingredient in alcohol production. Nevertheless, rice is now preferred for human consumption where it can be grown, while maize acts as food insurance in case of shortages or other crop failures (cf. Dang Thanh Ha et al. 2004). As with rice, households have planted several varieties of maize for generations, collecting seeds yearly and storing them in house granaries. Seeds are shared, bartered, or traded among extended family, friends, and

neighbors. In more recent times,⁵ hybrid seeds are increasingly obtained from private seed suppliers or lenders and the government. Yet in Hà Giang Province, much as with the hybrid rice in Lào Cai, the Hmong farmers we interviewed recognize the risks involved with these new hybrid maize seeds, namely the greater inputs required and the poor storage traits of the harvested maize cobs (cf. NIRAS 2007). There is a continued local preference for the taste of traditional varieties, and farmers state that they avoid eating hybrid maize if they can, preferring to use it for pig feed or as a basis for alcohol instead.

In addition to growing the customary key rice and maize, Hmong farmers also grow buckwheat and millet in some regions. They also maintain swidden fields for tubers, cassava, and other root vegetables. These days, little pioneer swiddening takes place; instead, farmers practice rotational swidden farming with fallow periods, or rotate dry field cultivation around fixed settlements.⁶ While in principle, this rotation does not have the same deep impact on land and topsoil as does clearing land for permanent paddy fields, for decades both Chinese and Vietnamese officials have frowned upon any form of swiddening—“slash-and-burn,” as they prefer to call it—and have blamed this age-old practice for much of the deforestation in the highlands (De Koninck 1999).⁷ Overall, the most common farming approach for Hmong households can be described as a composite swiddening agro-ecosystem that integrates permanent maize or wet rice fields and rotates swidden plots into a single-household resource system, along with gardens and the use of regenerating forest areas (Tran Duc Vien et al. 2006).

Each Hmong household keeps a small garden in the immediate vicinity of the house that is usually overseen by women. This is not so much for trade as to provide cooking ingredients such as mustard greens, string beans, taro, pumpkins, cucumber, ginger, and chili peppers, while some households also have medicinal gardens (Huyin Huai et al. 2011). Hemp and indigo, which are customarily used for making cloth, are also grown in many areas, and the women are in charge of clothing fabrication for their families. In Yunnan, however, the state has restricted hemp production in the borderlands because of its alleged association with narcotics, which is much debated by scientists.

For any rural Hmong household in these borderlands, livestock comprise a crucial asset. Hmong raise the monarchs of the highlands, water buffalo, for the prestige they confer to their owners, for their practical value (that is, for plowing fields and for reproduction), and for their ritual worth as indispensable sacrificial animals at important events such as funerals.⁸ Households that are considered well-off will generally own two or three water buffalo,

but this varies greatly depending on kin-sharing agreements, location, and the maturity of the household.⁹ In maize-growing areas where less plowing is necessary, cattle often play the same role, serving as capital, monetary insurance, and key symbols of social status and wealth. Both water buffalo and cattle can be traded, though they are considered “big ticket items.” In the dryer parts of Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures, Yunnan, households sometimes own cattle or donkeys rather than water buffalo, and use mechanized farm equipment on flatter lands.

Next in popularity after water buffalo and cattle are “wild” or black pigs. Here again, as in many other societies in continental and archipelagic highland Asia, pork is much appreciated and subject to trade. Sacrificing and sharing one or more pigs is important to festive moments such as Hmong New Year and wedding feasts. Live pigs have also long been exchanged as payment, for instance as part of the bride wealth, when a groom’s family must offer valuables so that the bride’s family will let go of one of their own. An average Hmong household usually keeps at least two or three pigs, which are cared for by the women. Interestingly, households involved in the production of alcohol automatically raise more pigs, as the animals (quite conveniently) can be fed with the nutritious by-product of alcohol production that is left over after the fermentation and distillation process is complete.

Short, sturdy horses and mules, made famous by their perpetual presence on the high caravan trails, have long been used as pack animals and for plowing. Historically they were seen everywhere on mountain trails and paths and at marketplaces (Clarence-Smith 2004). Sadly, their time has nearly passed, and they have now largely been replaced by the ubiquitous motorcycle.

Chickens, ducks, and goats are used for consumption and payment as much as for rituals—chickens for minor household-level and shamanistic rituals, and goats for the divination power of their horns (Lemoine 1972; Lee and Tapp 2010). When cash or basic goods are urgently needed, these small livestock are assets that can be bartered or sold to locals or at the marketplace. Hmong living near streams also try their hand at fishing, and although hunting and trapping are now restricted by state regulation, birds, monkeys, insects, and other forest animals can still be important food sources in remote areas, in the vicinity of forests (Vuong Duy Quang 2004).

Both Hmong men and women can be shamans, as long as they have had the specific calling to do so. Their roles are gendered, with male shamans tending to undertake the most “important” rituals. Women are often important herbal healers—men far less commonly so—and maintain garden plots specifically to supply the necessary ingredients.¹⁰

In the truly subsistence lifestyles of the past, one Hmong man was assumed to be as good as the next for just about any male chore of daily life; likewise for women. For men, occupational specialization tended to be limited to expert blacksmithing (of muskets, for instance), jewelry making, and services such as wedding intermediaries (Lemoine 1972). Market integration and expanded communication channels are changing this. Nowadays, increasing numbers of Hmong household members devote a significant proportion of their time, energy, and resources to specific activities and trades, such as cash cropping, alcohol production, or producing textiles.

Other possible economic activities—for instance, shop keeping, money lending, unskilled wage work, tourist hosting, and civil service—have remained marginal until very recently. There is no denying that this is changing, especially north of the border, where transformations are occurring at a faster pace than in upland Vietnam. But for the time being, agriculture, either subsistence or cash-oriented, remains the backbone of the economy for the vast majority of Hmong in the borderlands, and crucially, the most active sector of change.

FROM AGRICULTURAL EXTENSIFICATION TO INTENSIFICATION IN THE BORDERLANDS

Hmong livelihoods in southern Yunnan and upland northern Vietnam have long been contingent upon regional and international political events. When the collectivization process began in the 1950s, only a small residential land plot and family garden could officially be privately operated; all remaining lands were managed by collectives or run as state enterprises (Harrell 1995; Yin Shaoting 2001; Corlin 2004). However, as officials on both sides of the border now readily admit, collectivization could not be as consistently or efficiently implemented on the states' extreme peripheries as it was in the heavily populated and administratively integrated lowlands of China and in Vietnam's Red River Delta. The "friction of terrain" (Scott 2009) played its role and demanded enormous investments from the central state that, it was calculated, were not commensurate with the upland populations involved or the modest potential benefit for the national cause. Yunnan, it was also assessed, did not harbor nationalist movements for lack of ethnic unity; the gaze of the Chinese state was instead directed at potentially problematic areas such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet (MacKerras 2003; McCarthy 2009). In Vietnam, the relative failure of the collectivization of production in the highlands was also partly due to the persistence of cultural prejudice,

superstition, and fear among lowlanders. Few Kinh were willing to settle among the highland “barbarians” to oversee collectives, local administration, border security, and education (Corlin 2004). Numerous collectivization and modernization projects were launched and abandoned, leaving upland minorities more or less free to operate as before, carrying out barter and small-scale trade among themselves and with local and regional markets.

Hmong elders in Vietnam recall that during the collectivization period they simply continued with their traditional farming practices. Swidden agriculture produced tubers and several varieties of dry rice and maize, while precious woods such as *Fokienia hodginsii*, the Fujian cypress prized for coffins, and especially fossilized *Fokienia ravenescragensis* were important sources of cash (Tordoff et al. 1999; ANOM, GGI 66105 Ba-Xat 1898). Hmong elders recall trading forest products and vegetables; Lia, an elderly woman, remembers her parents selling timber to Kinh traders, while in the 1970s, Mai Yia’s parents would travel several times a week on horse or by foot to Lào Cai City from Sa Pa District to sell chilies and root crops.

Opium remained an important element of the Hmong economy throughout the collective period. In Vietnam, the Communist state maintained the state monopolies first implemented by the French for fundamental goods such as salt, alcohol, and opium. The trade of the latter was vital to the war effort to conquer the South and unify the country. Elders recall high valleys on the borderlands covered with poppies in January and February, and the harvested raw resin being taken to state shops in each town around the uplands. In these shops, the resin was exchanged for coupons used in turn to purchase salt, industrial goods, rice, and meat from the production collectives.¹¹

When the short Sino-Vietnamese war broke out on the frontier in 1979 and city dwellers on both sides fled, local livelihoods were disrupted by the widespread damage to marketplaces, state shops, distribution centers, and household assets and infrastructure, including homes, crops, livestock, bridges, roads, electricity, schools, and hospitals (Donnell 1980). This war period was marked by sudden and severe poverty and hunger for many. Cham, an elderly Hmong lady in Vietnam, recalled that during the conflict, “Sometimes we did not have any rice to eat for three or four days, so we had to go to the forest to get wild tubers” as well as mushrooms and insects. Lam, another Hmong elder, said of the border war: “People were very hungry, and my family and I went hiding in the forest because there were a lot of soldiers with guns in Sa Pa. Everybody was very scared. We stayed in the forest a long time and ate only leaves, mice, and frogs” (cited in Tugault-Lafleur 2007, 87).

The situation was not noticeably better across the border in Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures, where borderland infrastructure was heavily damaged by Vietnamese bombing; inhabitants of Hekou, Maguan, and Qiaotou all had to temporarily move to more remote towns.

With the beginning of decollectivization in the early 1980s, farmers in Yunnan were once again officially allocated land for household cultivation. While this land initially tended to be used for subsistence agriculture, the government quickly began to encourage farmers to switch to cash crops (Xu Jianchu, Lebel, and Sturgeon 2009), and the launch of the Go West Campaign in the late 1990s energized this shift.

Although development projects were often poorly thought through, and state forest and land-use allocation policies routinely discriminated against ethnic minorities, Hmong nevertheless report that changing market conditions eventually provided new livelihood opportunities—albeit not always superior to their previous options (Xu Jianchu and Ribot 2004; Tran Duc Vien et al. 2006). Property reforms, the reclassification of forests, and recent reforestation initiatives have all altered the access that Hmong households have to various livelihood opportunities.

On both sides of the border, the state gospel from the end of the 1980s onward was rapid modernization.¹² From the official reopening of local border crossings in 1988 until the late 1990s, both governments focused on incorporating “minority nationalities” into their national economies by sedentarizing their land use practices, eliminating poppy fields no longer desirable in view of new international alliances, banning tree felling, expanding rice cultivation, and attracting external development initiatives. Then, from the late 1990s on, the focus switched to encouraging hybrid rice intensification, dealing with inflation, and completing infrastructure plans for dams, rural electrification, roads, and permanent marketplaces.

Vietnam’s economic renovation of the mid-1980s and a range of subsequent government policies and programs have directly affected Hmong households’ access to resources. Elderly Hmong in Lào Cai, Vietnam, overwhelmingly agree that the most significant long-term change to their livelihoods that they have experienced was the ban on opium production in the early 1990s. Bang, a Kinh informant, explained that before Resolution 06/CP prohibited its production in 1993, “You could go to the villages and buy [opium], which some Kinh did, or it was available in the Sa Pa marketplace in the weekends.” Lue, a Hmong farmer born in 1954, declared that before the ban, he could harvest “two big bowls of opium each crop, with one crop a year. That’s about two kilos in one year . . . and one kilo equaled

VND300,000, but it's VND300,000 back then—soooo much money! It's not like right now.” Trying to estimate what that would be worth now, Lue noted that a buffalo now costing VND14 million was, in the 1980s “just VND125,000 for a big one.” He therefore suggests that his annual opium crop income would have bought him four mature buffalo. Lue explained, “When I grew opium, I gained a lot of money, and with the money I bought silver and we made silver necklaces for the girls and women. Every day you had money.”¹³ After the ban, all of this income disappeared without an apparent way to replace it. Lucky households that had been in a position to take advantage of the good opium decades were able to turn that wealth into land or silver, although, considering the collectivization of land, the latter seems to have been a more enduring investment.

Then things got worse. In 1993, the sale of forest timber was also banned and all forms of swiddening restricted, in large part due to the pressure of international environmental politics (De Koninck 1999; Hoang Cam 2009; Mertz et al. 2009). The centuries-old trade in *Fokienia hodginsii* (called *pơ mu* by the Vietnamese) was halted, as the tree was now considered an endangered species. Lue recalled how the bans on opium and timber began almost simultaneously, commenting, “Twenty years ago, they told everybody to stop making opium. So the people kept going to the mountain to get wood for the Vietnamese people, for building houses, the *pơ mu*. . . . The Vietnamese people [officials] came and saw we had lost a lot of mountain, and they took a lot of people to jail. . . . The Hmong then lost their jobs clearing the wood to sell in the market.” While the harvesting of Fujian cypress for domestic use (houses and coffins) is tolerated by the authorities, Hmong and other minorities can no longer sell it to Tai-speaking, Vietnamese, or Chinese customers—at least not officially. A residual trade persists, but the income that Hmong households derive from it in no way compares with that of the previous era, while the risks of being caught and fined have risen.

Poor Hmong households, endogenously defined as those who cannot grow or purchase enough rice to support the household through the year, are more willing than others to take on the risk of trading timber illegally with Kinh buyers. Lim, an elderly Hmong woman, explained how one of her sons occasionally cuts forest trees for selling timber, but only “very far away in the forest”—in this case deep in a national park. Although Lim worries that the authorities might arrest her son, she understands, like many other Hmong, that there exist few alternatives to make ends meet when cash income is necessary.

Hmong farmers in Lào Cai and Lai Châu Provinces decided that the only

response to these new restrictions was to rework their livelihood strategies by clearing more land for rice paddies. Lue explained, “When the government stopped the opium, the opium farmers couldn’t make money any more. The whole village, everyone came together, to talk . . . then we went to the mountain to clear it to make rice paddies for growing rice and to plant sweet corn.”

On the Chinese side, Yunnan officials banned hemp growing in the borderlands in 2000, ostensibly to discourage drug cartels and drug dependency among the local population. This regulation was enforced despite the fact that hemp used by highlanders for textiles is harvested before flowering and contains much less tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) than the more feared varieties of *cannabis sativa*, thus calling into question the wisdom of this policy.¹⁴ Whatever the underlying logic of this regulation, the consequences have profoundly affected minorities. Among other things, being unable to produce their own clothes has meant that Hmong in Yunnan have also abandoned growing indigo and instead buy industrial fabrics on the market, an additional economic cost—all of which comes with a cultural price tag, too.

While the overall surface area devoted to swiddening is officially declining on both sides of the border, village authorities are acutely aware of local hardships and often simply look the other way instead of policing the forest on their commune’s territory. Yet swiddening has become more and more difficult as populations grow and available land suitable for swiddens shrinks, inevitably depriving highlanders of a much-needed complement to fixed agriculture, especially in years of reduced harvests (Guo Huijun, Xia Yongmei, and Padoch 2007; Schmidt-Vogt et al. 2009).

As was the case in other Asian countries facing similar issues, most prominently Thailand (Michaud 1994), both the Chinese and Vietnamese states attempted to alleviate the adverse effects of the major regulation changes of the 1990s. These attempts chiefly involved offering new unskilled employment opportunities to highlanders willing to leave agriculture altogether, and proposing replacement cash crops to others. But horror stories abound telling how poorly these replacements were conceived and how untidily many of the plans were implemented. One such example of a well-meaning but badly planned project in upland Vietnam was plum tree cultivation (*Prunus salicina*). In the late 1990s, an overseas nongovernmental organization, with the support of the local government, sought to diversify local families’ income-generation options by supplying Hmong households in the Sa Pả, Tả Phìn, and Trung Chải Communes of Sa Pa District with plum seedlings. At the time of initial distribution, competition was low and plum

prices were high; but as the trees began to fruit a few years later, local markets were flooded with plums. No infrastructure had been set up to handle and process the fruit, and Sa Pa growers faced strong competition both among themselves and from growers in Bắc Hà District to the east, where plum cultivation had already been established in the early 1980s through an earlier French initiative. As Sa Pa growers faced a shrinking market and as prices fell, most decided that plum production did not warrant their time or labor and abandoned commercial production. Similarly, in Hà Giang Province, tea plantations were introduced by government officials in the 1970s but have become increasingly unpopular as government support has ended and economic returns have dropped (Novellino 2000).

In parallel with such development schemes, the introduction of hybrid seed varieties of rice and maize has directly affected Hmong households on both sides of the border—indeed, in the whole of Asia. In many cases in Vietnam, these new seeds are being adopted because the gendered, generational division of land among married sons is placing intense pressure on the limited land that can support irrigated paddy cultivation of traditional varieties. This pressure is being exacerbated by state-led programs for sedentarization, forest protection, and land allocation, as well as land competition due to state or private large-scale agricultural projects (World Bank 2009).

INTENSIFICATION OF RICE PRODUCTION IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

Hybrid seeds introduced across the Sino-Vietnamese uplands have effected tremendous changes in agricultural production. These seeds are selectively bred by crossing two genetically distinct parents, aiming for “heterosis or hybrid vigour” (Husain, Hossain, and Janaiah 2001, 5).¹⁵ One of the drawbacks of such seeds, however, is that they lose capacity with each replanting, meaning that farmers must buy new seeds every planting season (Kloppenburg 2004; Pray and Naseem 2007). In the mid-1970s, in the midst of the Green Revolution, hybrid rice seeds gained popularity across Asia, including in China, where the state supplied inputs and managed production in collectives, so quality and cost were of little concern. After several years of great popularity, hybrid rice seed adoption has been on the decline in China, although it is still widespread (Dalrymple 1986; Husain, Hossain, and Janaiah 2001).¹⁶ Further afield in India and Bangladesh, trials of hybrids began in the early 1990s, but there too farmers have had mixed reactions (Chengappa, Janaiah, and Gowda 2003; Hossain, Janaiah, and Husain 2003). Around the same time, hybrid rice seeds began to be distributed in the north of Vietnam, and by 2008 cultivation had spread to thirty-one

northern provinces thanks to robust support from the government (Dang Quy Nhan et al. 2008). The state has promulgated key policies concerning rice exports, brand recognition, and rice farmers' profit margins, while working to develop rice storage systems and improve communication between farmers and state enterprises—all the while aiming for stable incomes for rural producers (IRIN, April 14, 2008; United Nations Vietnam 2008; Vietnam News, March 5, 2009). From the perspective of local upland Hmong farmers, however, fluctuations in national rice production or global demand have little bearing on day-to-day life when households are preoccupied with basic food security (FAO 2004a, 2004b; Gill et al. 2003).

The current Vietnamese government subsidy program for seeds and other inputs for hybrid rice and maize was launched in the uplands in 1999. In Lào Cai Province, hybrid seeds were initially provided free to raise interest among farmers; after 2001, the provincial government scaled that back to a 30 percent subsidy on stocks sold to specific communes, which in turn oversee the distribution to farmers. The success of these programs is easily quantifiable; in Mường Khương District, the program has succeeded in increasing rice and maize yields by 30 to 50 percent (DFID and LCPC 2003, 13).¹⁷ Subsidized fertilizer is also available through the government's program; however, once the government has deemed local production levels "sustainable," it begins to phase out fertilizer subsidies, thus slowly but steadily disengaging from financially supporting the conversion of upland farming practices and hence turning peasants into entrepreneurs (Hoang Xuan Thanh and Keefjes 2005).

Before the introduction of hybrids, households without sufficient rice production for the year would survive by other means, such as eating potatoes, maize, and cassava. Hmong householders consider this a temporary strategy only for emergencies, as few people are willing to substitute their preferred staple of rice with other foods (cf. Castella and Erout 2002). Since hybrids were launched, the consumption of these less-preferred substitutes has become less frequent, while official sources note that hybrid seeds have enabled 60 percent of the province's rice demand to be met (Lào Cai Government 2012).

Hmong farmers acknowledge that hybrids can be a positive addition to livelihoods. However, many insist that the customary, lower-yield landrace rice varieties have far superior taste. Hmong householders express apprehension about developing an overdependence on government-distributed seeds. While households with diminishing landholdings are increasingly replacing what they call traditional "Hmong rice" varieties with higher-yield hybrids,

even these families continue to grow up to eight traditional varieties, especially sticky rice, because of their central role in Hmong taste preferences, customs, beliefs, health practices, and social relations. Because traditional rice seeds have a wider seasonal window of opportunity for planting than hybrids, human and draft-animal labor, as well as other duties, can be pooled among several households. Hmong farmers also note that the harvested stalks of traditional rice can be fed to water buffalo as they plow the steep terraces, but hybrid stalks are too tough. Farmers who rely on hybrid rice must therefore expend more money and time seeking other feed sources for their buffalo, and often travel long distances to find suitable grass, as opposed to farmers with more traditional stalks, who can simply use this local agricultural byproduct.

In all of our interviews, upland Hmong residents have insisted that their traditional rice tastes superior to “Chinese rice,” the term locals now use to refer to hybrid varieties, as most of the seeds available in marketplaces and supplied via Vietnam’s state distribution centers are imported from China. Farmers explain that, ideally, they would limit their production to traditional Hmong varieties only, but they are also aware that this desire must be balanced with food security needs, rice terrace size, and the number of offspring among whom household land will be divided. Generational land-parcel division is a dynamic factor in Hmong households’ negotiations of the pros and cons of adopting hybrid seeds. Yet, ultimately, it appears that to switch entirely to hybrid seeds one must have no options left; only when a household’s traditional rice field capacity is no longer sufficient for subsistence needs do Hmong farmers decide to make a wholesale switch to “Chinese rice.”

Switching to hybrids is a last recourse that comes with additional costs.¹⁸ Unlike traditional seeds, a portion of which are put aside from one year’s harvest for planting the next, hybrid seeds need to be purchased for each planting and require additional investments in fertilizers and pesticides as well as more stable irrigation, which often adds infrastructure costs. Traditional rice varieties require less fertilizer, which tends to be a mix of dried buffalo dung and ash that farmers can easily gather free of charge from kitchen fires. Hybrid seeds that have not been bred locally, and thus have not developed natural defenses against local pests, have been found to host a broader range of diseases than traditional rice varieties, so pesticides make up another monetary constraint. Even with government subsidies for chemical inputs, this makes hybrid rice five to ten times more expensive to grow than traditional rice (DFID and LCPC 2003, 21). While additional overhead costs should theoretically be offset by augmented yields, farmers,

many of whom do not have the initial capital on hand, nor wish to enter the debt cycle to get it, are often discouraged by the initial financial outlays.

As if all this was not already enough of a headache, hybrid seed prices are also rising. In 2005–6, one kilogram of rice seed cost VND12,000 (US\$.70) at government supply centers; by 2009 the price had risen to VND28,000 to 30,000 per kilogram (US\$1.50). The free market options follow the same trend: in 2005–6, small-scale shopkeepers and traders operating at marketplaces in Si Ma Cai, Mường Khương, and Bát Xát Districts of Lào Cai Province, who privately imported seed across the border from China without subsidies, demanded around VND40,000/kg (US\$2.40). In 2010, we found that the price of Chinese rice seeds in roadside markets between Hà Giang Town and Mèo Vạc (Hà Giang Province), brought across the border from Babuxiang, Wenshan Prefecture, at the Nghĩa Thuận crossing, was reaching VND90,000 per kilogram (US\$4.60).

Nonetheless, despite the higher prices on the free market, Hmong farmers who rely on hybrid seeds often prefer purchasing from private traders rather than subsidized bureaus. This counterintuitive choice is largely a result of the unreliability and poor timing of government-distributed subsidized seeds. When hybrid seeds arrive at official distribution centers later than farmers would like, this forces them to push the planting season back by a few weeks, increasing anxiety about growing and harvest timing. District authorities also often estimate a commune's required quantity of rice seed based on outdated or inaccurate landholding data. Since the amount of land actually farmed in a commune is frequently greater than what is listed on official records, supplies are often insufficient to meet demand, and farmers who are left out are forced to find alternative supplies at the last minute. One Hmong interviewee, May, explained, "This makes people very angry, and they either have to wait for a new supply—because we will have paid for it in advance to the government—or buy the seeds themselves, which is more expensive." Indeed, as May suggests, government seed programs require households to register their order early in the year, often before they even know how many fields they will cultivate, turning their order into a guessing game. Given shifting land and workforce availability, food security decisions and strategies are routinely changed not only from year to year but often on short notice. As for timing, it is government delivery schedules—not local needs—that determine when the seeds arrive for distribution, causing all households in a given area to plant their rice simultaneously. This compromises the customary community exchanges of human and draft animal labor and incurs the cost of employing extra wage labor.

Local state officials have ignored requests to supply seed varieties that villagers consider more suited to the local ecology. The government also does not seem to grasp that some Hmong households farming at higher elevations want to obtain and plant rice seed relatively early to allow crops more time to mature. Relying upon indigenous knowledge of seasonal planting calendars and local weather patterns to determine ideal sowing times, these households see little to gain from subsidized rice seed arriving all at once and late. Those who are able turn to the free market for their needs, while others are left to accept the consequences of their financial disadvantage. In short, in a grand strategy for agricultural development deployed on a national scale, solutions also tend to be set at the national scale; little room is left for particularities or special requests, no matter how much sense they make (figs. 3.3 and 3.4).¹⁹

Nonetheless, Hmong analyses of their current situation still drive them to use hybrid rice for at least part of their crop. Farmers are aware that their increasing reliance on the government can frequently leave them more vulnerable to short-term food insecurity, and this reliance does little to alleviate long-term concerns about issues such as land availability, climate fluctuations, or buffalo feedstock. It appears that Hmong actors go along with the current course of events in selective and opportunistic ways that draw upon historically and spatially rooted strategies for enhancing livelihood adaptability and flexibility.

Households relying on government distribution use a wide variety of cultivation strategies and a range of social networks to make better livelihood decisions and to protect against the risks associated with the government hybrid rice program. For example, social networks constructed on the basis of clanic exogamy—founded on women who have moved to their husbands' families in new villages—open the door to knowledge being shared between relatives in different upland areas. This augments a household's knowledge with a battery of shared information exchanged in person or through cell phones, and an improved understanding of hybrid seed distribution and availability. Households are in a position to act on this information by adjusting annual planting calendars or by borrowing or renting extra seeds, land, buffalo, or labor. Efficient lineage and household coping mechanisms help Hmong farmers bridge the gap between successful seed purchasing, crop diversification, and cultivation techniques and their livelihood needs, cultural priorities, and unique agro-ecological circumstances.

On another front, the state hybrid seed program has required the increasing monetization of highland agricultural livelihoods, which until recently



FIG. 3.3. Hmong farmers collecting state-subsidized fertilizer from an official distribution point in Bắc Hà District, Vietnam, 2009. Source: Sarah Turner.



FIG. 3.4. Hmong farmers shopping at Cán Cấu market for rice seeds that are more appropriate than government-distributed seeds. Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, 2012. Source: Sarah Turner.

were in large part not reliant on currency. Since households involved in the hybrid seed approach must purchase supplies every year, cash income has become an essential livelihood component for farmers. This need for cash is now contributing to farmers becoming more fully and more permanently integrated into the market economy (Plattner 1989; Nevins and Peluso 2008), and is encouraging farmers to take up or rely more on earnings from cardamom, textiles, and alcohol production.

One particular consequence of the need for cash has been an alteration of the gender power balance. In Hmong society, it is generally women who manage the household's cash (Lee and Tapp 2010). Yet now in some areas, such as Lào Cai Province, the gender-specific nature of cash-generating activities—namely, the handicraft textile trade (and in Sa Pa District, also tourist trekking)—means that women are not only income managers, but are being repositioned as key *earners*. This is creating complex intrahousehold and intergenerational negotiations, cooperation, and conflicts over gender roles and relations.²⁰ By design or by chance, state agrarian interventions have the capacity to affect household-level negotiations and to challenge, reconfigure, or even reinforce gendered societal contracts (Bonnin and Turner 2014a).

An increased need for cash, however, is no coincidence. Market expansion in these uplands is a direct state policy (SRV 2003), and its inherent logic entails predictable tuning and alterations to local economies. But Hmong farmers (as well as their neighbors, such as Yao farmers) are ambivalent about the uncritical adoption of these routes to “development and prosperity” (Alther et al. 2002). At this crucial social interface, Hmong rice cultivators alternately adjust, comply with, improve upon, and quietly contest the government's efforts to control upland farming and seed distribution. Their coping mechanisms tie in directly with their “everyday politics” (Kerkvliet 2009, 232). Some quietly challenge the Vietnamese state by continuing to keep production adjusted to their subsistence needs rather than attempting to hit the market with sizeable surpluses. They persist in growing traditional rice when household land availability allows, thus not buying into the national dictum of economic modernization and profitability as fully as the state would like them to. Others are adopting the new seeds but retain a “plan B” with an eye to the local government's inability to provide seed that can be planted on time and that will produce a secure, significant yield. Farmers maintain a variety of contingency plans to avoid too much reliance on the state: maize, dry rice, and traditional wet rice crops still provide alternatives, along with tubers and whatever forest products farmers' local knowledge has

taught them can be used to survive. To date, farmers appear to have decided that the best, most resilient tactic in this situation is a composite approach to their livelihoods, adopting new practices and maintaining other practices that are firmly rooted in local cultural knowledge. This contrasts sharply with the situation north of the border.

CASH CROPPING IN SOUTHERN YUNNAN

Since the 1970s, farmers of a variety of ethnicities in the southeastern prefecture of Honghe in Yunnan have started to shift from semi-subsistence farming to cash cropping on a scale exceeding their subsistence needs, and much of what is happening in Honghe is also happening in neighboring prefectures. To a large degree, this transition has been driven by state policies and incentives. Wang et al. (2013, 194), in their study of mobilities and increasing cash cropping livelihoods among ethnic minorities in southeast Yunnan, put it bluntly, “In the mass-mobilized development paradigm in China, ‘development’ projects appear to be driven by the market. However, in reality, the interests of investors and capital are guaranteed by policy and state powers acting on behalf of and representing corporate and capital interests.”

Banana and rubber, as well as pineapple and mango, were the first large-scale cash crops to be introduced on the Yunnan side of the border during the collectivization period (Honghe Prefecture and Government 1994). After decollectivization in the 1980s, peasant households were allocated state-owned land with the right to cultivate it at will, which for many initially involved a return to earlier subsistence-scale agriculture. The Yunnan provincial government introduced tobacco cultivation programs in the early 1980s, but due to the remoteness of Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures, it was not until the late 1990s that cash cropping and plantations began to be encouraged among farmers there, and tobacco became a major crop in the borderland region (see also Foggin and Carrier 2009).

The adoption of cash crops by local minority farmers is not, however, merely the result of government encouragement. It is also heavily determined by distance from information sources and markets. For instance, Hmong farmers, along with Yi and Yao, tend to live in more remote upland areas. In the limited instances in which they have converted to cash crops, they have tended to do so in smaller numbers and far later than farmers in the prefectures’ lower areas, who are more often of Han, Dai, or Zhuang background (Champalle 2012). While the government has encouraged cash cropping via a range of subsidies, farmers here (as in Vietnam) have remained reluctant to convert if they cannot afford the initial investments without loans. A wealth

divide has therefore become increasingly visible within villages as those with greater financial means—quite possibly carried over from the golden age of opium cultivation—take up these new opportunities.

Since 2007, Hmong farmers in Honghe's uplands of Hekou and Mengzi Counties have also been encouraged to try their hand at the cash cropping of apples. Orchards are usually planted on undeveloped land close to Hmong villages, often on land formerly classified as either steeply sloped or bare—that is to say, land fallowed for the long term and/or depleted of top soil (Liu et al. 2008). To urge farmers to reforest undeveloped land with new apple trees rather than with other cash crops deemed less suitable for steep, mountainous land, the local government in Xibeile Township near Mengzi City donated half the cost of each tree sapling, a cost of ¥2 (US\$.30). The local government also offered free start-up fertilizer and plastic film to shelter young trees from pests (Champalle 2012).

Twenty kilometers northeast of Mengzi City, in the village of Xiangtang, Xibeile Township, Hmong farmer Wu, his wife, two children, and a nephew grow three cash crops: tobacco, apples, and potatoes. In addition to his land-use certificate holding of seven *mu* (1 *mu* = 666.66 m²), Wu's family has reclaimed eight *mu* of undeveloped land to grow tobacco, from which they earn a yearly income of approximately ¥10,000 (US\$1,500 in 2010). Wu also has two hundred immature apple trees, which have yet to produce fruit. He invests his own money in the potatoes he grows for the market, using no government subsidies, and he also raises a few pigs for sale. Wu's household's economy is now entirely converted to cash cropping, and notwithstanding customary reciprocity for a number of items linked to daily life and rituals, most transactions are now permanently monetized.

Wu's village of Xiangtang is composed of 382 households with 1,756 people, of whom just over 60 percent are Hmong. As one large state-defined "administrative village," Xiangtang is actually comprised of seven hamlets, or natural villages, with homogenous ethnicity characteristics and close-knit kinship links. In the past, farmers' semi-subsistence livelihoods here were based on maize and upland dry rice, but since around 2000, an increasing number have tried their hand at tobacco cultivation. Initially, sales were poor and villagers decided to stop cultivation, but they turned to the crop again in 2005 as demand increased. By 2011, tobacco was planted on 2,200 *mu* of "undeveloped" and household-allocated land around the village, with only maize taking up more space. A local subsidiary of the national tobacco monopoly buys all of the harvests, and each step of production, from managing the crops to drying the leaves, must meet the company's standards. To

help farmers in this regard, a local Hmong farmer who has been growing tobacco for a number of years was trained by the company to serve as an adviser, passing on cultivation skills and helping to prevent plant diseases and pests (Champalle 2012).

These examples are typical illustrations of how Hmong in Yunnan's borderlands are diversifying into cash crops. But these households also concurrently try to maintain other sources of income, confirming old peasant wisdom that there is safety in variety. For instance, eighty kilometers from the border and just east of the Red River lies Dongjiao Market. Here, as in numerous borderland marketplaces, Hmong traders sell medicinal products gathered from the forest. Lan collects wild herbs from around her house high in the nearby mountains and sells here year-round, earning approximately ¥10,000 (US\$1,500) a year, a considerable amount by local standards. Meanwhile, her grown-up children have moved into cash cropping: two of her sons have contracted chili pepper fields in Kaiyuan, approximately 120 kilometers to the northeast, while another son has shifted into wage labor as a truck driver transporting timber products. Another Hmong woman selling medicinal herbs, Shu, also grows cash crops of tangerines, as well as mulberry bushes for silkworm farming. Indeed, in 2006, the eleventh Five Year Plan of the central government promulgated a national East Mulberry Shifting West project (Dong Sang Xi Yi), with the aim of turning Yunnan into an "important natural silk production, processing, and export base in China" (YFAO 2007). In Shu's village in Pingbian County, close to the border, the local government is supporting a program that donates six *mu* for mulberry trees to farmer households.

For all of these Hmong farmers who have taken up cash crops, the increased need for capital for inputs has resulted in a range of livelihood strategies, including traveling long distances for seasonal off-farm work. Luo, an unmarried Hmong farmer, had been working at a tin ore mine since 2007 when interviewed in 2011. With a three-hour commute, Luo worked at the mine four to five hours a day carrying ore on his back, making just under ¥10,000 (US\$1,500) a year. He took a break from this wage work in the rainy season when he considered it too dangerous, and instead helped on his sister's family farm, where he lived. Despite his cash income, the costs of growing tobacco were deemed too high, and while his family had grown it previously, by 2011 they had stopped cultivation due to a lack of profits. Falling back on maize and upland dry rice remained the core of Luo's household on-farm livelihood (Champalle 2012).

Adding another layer of complexity to local Hmong livelihoods in Yun-

nan are relocation policies.²¹ Jiang, a Hmong farmer now living in Mayanhe Village, forty-five minutes away from Nanxi Town by motorbike, and fifteen kilometers from Hekou and the border, recalled how in 2002 nineteen Hmong families moved with government encouragement from their former village, located high in the mountains, to their present location right beside the river. For one thing, electricity was not available in their former location, and by settling near the river, farmers knew they would have easier access to markets. The local government of Nanxi subsidized the building materials, such as tiles, bricks, and stones, for the villagers' new houses, and Jiang noted, "Moving down here made our lives easier." Before 1995, his household had cultivated maize and paddy rice as subsistence food crops, as well as small amounts of pineapple. At that time, they also planted cedar trees (possibly Fujian cypress, though we could not verify this) and harvested medicinal herbs from mountain forests. In 1995, Jiang started cultivating bananas. These days he no longer cultivates rice or pineapples but grows grapefruit and cinnamon trees as cash crops in addition to bananas, of which he had an impressive six thousand plants when interviewed in 2011. Jiang noted that his access to information about new crops has increased since the Mayanhe community moved to lower lands, and that his social capital has improved as his networks have extended to other lowland villages close by. In 2010, to further expand his operations, Jiang took out a loan of ¥20,000 (US\$3,100) that he was able to pay back the following year, thanks to his banana profits—a significant feat. Jiang has also acquired new knowledge of appropriate fertilization and pesticide methods for banana, grapefruit, and cinnamon trees, and believes that his overall financial profits are likely to increase with future grapefruit and cinnamon harvests (Champalle 2012).

In this resettled village alone, farmers tend over twenty thousand banana trees, and only three households cultivate paddy rice; rice is simply bought on the market. Other cash crops that villagers are hoping for success with include cedar trees, grapefruit, and cinnamon. Maize is also grown, subsidized by the local government, while pigs and chickens are raised for food and trade. Although the village has relocated, the land is still too steep for mechanical ploughs, and water buffalo or donkeys are the preferred agricultural implements; water buffalo also used for ceremonial purposes, including ritual sacrifice.

Similar examples gathered in border counties demonstrate that the inclusion of Hmong farmers into the national market has increased steadily and has reached deeply into local economies in southeast Yunnan. Large-scale cash cropping is in full swing, with its usual consequences: heavy

monetization of the family economy, dislocation of households to follow economic opportunities, and complete dependence on the broader market. Only a residual amount of livelihoods remain focused on customary ways.

Several factors contribute to the disjuncture between Hmong in southern Yunnan and Hmong in northern Vietnam, many of whom are kin dwelling only kilometers apart on either side of the border. First, the penetration of Han into southeast Yunnan is numerically more significant and occurred far earlier than Kinh migration into the northern Vietnam uplands, which began only with the French occupation. Second, economic investments and industrialization are more aggressive on the Yunnan side. Third, the Chinese state's propaganda promoting modernization (which to a large degree means Hanization), boosted by ten years of Cultural Revolution bent on erasing the past among minorities, is much stronger and more persuasive than its counterpart in northern Vietnam.

SO WHAT NEXT?

Contrary to media reportage or romantic popular belief, Hmong households across the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands—or, for that matter, households from any of the upland societies in the region—have never been autarkic. Instead, for generations, they have been involved in small-scale barter and trade, when and where needed. In response to state decrees affecting their livelihoods, it is therefore not surprising that Hmong households have turned to a variety of new strategies to conserve or increase access to supplementary cash incomes and maintain resilience. This approach could be deemed “productive bricolage” and encompasses a variety of ways in which farmers integrate subsistence agriculture, cash cropping, production for barter/sale, and nonagricultural activities while in pursuit of cash income—all of which are balanced in varying ways across time, space, and borders (Batterbury 2001, 438). The trading activities of upland Hmong have grown progressively more complex since the mid-1980s. Since then, a number of political decisions and policy changes, combined with government development plans, rising world prices for certain products cultivated by Hmong, and increasing market access, have created new economic opportunities, new uncertainties, and certainly more intricate livelihood decisions.

4 LIVESTOCK TRANSACTIONS

Buffalo Traversing the Borderlands

FOR TENS OF THOUSANDS OF HMONG HOUSEHOLDS IN THE SINO-Vietnamese uplands that continue to depend on semi-subsistence livelihoods, water buffalo (*nyuj twm* in RPA) are an essential asset in more ways than one. To guarantee a supply of buffalo, borderland residents must carefully weigh the benefits and disadvantages of partaking in the various upland circuits through which these animals are exchanged and traded. Diverse social, cultural, and official institutions set the guidelines by which buffalo transactions are conducted, whether in the context of community-based or more impersonal marketplace trade (cf. Alexander 1992). In some trade contexts, certain approaches mediate vulnerabilities, while in others they add risk and complications.

Buffalo serve many functions within Hmong household economies and play important roles as sacrificial animals (for animist households), as evidence of wealth and prestige, and as markers of identity. These prized animals are traded and exchanged either within hamlets, locally via what are regarded as specialized “buffalo villages,” or in more impersonal buffalo marketplaces. Access to these complex networks for Hmong individuals and households can be extremely variable. Changing transportation methods, tightened border-crossing controls, concerns regarding livestock disease, and extreme weather events have resulted in new supply and demand flows, yet the critical place of buffalo in Hmong upland livelihoods appears remarkably stable.

THE PLACE OF BUFFALO IN HMONG UPLAND LIVELIHOODS

Water buffalo thrive in muddy, wet environments and are found throughout rural China south of about 36° north and east of 97° east (Hu Wenping 1998; Roth 2004; Berthouly 2008). More than half of Vietnam’s buffalo are found in the northern mountainous region, where ecological conditions are optimal for their growth (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001; Lào Cai DARD

2011), while the mechanization of agricultural production in the fertile lowlands has made them largely redundant there.

Throughout the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, however, buffalo populations are fragmented. Hmong farmers with rice terraces in Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures, Yunnan, sometimes own one or two buffalo, but the terrain and dry climate often mean that cattle and horses are the more common beasts of burden. In Vietnam, buffalo accounted for 79 percent of Lào Cai Province's total livestock population (of buffalo, cattle, and horses) in 2010, largely on the west side of the Red River (Lào Cai DARD 2011). To the east, buffalo are a less common part of a household's livelihood, especially in the border areas of Hà Giang Province, where the rocky karst terrain and higher altitudes make it difficult for them to effectively plow fields. Buffalo are still found in Hà Giang Province, but tend to be in lower-lying areas populated by Tai-speaking Tày and Nùng. In Lai Châu Province, as in Lào Cai Province, buffalo form a core part of Hmong livelihoods. A thriving cross-border trade in these livestock, dating from at least colonial days, remains active across these mountainous ranges.

THE MAGIC ENGINE OF THE FAMILY

Water buffalo have contributed significantly to human livelihoods and food security. For over five thousand years, populations in Asia have depended upon them for draft labor in farm production as well as for hauling heavy items (Berthouly 2008). Buffalo are unique as multidimensional livelihood assets, acting as sources or facilitators of physical, natural, financial, social, and cultural capital (Chantalakhana 2001; Holm 2003; Iqbal et al. 2009). On both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border where ecological conditions favor terraced farming, buffalo are vital for the steepest terraces, as mechanized plows are ill-suited to the vertical, narrow plots (figs. 4.1 and 4.2; cf. Kunstadter and Kunstadter 1983). Even in less steep areas, buffalo are often more cost-effective than small tractors because they save farmers money on fuel and boast low maintenance costs and high resale value (Pryor 1995; Iqbal et al. 2009). Buffalo bring added benefits by consuming the otherwise unusable byproducts of farm production, such as rice stalks, while their dung can be used as cooking fuel or to improve soil fertility.¹

As important sources of fresh and dried meat, buffalo play a direct role in Hmong food security and nutrition.² Yet farmers in the borderlands have not raised buffalo for these specific purposes until recently. With the exception of ritual sacrifice, buffalo have usually been slaughtered for consumption only



FIG. 4.1. Water buffalo harrowing steep and narrow terraces in Sủ Pán Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, 2010. Source: Sarah Turner.



FIG. 4.2. Dry terraces worked by water buffalo, near Lau Kha, Maguan County, Yunnan Province, 2009. Source: Sarah Turner.

after they are no longer able to work due to age or injury (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001; Berthouly 2008). Buffalo also contribute in other ways. Their horns are used for knife handles, musical instruments, and divination tools, as well as for “cupping,” a traditional health practice for relieving pain and headaches (Hong Thao 1995). Buffalo hides are used as well.

Buffalo are a mobile, highly fungible source of wealth, savings, and insurance. Given their high monetary value, buffalo are ideal for increasing long-term household income security. For instance, in 2012, Hmong farmers in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, reported that the standard price for a dependable, adult working buffalo capable of draft labor was VND18–20 million (US\$865–960). Reports circulating at a Hmong wedding in 2012 of a prized buffalo selling for VND29 million (US\$1,380) resulted in admiration among attendees and prestige for the owner.

Buffalo typically begin their work training at about the age of two, and continue to supply important farm labor until they are about eleven years old, when their productivity begins to decline (Berthouly 2008). Buffalo can also appreciate in worth as they mature and breed; female buffalo are capable of bearing offspring until approximately eighteen years of age (Do Kim Tuyen and Nguyen Van Ly 2001).

The number and health of the buffalo in a Hmong household are important markers of prosperity. Hmong residents explained to us that a household is considered well-off if it possesses three or more buffalo, and poor if it has none (cf. MRDP 1999). Consequently, householders express reluctance to sell their buffalo if they can avoid it. As Doua, a Hmong man from Lào Cai Province, put it, “We really don’t like to sell them because they are so important to us, so we won’t do it unless we really need the cash.”

Water buffalo act as an important economic safety net among Hmong households. In times of need or crisis, buffalo can be sold to generate immediate cash or used as collateral for loans. The sale of a buffalo is a common way to pay off a large loan or cover hefty medical expenses when a family member falls seriously ill. Buffalo can also be used as payment for customary fines within Hmong society (for adultery, for instance), and sons donate buffalo for sacrifice at the funerals of their parents. In addition, selling a buffalo is a normal way for Hmong households to fund a wedding ceremony, as well as for the groom and his family to obtain the large sum of money and items that are exchanged as bride wealth and other wedding payments. In sum, the tangible livelihood contributions of water buffalo are extensive and diverse. As Yeng, a Hmong man from Lào Cai Province, eloquently stated, these beasts of burden are “the magic engine of the family.”

BUFFALO AND HMONG SPIRITUALITY, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

The high status of water buffalo is evident in their place in Hmong animist lifecycle ceremonies, especially funerals, in which the sacrificed animal is said to accompany and guide the deceased person on their journey to the underworld.³ Buffalo are also used in Hmong curing rituals and sometimes in offerings and feasts for the lunar New Year (Tapp 1989b; Symonds 1991), as in many other ethnic minority societies throughout the Southeast Asian Massif (Hayden 2009). Evidence from French military reports of the late 1800s points to the temporal and spatial continuity of these practices in the Vietnam borderlands (ANOM 1898 GGI 66105 Phong Tho; EFEO 1903 ME 364 Lao Chay).

The value of different animals sacrificed at a Hmong funeral stands in direct relation to the social and economic status of the deceased person. According to Khu, a Lào Cai Province Hmong woman, if a person has already reached puberty before they die, a buffalo should be sacrificed by their family. For the death of a child, however, a sacrifice of smaller animals, such as pigs or chickens, is acceptable. The worth of the sacrificed buffalo also depends on a household's current economic standing and the kinship or community status of the deceased person. In Khu's words, "If you are poor, you can offer a large pig or a small-sized buffalo instead, and that's ok. But if you are able to afford it, you should try to use a big buffalo, one worth around VND12 million [US\$660 in 2009]. This is especially true if your father, mother, or a very important person has died." These practices are part and parcel of the maintenance of Hmong lineage and identity as well as household wellbeing and prosperity. During the funeral ceremony, the way in which the slaughtered buffalo is divided up and distributed "is one of the main means whereby different descent groups can be distinguished" (Tapp 1989a, 89). This distribution is thus important to the continuity of Hmong cultural identity through the symbolic reenactment of kinship structure. In fulfilling these cultural obligations, a household also demonstrates its prestige, solidifies its social networks, and contributes to the food security of the community via redistribution (cf. Hayden 1998, 2009).

French military reports for Phong Thổ Sector, in current day Lai Châu Province, describe how in 1898, more buffalo were typically sacrificed at the funeral of a Hmong person of high social status than today (ANOM GGI 66105 Phong Tho 1898). Some two decades later, French Catholic missionary François-Marie Savina (1924) reported that two buffalo were normally sacrificed in Hmong villages in northern Tonkin, while for a respected village

elder the number could be as high as twelve.⁴ However, Hmong individuals interviewed in Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang Provinces since 1998 state that these days, just one animal, and very rarely two, are sacrificed per funeral. It is likely that this is in response to the ongoing efforts of the socialist Vietnamese state—as in socialist Laos (Daviau 2011) and China as well—to curtail what is deemed a “bad and counter-productive habit” (Lào Cai Province CPV 2008). Indeed, despite the fact that these funeral practices ultimately result in a redistribution of resources, under the “selective cultural preservation” policies of the late 1970s, the Vietnamese state discouraged and in some areas attempted to eradicate animal sacrifices and funeral feasts, a clampdown with ethnocentric overtones facilitated by the fact that the majority Kinh do not sacrifice large animals for ritual purposes. Thus, maintaining this custom—not only in Vietnam, but also in China, where it is discouraged as “wasteful”⁵—implies that at times Hmong households have to stand up for this tradition, negotiate the number of animals that will be acceptable to sacrifice, and often simply perform the ceremony without telling anyone outside the village circle. At each funeral, in a delicate balancing act, elders face this strategic question and a decision must be reached. This is a clear example of the social interface at which different life-worlds are intersecting and discrepancies in social interest, cultural interpretations, and knowledge must be mediated.

The reduction of buffalo sacrifices at modern-day funerals in these borderlands is also a legacy of the socialist cooperative farming system that prevailed between the 1950s and 1980s, during which buffalo were viewed as a “national treasure” and placed strictly under the control of cooperatives. Hmong households were encouraged to turn over not only their land but also their buffalo to the cooperative, while pigs and chickens could be kept for private consumption and income generation (Tuong Vu 2003; Hager 2006).⁶ After cooperatives were dismantled and land was reallocated to households, residents could buy back their buffalo for a low, set price (Hager 2006). Those who could not afford to do so pooled with other households, leading to an overall decline in the number of animals per household (*ibid.*)⁷

With all these specificities being intrinsically linked to the buffalo question, it is important to remember that the cultural significance of water buffalo underlies their broad appeal to Hmong individuals and families and makes them more than a mere physical or financial resource. Conceptualizing the enduring importance of buffalo within the borderland Hmong economy, society, and culture helps us to carefully examine different approaches to buffalo exchange and trade and understand the multiple roles and meanings of buffalo embedded within trade networks.

HMONG BUFFALO TRADE APPROACHES AND NETWORKS

In the borderland locales where water buffalo are most numerous, Hmong farmers describe three main methods for acquiring and trading buffalo. The first consists of household trade and exchange within a hamlet or between neighboring hamlets. The second involves “buffalo villages,” that is, locales that have gained a reputation among uplanders for having a large number of animals for sale. These source locales may be situated within the same district as the buyer or as far away as a neighboring county or province and may encompass local and regional trade networks. In the third method, buffalo may be traded at periodic livestock marketplaces, which involve local and regional as well as upland-lowland and cross-border trade networks. Each method brings its own specific opportunities and risks.

HAMLET-BASED BUFFALO TRADE AND EXCHANGE

Hmong and other minority individuals from communities on both sides of the border throughout these uplands confirm that the most common and flexible way for people to obtain water buffalo for household use is directly from other households within their own or a neighboring hamlet. These transactions take place within a context of strong social networks and sanctions that ensure trust, cooperation, and reciprocal obligation, minimizing both risk and profiteering (cf. Scott 1976; Long 2001). These collective moral understandings of how transactions should be conducted are crucial given the high monetary value of buffalo.

Permanent or long-term buffalo exchanges in the hamlet occur through barter, cash exchange, or loans, as well as shorter-term or seasonal sharing arrangements between kin and neighbors. This localized Hmong buffalo trade relies on social networks and word of mouth. An individual inquires among their own kin and hamlet and, if he or she has no luck, tries neighboring hamlets to see if an animal is available for sale. However, as Long, a Hmong man in his fifties in Vietnam explained, this “grapevine approach” covers a small radius, so it can often take time to find an appropriate buffalo.

A key benefit of this localized approach is that terms of payment can be quite flexible. Buyers can normally arrange a relaxed payment schedule with sellers, which is important given that buffalo are one of the most expensive purchases a household makes. Upland residents on both sides of the border explain that it is generally feasible to pay a portion of the buffalo cost in cash immediately—as little as half the total—with the rest to follow at a later time. Additionally, if a household is suddenly confronted with funeral expenses

and needs to obtain a buffalo quickly without being able to cover the full cost, it may be possible to negotiate an exchange with another household. In this case, a buffalo is bartered in return for similarly high-valued collateral, like terraced rice land. Bee, a thirty-year-old Hmong woman in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, explained that for funeral rituals, “If you have no buffalo, you must buy one. Here, we normally buy one from the families in our village. But if you have no money, you can give away some of your rice paddy fields in exchange for a buffalo. Later, when you are able to buy a new buffalo, you give it to them and can then get your land back again.” Of course, for less well-off households, a reduction in paddy land may have a direct effect on food security or production strategies, possibly for several years. Nevertheless, the possibility of reciprocal exchange within the community is important for enabling poorer or unprepared Hmong households to meet spiritual and social obligations.

This localized trade approach dovetails effectively with informal mechanisms for settling disputes. For instance, when a buffalo is bought locally from another Hmong person, it is generally acceptable to take the animal home for a period of time to “test it out,” making sure it is healthy and capable of work. If, after this test period, the buyer believes they have found a good buffalo, then the rest of the settled price is paid. Alternatively, if the buyer finds the buffalo is acceptable but does not live up to what was promised—for instance, if it turns out to be a “slow” buffalo—they have the right to renegotiate a lower price. However, if the buffalo is observed to be unfit for work or sick, the buyer can return it to the seller, losing a small percentage—around 5 to 10 percent—of the original cost. Vu, a young Hmong woman in Vietnam, explained:

When you go to buy a buffalo, the seller will promise you that their buffalo is very good, that it's never sick, things like that. When you buy within the village, you can take the buffalo back to your home first. You should bring it to your field and watch how quickly it can plow. Then, you should feed it some grass and watch the way it eats . . . observe it closely to see whether it's too skinny. If, after you try it out, you find that the buffalo is not very good, you can go back to the seller and ask them to change the price. If the buffalo costs VND15 million [US\$830], and I already paid 10 million, and the buffalo is so-so, then 4 million extra is enough. I don't want to pay more. The second way is if the buffalo really is not good at all and I need to return it. Here, I will lose 1 million, but the seller will return the other 9 million I paid after I give them back the poor buffalo.

As Vu explained it, although the buyer is expected to take the burden of some financial loss, they can still return the animal and reclaim the majority of their investment. At the same time, by returning an animal, the entire community is alerted that the potential buyer is making a serious claim against the seller's buffalo. The seller will therefore be unable to promote that specific buffalo to anyone else in the hamlet—or, very likely, neighboring hamlets as well. Long, the Hmong man mentioned earlier, clarified that “such a buffalo is now bad luck and you can never sell it anymore. Everyone now knows this, so it's not good for you.” A seller's ability to trade animals or conduct other business may be affected if they earn a reputation for trying to sell a poor-quality animal. Being dishonorable in a community-level deal can have significant financial and social repercussions.

Clearly, these localized transactions are embedded in a moral economy that affords great security to both buyers and sellers, preventing either from acting out of self-interest or taking advantage of—or even substantially profiting from—the other. As a telling example of balanced reciprocity (Sahlins 1968), this level of exchange is practiced most among close-knit social groups to avert strained community and kin-based ties.

Intrahamlet exchanges are also extremely important for Hmong households who must cope with hardship and crisis. While Hmong farmers in these uplands depend greatly on their buffalo, this precious household resource can be lost through accident or illness, resulting in unexpected challenges to livelihood viability and resilience. In recent years, abnormally cold winters have led to extreme buffalo mortality on both sides of the border, though more so in Vietnam. In Lào Cai Province alone, according to officials, between the months of January and February 2008, over 8,000 buffalo perished. In 2010, another bout of abnormally cold winter temperatures resulted in 12,802 buffalo deaths in the province (LCPC and DARD 2011). These calamities have caused a widespread shortage of mature buffalo in Lào Cai, and prices have risen accordingly. In 2007, Hmong interviewees in Vietnam reported that the cost for a top-quality buffalo, described as one that is “large, strong, healthy, and fit for work,” was between VND8 and 10 million (US\$480–605).⁸ After the cold winter of 2008, this had risen to between VND12 and 15 million (US\$700–880). While this new price level remained fairly stable through 2009 and 2010, by 2011 a number of informants from Sa Pa District stated that prices had risen again, in reaction to the harsh 2010 winter, to between VND18 and 20 million (US\$860–960), and they remained at that level from 2012 to 2014.

West of the Red River in Vietnam, wide-reaching losses of buffalo due

to harsh winters had affected almost every Hmong farmer interviewed between 2008 and 2014, due to the loss of productive labor, a saleable asset, or reduced security for dealing with future contingencies. In particular, many households who previously owned just one or two buffalo are in a critical situation without an animal for plowing. Household members now draw upon kinship, clan, or hamlet-based social networks and other reciprocal arrangements in order to try to meet their agricultural production needs. The social support mechanisms that have come into play are of course not new, and the benefits often extend beyond an individual household unit to the wider kin group. For example, during the plowing season, buffalo are commonly shared among married brothers and sisters as exchanges of help and hospitality based on open-ended mutuality.

During times of crisis, such methods of reciprocal assistance often assume far more critical roles as immediate coping mechanisms (cf. Ellis 2000). Since the harsh winter of 2008, some households have made agreements to plow another's fields or plant their rice in exchange for the loan of a buffalo. Some arrange to barter an equivalent value of postharvest rice in return for a period of buffalo labor, which for many is preferable to a cash-based rental. The ability of Hmong communities to marshal resources and cope with buffalo crises caused by extreme weather events depends greatly upon these local social networks.

In sum, the hamlet-based approach for exchanging or purchasing water buffalo, which affords access through community-level and kinship-based social networks, trusted partners, shared cultural identity, common language, and largely non-monetized and non-taxable dealings, is a highly flexible and fairly safe way for Hmong households to procure or sell an animal. Farmers find that forms of payment are negotiable and they can avoid the additional costs of transport and time attending markets. Additionally, by keeping the pressure on sellers to ask for a fair price and be trustworthy, a protective guarantee exists in the form of one's reputation within the community. This approach accommodates Hmong farmers who rely intensely on buffalo and need a healthy and reliable animal to meet their livelihood needs. This local system also appears resilient in its capacity to adapt in times of crisis, such as during short-term buffalo shortages. In contrast, the second method of buffalo trade offers far less protection, with greater risks for buyers.

UPLAND "BUFFALO VILLAGES"

The second important method of trading water buffalo in these uplands extends trade networks beyond the local community to more distant "buffalo

villages.” Although they have existed for a long time, these source localities have become particularly important since the large-scale losses of buffalo in recent years due to cold weather. Such disasters have reduced the overall likelihood that Hmong households in the most affected regions will have surplus buffalo to sell, so buyers are forced to seek animals from outside their community circle, such as from a reputable buffalo village.

For example, in upland districts of Lai Châu and Lào Cai Provinces, Vietnam, there are specific Hmong communes or villages recognized for having buffalo in relative abundance. These locales are generally in mountain valleys at lower altitudes that have areas of flat grazing land and less extreme winter temperatures than in the mountains. Hmong farmer Ly explained, “If someone needs to buy a buffalo, they can go to a buffalo village known for having lots of buffalo, such as in Bình Lữ [in Lai Châu Province] or another buffalo village near Lào Cai City where Hmong have many animals. These villages have warmer weather, where buffalo can live more easily and grow up healthy.” Still, Hmong wishing to access one of these more distant buffalo villages have to travel there by bus or motorbike and bring the animal back via rented truck or on foot.

This buffalo trade follows quite different conventions from intravillage trade. The protective mechanisms of familiarity and community sanctions are absent, aside from instances in which the buyer happens to share kinship ties (either through lineage or clan) with the seller or comes from a village very close to the buyer’s. Other arrangements and rules are thus applied to mitigate the risks of this high-value trade among potential strangers—however, in our observation, these appear to safeguard the seller more than the buyer. To begin with, the buyer is required to pay the entire cost upfront. Vang, a male Hmong farmer, highlighted this social distance or lack of informal protective mechanisms when doing business with someone considered an “outsider”: “It’s easy to buy buffalo from your own hamlet. But if you travel to a buffalo village to get one, you should have all the money with you when you go there. This is because you don’t know those people, and they don’t know you. So you’ll need to have the full sum of money to pay them. . . . That’s the way you have to do it if you’re going to buy from far away.” It is clear that the hazards can be much greater in these transactions. Tou, another male Hmong farmer, discussed how purchasing an animal from one of the buffalo villages can be risky: “I think it’s important to never leave your own village to buy a buffalo. If you do, there’s no way to know whether, after bringing the buffalo back to your village, it will get sick, or if the animal cannot settle to the different conditions in your village. And then you’ll have

lost all of your money!” Tou’s comments raise the important concern, shared by many, as to how a nonlocal buffalo will respond to a new habitat. Several farmers explained that a buffalo is best adapted to and familiar with the particular conditions of its original area. A recurrent apprehension about the long-distance trading of buffalo is therefore the sensitivity of these animals to new environments, and whether a “foreign” animal will be able to adjust. Moreover, in many instances, a new buffalo may be viewed with suspicion by the community because of the possibility that it might be carrying a contagious illness such as foot-and-mouth disease, which has been a serious threat in the past.

In addition to less flexible payment arrangements and a lack of recourse for a buyer sold a “bad buffalo,” another difference from more localized transactions is the addition of formal rules. Hmong farmers explain that buyers from outside of the seller’s village should register as the new owner of a buffalo with the commune’s People’s Committee. If a buyer fails to do this, it can cause problems because as the buyer makes the journey home with his or her new animal, the seller, or even observers, may claim that the animal is stolen. Buffalo theft is indeed common and understandably a major source of anxiety, given these animals’ high value (see Cox and Tran Manh Hung 2002). The buyer incurs the cost of this registration and necessarily appears on the administrative radar for this transaction—not always desirable to highland farmers.

It is understandable that Hmong farmers prefer the intravillage system to the buffalo village trading approach. But does this mean that only intravillage trading is desirable? Not necessarily. The third main mode of buffalo trading that Hmong farmers use, namely periodic livestock marketplaces, brings with it even greater risks for potential buyers, but also greater opportunities. Once again, access to information, knowledge, and social networks are critical resources.

UPLAND BUFFALO MARKETPLACES

Livestock markets, some of which may have originated at stopping points along ancient trade routes, have existed across the uplands for centuries (Choquart 1928). These days, they take the form of specialized livestock markets or a livestock section attached to a larger periodic marketplace.⁹ Particularly since 2000, the Chinese and Vietnamese states have built or renovated many buffalo and cattle markets in weekly upland marketplaces to encourage animal husbandry and livestock trade as a means of poverty reduction (CPV 2006).



FIG. 4.3. Hmong buyers in Cán Cấu market, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, inspecting buffalo, 2010. Source: Christine Bonnin.

Buffalo markets cover a large, flat, sometimes enclosed area. On market day, groups of men gather around a given buffalo they are interested in. Prospective buyers carefully look over the buffalo, checking its teeth, legs, hair, horn shape, neck size, hoof spread, facial appearance, eyes, and tail in order to assess its physical condition, hardiness to cold weather, and character or personality (fig. 4.3). When a deal is reached, the circle of potential buyers and interested onlookers quickly disperses, and the buyer leaves shortly afterward with the buffalo in tow, either heading for home or to have the animal and sale registered.

On both sides of the border it appears that a greater number of specialized markets with large numbers of buffalo operate to the east of the Red River than to the west.¹⁰ It is quite likely that this distinctive spatial pattern reflects differences in agro-ecology and upland farming systems between these areas. In general, the western upland districts are richer in water sources and can accommodate more terraced wet rice farming on steep slopes, requiring buffalo. With higher offers and demand for buffalo in these areas, households have been able to access the animals through intra- and intervillage trade alone (at least prior to the recent buffalo crisis). This may sound counterin-



FIG. 4.4. Buffalo markets east of the Red River: Cán Cấu buffalo market section, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, 2010. Source: Sarah Turner.

tuitive, but the more buffalo in a given region, the less need for marketplaces to trade buffalo, as localized and socially rooted networking is preferred.

In many parts of the uplands to the east of the Red River on both sides of the border, maize production is dominant in large part due to more irregular and dryer karstic terrain. Bullocks make for better draft labor here than buffalo, as buffalo do not thrive in dry, rocky environments. Yet, because buffalo are still important animals for the available paddy and terraced rice land as well as for ritual purposes, buffalo marketplaces such as those at Cán Cấu and Bắc Hà (fig. 4.4) have become important for guaranteeing access to animals in these regions.

Upland periodic markets with sections for animal trading are characterized by a diverse array of social actors from multiple ethnic groups dwelling in the uplands. First are those involved in household-level trade, generally people from nearby hamlets who need to purchase or sell a buffalo. Second are the localized commercial traders, who tend to operate between two different marketplaces to make the most of differences in prices, offer, and demand. Third are the multimarket commercial traders, who cover larger distances and rely on a number of marketplaces and hamlets to source their animals and conduct cross-border trade. Buffalo markets are decidedly gendered, male spaces of trade, which Hmong like Pang, in her thirties,

explained is because of the very large sums of cash involved in this high-stakes trading: “Many people think men are better at calculating big numbers and counting the money so they don’t get cheated. But also, there is more worry about the woman’s safety carrying so much money with her”—not to mention bringing back home the newly acquired beast(s).

Household Trade at the Market

For ethnic minority households residing in close proximity to a buffalo market, deciding to buy there instead of within their hamlet is clearly a viable option, but Hmong farmers contend that purchasing buffalo in a marketplace is risky. Long, a Hmong farmer from Lào Cai, described the implications of the lack of informal, socially sanctioned protective mechanisms between market participants:

At the Bắc Hà market, people never ask where the buffalo comes from, that’s not something you do. People are just expected to accept that the buffalo belongs to the person selling it. Traders bring buffalo to Bắc Hà or Cốc Ly marketplaces to sell them. But these buffalo are not necessarily local and don’t always come from those places. The animal might come from very far away but you wouldn’t know it. Traders only come to the market for the purpose of selling. It’s all business. And buyers don’t usually know the person who is selling the buffalo. It’s something like this: you see me but only from the outside and you don’t know who I am inside . . . you don’t know where I come from.

Given this uncertain environment, access to knowledge is a key resource that actors must draw upon in order to trade in buffalo marketplaces. The ability to expertly evaluate a buffalo’s physical condition is vital, as buyers need to make quick decisions with little time for assessment if there is competing interest. Traders arrive around 7:00 or 8:00 on the morning of the market, and many times trading is completed by noon, although some buyers will bide their time and return for another two or three market sessions before concluding a sale. Marketplace buyers must have experience calculating an animal’s current market value in order to make a profitable transaction.

Nevertheless, it is not all bleak for buyers. Hmong informants in the borderlands of Hà Giang Province, Vietnam, and Maguan County, Wenshan Prefecture, repeatedly stated that the main advantage of marketplaces is that they offer far greater choice for buffalo buyers. When purchasing in one’s own hamlet, a buyer does not have many options, as it is unlikely that many

households will have a buffalo for sale exactly when the buyer needs it. As one elderly Hmong man from a hamlet near Maguan Town said, “The ones for sale you don’t necessarily want, while the one you want is not necessarily for sale.” So if an individual needs a buffalo immediately and cannot wait until one meeting their criteria is available locally or in the nearest buffalo village, they must either settle for whatever animal is locally on offer or head to a market. According to Vang, a twenty-six-year-old Hmong trader in Cán Cấu market, Vietnam, “When you buy a buffalo from your own home village, you will only have around two animals to choose from. Whether you like it or not, you don’t have much choice. A lot of people here like to come to the market because they are able to choose from a lot of different buffalo. There’s far more selection.” The multitude of animals available for sale every week at the markets, as well as the weaker moral obligations between buyer and seller, make it easier to compete and bargain over prices (cf. Evers and Schrader 1994). Marketplace buffalo trade is thus an example of the self-interested trade behavior described by Marshall Sahlins (1968) as “negative reciprocity.” Each party in the transaction, because they are not closely related to each other by blood, alliance, or neighborhood, need not consider the long-term benefit of a more balanced form of reciprocity and thus simply focuses on making the most profit. Chi, from Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, suggested that because Hmong who live in places with buffalo markets have long been exposed to this type of trade, they tend to be more adept at it: “In Sa Pa [west of the Red River], we don’t have a livestock marketplace, so we go to Hmong families and choose our buffalo from the village. We buy buffalo living in our own village already. In Cốc Ly, Bắc Hà, and Cán Cấu [east of the River], Hmong have buffalo markets, so they know how to do that type of business. More of the people from those areas will say, ‘We are going to the market.’ They’re used to that kind of trade.”

Small-Scale Commercial Traders

Most of the exchanges taking place in marketplaces are business transactions of a professional nature, as opposed to household-oriented sales or purchases. Professional or commercial traders step in and aim for quick turnover, purchasing buffalo that they hope to sell again within a relatively short timeframe. The majority of these buffalo traders are Hmong, Nùng, Tày, and Yao. They are regularly involved in livestock trade as a livelihood strategy, not as a one-off sale or a means to gain an animal for household use. These traders sell to other buffalo traders or to household-level buyers. Some operate at a very small scale, moving two to three animals at a given time,

focusing on trade between two marketplaces. For instance, Tuan, a Nùng man, buys buffalo in Xín Chéng market and walks them to Cán Cầu market, sixteen kilometers from his home in Si Ma Cai, Vietnam. Due to their narrow geographical trade scope, such traders usually lack the official permits and contacts that allow for longer-distance trade. Not surprisingly, these men trade buffalo part-time, while maintaining their farming activities.

Multimarket Commercial Traders

Multimarket buffalo traders with more extensive trade networks comprise a third group of marketplace actors. Their trade activities involve sourcing from and selling to a range of marketplaces and hamlets, sometimes reaching across the border. These traders operate on a larger scale and often have several buffalo to trade at a time. They usually have greater financial capital, and the largest traders may even hire trucks to transport buffalo. Some Hmong interviewees involved in this scale of trade described their work as a “family trade.” Over the years, their fathers passed on their trade knowledge, skills, and contacts to them. Vang, one such trader, also described the marketplace as a “fashionable” way for young Hmong men to earn money. In particular, he finds the trade exciting because of the travel it entails.

Given the high levels of risk and uncertainty on the part of both buyers (the unknown characteristics of the animal they may purchase) and sellers (the possibility of not finding any buyer that day), buffalo marketplace traders adopt a variety of tactics for creating confidence and trust. One of the main risks traders take when buying livestock in a marketplace is ending up with a buffalo that is sick or falls ill. Vang explained that buyers attempt to reduce this likelihood by sourcing only from market traders with whom they have developed long-term connections, or with traders who have been recommended to them, reactivating a degree of balance in the otherwise negative reciprocity.

Another important reason that traders work to establish trust is because of anxiety about trading stolen animals. Traders and household purchasers told us that some of the buffalo being smuggled across the border from Vietnam into China are stolen, as theft is easy to deny once buffalo have been sold in a distant market. Trader Vang explained that buyers often pick up on warning signs that a buffalo is stolen or sick, such as an unusually low price. To overcome such suspicion, some traders rely on the authority of formal contracts to help assure buyers. For example, in Lào Cai Province, buffalo trader Pao carries letters of ownership signed by both the previous buffalo owner and a People’s Committee representative of the commune the buffalo

originates from. While this is not a formal requirement, this enables Pao to demonstrate to potential buyers that his buffalo are legitimately purchased. One obvious consequence of trading at this level is that one's transactions, either buying or selling, will be more public and visible on the state's radar, adding a range of possible fees.

CROSS-BORDER BUFFALO NETWORKS

With a disproportionately large consumer market for both animal labor and meat compared to Vietnam, China is a major driver of the buffalo trade in the upland districts south of the border. The demand for buffalo meat in China is so intense that a study tracing livestock market chains in the Greater Mekong Subregion found that buffalo originally from Thailand were being transited by truck through Laos into Vietnam at Nghệ An before moving on to the northern uplands to be traded across the border into China (Cocks et al. 2009). Another significant trade network runs in the opposite direction and involves the flow of upland buffalo through Lào Cai Province to lowland Vietnamese markets for meat. This trade is run mostly by Kinh collectors who visit upland markets with trucks, purchasing between fifteen and one hundred animals at a time. Given that Hmong are not so much a buffalo exporting society as they are a buffalo consuming society, this drain toward heavily populated regions in both China and Vietnam is a problem for Hmong farmers on both sides of the border.

Before 2007, borderland residents explained, most of the buffalo trade was flowing from Yunnan to Vietnam. Since then, however, there has been a dramatic surge in Chinese demand for Vietnam-bred buffalo. Locals in the Yunnan borderlands have observed more people, mainly ethnic minorities, bringing buffalo from Vietnam to China's border markets to sell. The trade of buffalo across the border now creates a two-way flow in which rapidly fluctuating market prices, differing climatic environments, and varying perceptions of the strength of buffalo from different locales have resulted in concurrent demand in both directions. Buffalo from Vietnam are highly valued in China because they are considered to be larger, stronger, and healthier than those raised in Yunnan; China-bred buffalo are in demand due to shortages in Vietnam following cold winters and disease outbreaks.

Ethnicity and language play important roles in this cross-border trade. A number of Vietnam-based Hmong, Nùng, and Tày professional buffalo traders cross the border to buy or sell in China. In addition, Hmong and other minority traders from China cross into Vietnam to purchase or trade buffalo, mostly at the Cán Cấu marketplace, the nearest to the border. Access

to this trade is mediated via social identity and kinship and through shared minority languages and the local form of Mandarin, as is the case for the cross-border textile trade (see chapter 7).

While there exist official ways to carry out this relatively small-scale transnational trade, most of it occurs unofficially (Cocks et al. 2009). The official channel involves paying a fee at a local border gate and visiting an animal control station, where buffalo undergo a health inspection. This is seen by many local traders as a laborious exercise costing time and money, so they often work to avoid these crossings. Since the official borderline between Vietnam and Yunnan is rather porous, locals know of numerous “secret routes” to make the journey easily and avoid border gates. A Zhuang retiree from Xiao Bazi, Yunnan, who worked as a border patrol officer from 1979 to 2000 on the border with Si Ma Cai District, Vietnam, provided insight on participants in this unregulated trade and their motivations:

When people from Yunnan go to Vietnam to buy buffalo, they always go by a secret route in order to avoid the tax and animal check. They wait until midnight when it's dark and then proceed, crossing the border at unofficial points. There are many small trails on the frontier that they can use to do this. If a trader is caught going by the secret way, he gets a fine or a ticket. No other punishment occurs. Most traders, especially animal traders, don't take the main road, but smaller roads, because in the past there was animal disease and so the governments of China and Vietnam tried to control the cross-border trade. Now that they have medicine to control this illness, traders still take the secret routes because they may not have the border identification card or they don't want to pay for it. Most of the cross-border animal traders from Vietnam are ethnic minorities, because the Vietnamese [Kinh] are afraid to get involved in this trade. The Vietnamese are not familiar with the trading situation in China, and they can't communicate with people here.

Unofficial flows are a concern to both states, first, of course, as a taxation loss for the state, but also because the unregulated cross-border movement of livestock is considered a danger in terms of the spread of disease, especially foot-and-mouth disease, which has been a problem since the mid-2000s (MARD 2006). China and Vietnam border officials, the Vietnam Bureau of Customs, the Vietnam provincial police, and market management boards have all been placed on alert for these activities.

As the retired border patrol officer noted above, Kinh are not significantly

involved in this cross-border trade. As is also the case with Hmong textile commodity chains, the trade of buffalo through local border crossings and alternative routes in these uplands is a livelihood opportunity restricted to groups who can benefit from kin and social networks, common language, and an in-depth knowledge of their particular segment of the border area. Thus, borderland minorities have maintained control over this segment of trade. Moreover, most of the cross-border buffalo trade undertaken by individuals is on a small scale, as second-tier national border crossings and third-tier local crossings are closed to trucks, so that buffalo must be walked across in small groups.¹¹

Upland buffalo traders from Vietnam explain that the primary advantage of bringing their animals to China to sell—usually at nearby markets such as the Jia Han Qing livestock market in Wenshan Prefecture—is that they can fetch a much higher price. Many Vietnam-based traders also feel that they are guaranteed to be able to sell all of the animals they bring to China because of high demand at the numerous specialized livestock markets for live, strong animals, for breeders, or simply for meat. Many traders, such as Teng, a Hmong man from Lào Cai, described the greater ease and profitability of trading in Yunnan: “In China, I can get VND15 million for this buffalo! And they don’t care or bother about checking your animal. They don’t pick and choose, they just buy up all of your buffalo! But here [in Cán Cấu] I can only get VND13 million for this animal.” Hence, despite the risks and the trouble, cross-border buffalo trade remains a highly appealing livelihood prospect for a number of borderland minority residents.

MANY WAYS TO TAKE A BUFFALO BY THE HORNS

Specific elements of access critically shape the nature of different approaches to livestock trade and exchange in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. Hmong hamlet-level trade is facilitated by access to social capital and mutual-assistance networks, yet remains largely the exclusive domain of community members, excluding outsiders in favor of kin and locals. Beyond the village, access to knowledge regarding buffalo health and current prices is a rarer, yet essential, resource. Traders in marketplaces can exploit a lack of such knowledge to exact a higher profit, with the risk being directly passed on to the buyer. Access to social networks structured around language, ethnicity, and cultural identity, as well as privileged knowledge of border conditions, enable select ethnic minority individuals from border areas to engage in a vibrant small-scale cross-border buffalo trade.

Kinship-based and intra- and intervillage operations are based on trust rather than business logic. These operations are part of a larger flow of barter and favors; they remain under the radar, leave no written traces, and are not easily taxable. These processes occupy a niche in the customary exchange system that harmonizes with Hmong economic culture, suggesting that Hmong economic decision making in this region answers primarily to a logic that is local and culturally specific rather than mercantile and market-driven.

When dealing in buffalo beyond the village or kinship scene, market laws are the rule. This includes farmers sticking their heads above the parapet regarding fees, circulation across the border, and registration. Even if there are various ways of circumventing some of these obstacles, marketplace traders must be prepared for greater risks. Buyers must also be aware of these risks and be market savvy. But while the borderline represents an important hurdle for trader connections, it appears that an east-west divide based on agro-ecological conditions is even more crucial. Marketplace traders to the east of the Red River draw on their resources, experience, and ability to innovate—including common language, kinship ties, and place-based knowledge—to trade these important beasts of burden in large marketplaces on both sides of the border. The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands are thus home to networks of livestock traders using judgment that pure economics or political boundaries alone cannot capture.