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# Small city politics in the Global South: state imaginaries and everyday realities of a frontier city in northern Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

In the northern Vietnam uplands, the socialist state's urbanization plans are rapidly expanding the region's small cities and re-configuring their built form. Drawing on conceptual debates concerning small cities, urban space production, and everyday politics, we investigate dynamics of urbanization in one such small upland city, Cao Bằng. While legislative planning documents and official ideologies prioritize Cao Bằng's regional economic expansion, we find the resulting transformations in the city's built form engender sprawl and fragmentation. In reaction to both these physical changes and retributions for "disorderly" space use, the city's most marginalized residents adapt their everyday spatial appropriation tactics, while implementing a range of covert resistance approaches to protect their livelihoods. We suggest that such contentions between residents, state officials, and the plans they implement, reflect broader struggles regarding the state's "territorialization" project for these remote uplands, with the region's small cities being adopted as useful entry points.

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## Introduction

Urban theory has long privileged the experiences of the world's largest metropolitan regions, particularly those in the Global North (Bunnell & Maringanti, 2010; Parnell & Oldfield, 2014). In turn, comparative urbanism scholars have stressed the urgency of conceptualizing a decentered, more holistic urbanism through the lens of "ordinary" cities worldwide (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2009). While urban theorization is increasingly being rooted in Global South contexts, such studies have oftentimes lapsed into a similar focus on large, globally-connected cities, so that the theoretical nodes of "Southern" urbanism have come to mirror their Global North counterparts (Denis & Zerah, 2017; Goh & Bunnell, 2013).

To adequately represent the diversity of global urban experiences, increasing calls have thus been made for studies of urban production and everyday life in the world's *small* urban centers (Bell & Jayne, 2006, 2009). The potential lessons offered by small-scale urbanism are especially salient in the context of a rapidly urbanizing planet: the majority of the global urban population now resides in cities with less than 500,000 people (United Nations

Department for Economic and Social Affairs, 2012) and small and medium-sized cities are the fastest growing urban areas worldwide (Birkmann et al., 2016). Yet, to date, there has been limited scholarly attention placed on small cities in the Global South, with Southeast Asia especially neglected. As detailed below, this limited research on Southeast Asia's small cities tends to be based in lowland locales or in cities already fairly well connected by transport infrastructure to larger urban centers. Conversely, we want to investigate how small city urbanization is advancing in the region's more remote, mountainous areas.

In Vietnam, for example, urbanization is on the rise in the northern upland region (Turner & Pham, 2015). Here, both state and private enterprises are dramatically transforming rural landscapes for natural resource extraction and infrastructure development, and small cities are rapidly growing in population size as both regional rural dwellers and lowland migrants are attracted by new opportunities (Hardy, 2000; Turner et al. 2020, 2015). However, there is little scholarly work addressing urbanization in Vietnam's uplands and the impacts of changing regimes of urban governance on the lives of local residents (two exceptions being Henein et al., 2019; Korff et al., 2014). We wish to expand this limited literature here.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how state visions for upland northern Vietnam have shaped a remote, small city, Cao Bằng, situated on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, and how local residents are coping and responding to these urban transformations. To consider the dynamics of urban space production in Cao Bằng City, within the context of a socialist state, we begin this paper by introducing the conceptual tools underpinning our case study, focusing on recent debates concerning small cities, the production of space, and everyday politics. We then highlight the historical and socio-political context of Cao Bằng Province, before concentrating on our case study of Cao Bằng City. We analyze how development objectives at the national level have focused local planning practices in Cao Bằng City towards rapid urban expansion and consequently led to an increasingly fragmented cityscape. We then draw attention to two site-specific cases that highlight how local residents perform everyday political acts in response to official space use restrictions that challenge their access to traditional agricultural livelihoods and small-scale commercial activity. These cases also raise questions over the positioning of minority cultural identity in the city. With this evidence in hand, we question whether the shaping of Vietnam's small upland cities fits within a larger political project of territorialization by the central government, wherein peripheral peoples and resources of the Southeast Asian Massif are gradually assimilated into modern nation-states (Scott, 2009).

Core fieldwork for this paper was completed in summer 2017 in Cao Bằng City by the first author, with visits prior (Cao Bằng Statistics Office, 2016) and during the main data collection period by the second author. Our methods included 62 semi-structured interviews and 20 conversational interviews with city residents, four key informant interviews with local state officials, seven oral histories with elderly residents aged 60 or older, and participant observation. Our interviews focused on perceptions of everyday life in Cao Bằng City and how and why specific resident groups appropriated different urban spaces, while the oral histories focused on transformations in the city's built form over time. We recruited participants following a stratified random sampling approach with the aim of representing a diverse profile of socio-economic background, age, gender, and ethnicity. We also collected all state legislative documents, Master Plans, and media reports we could find from 2000 onwards for thematic analysis. We applied a two-tier thematic

analysis following both axial codes and constant comparative approaches to identify themes relating to state-sanctioned visions for Cao Bằng city (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

### Conceptualizing small cities

Scholarly work conceptualizing small cities in the Global North remains fragmented, with Bell and Jayne (2009, p. 684) noting that this research “does not coalesce into a coherent critical mass of work capable of generating a meaningful dialogue within the urban studies literature”. Research on Global South small cities has been equally disjointed, both geographically and thematically. Scholars focusing on the Global South have examined the role of small cities in bolstering regional development (Hinderink & Titus, 1988; Owusu, 2008; Rondinelli, 1983), constructing local identity (Page & Sunjo, 2018), national economic productivity (Simone, 2006), and the dynamics of local governance (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1988; Véron, 2010). While such studies provide important findings in themselves, conceptual framings around which small city debates can move forward have emerged less frequently.

Nonetheless, we draw upon nascent theorizations of small cities to build a theoretical underpinning explaining the processes changing the social character and built form of Cao Bằng City. Scholars such as Véron (2010) and Bell and Jayne (2009) eschew definitions of smallness based on numerical metrics as two cities with similar population levels or land areas may, in reality, share little commonality in social, political, and economic terms. Rather, “smallness” is more generatively understood as a product of relationships of influence and control between different scales of place, with small cities facilitating the exchange of natural resources, labor, capital, and information between their hinterlands and larger urban centers (Bell & Jane, 2009; Bolay & Rabinovich, 2004). Scholars have argued that small cities can mitigate economic decline in rural landscapes by providing access to services and employment opportunities for regional residents, and reduce the pressure migration places on larger cities (Rondinelli, 1983; Sýkora & Muliček, 2017; von Bloh, 2008). Such readings of smallness are embedded within certain economic and geopolitical contexts, and take cues from the “ordinary city” literature, which criticizes the reliance on globalized metrics for comparing cities and instead highlights the importance of understanding local processes and practices in narrating urban experiences (Robinson, 2006).

Based on this context-specific, relational understanding of what makes a city “small”, and supported by our empirical findings, we argue that the smallness of a city in the northern Vietnamese uplands derives from its role as an intermediate site where the region’s resources and ethnic minority populations are integrated into national socio-economic and political spheres. Furthermore, we emphasize that within the Vietnamese market socialist context, where centralized planning predominates, “smallness” is produced by discursively positioning cities in relation to each other based on the metrics of Vietnam’s hierarchical urban classification system.

There is a limited body of work concerning Southeast Asia that examines a range of urban concerns in smaller cities, without necessarily mobilizing the conceptual categorization of small cities. For instance, Glassman and Sneddon (2003) investigate urban sustainability in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen, Thailand, arguing that the development of these “secondary cities,” in the hope of easing congestion and pollution in Bangkok, has failed to alleviate concerns regarding Bangkok’s primacy. Manorom and Promthong (2018), through their

study of peri-urban agriculture in Ubon Ratchathani, in Thailand's Isan province, explore how livelihoods and land use have been transformed via urbanization, and how peri-urban residents have worked to maintain a sense of place and personal well-being. More explicitly focusing on small urban centers, Fahmi et al. (2014) examine the particular challenges to urbanization faced by Cirebon, arguing that Indonesian small cities are relatively dense and expanding rapidly beyond their administrative boundaries. In Vietnam, Korff et al. (2014) draw on the social interface concept to broadly analyze the interactions between different actors within two small Vietnamese cities, Vinh and Cao Bằng, highlighting how small urban centers provide a crucial link between urban systems and rural hinterlands.

Given the socialist political context for our study, and the close proximity of China, we also draw upon Chinese urbanism work. Scholars Ma and Fan (1994) note that after the 1978 economic reforms, the growth of small cities emerged as a prominent force of Chinese urbanization. This growth has commonly been due to industrialization or tourism, with local state officials leveraging local resources to stimulate economic growth (see also Qian et al., 2012). Themes that emerge from such work include regionalist urban entrepreneurialism and the degree to which local government authorities pursue their own economic ambitions (Han, 2010; Neo & Pow, 2015). As such, debates concerning relative size, the relationships between small cities and rural hinterlands, the impacts of infrastructural projects on local residents, and the diverse motivations for expanding small cities, inform our work.

### ***The production of space in a small city***

To better identify and analyze the key actors and features involved with space production in Cao Bằng City, we draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) work regarding the production of space, particularly his spatial triad concept. Lefebvre posits that space is a fluid set of social relations and that three interconnected dimensions, or "moments" interact to produce space, namely representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1991).

To briefly outline these three "moments", representations of space or "conceived space" refers to the space of urban planners and architects (Merrifield, 1993). This conceived space is always abstract as it is envisioned rather than directly lived, and channels ideology in its practice (McCann, 1999; Merrifield, 1993). Conceived space aims to define how individuals experience space, often accomplished by producing master plans (common in Vietnam), maps, and legislation governing space use (Degen, 2008; Leary, 2013). Here, we employ "conceived space" to interrogate the dominant official ideologies and visions that underlie Cao Bằng's spatial arrangement, built form, and governance.

Spatial practices or "perceived space" is considered to be "the observable, the concrete and the physical" aspects of space (Rutanen, 2014, p. 18). Degen (2008) explains how perceived space encompasses the everyday space where one can empirically observe phenomena that rely on sensory stimuli. In this study, we mobilize "perceived space" to investigate the material components of Cao Bằng City, including the city's spatial arrangement and built form, as well as how these have changed over time as a result of complex social, economic, and political factors and interactions. Finally, spaces of representation or "lived space" refers to space that is subjectively experienced through

individual imaginations (Lefebvre, 1991). We employ lived space to frame how Cao Bằng residents mobilize specific tactics to appropriate urban spaces, and their reactions to state spatial regulations.

Henri Lefebvre's writings on the spatial triad do not specify how these three "moments" of space interrelate (Merrifield, 1993). While some scholars divide space into three distinct segments and analyze them separately (see Tan, 2015; Watkins, 2005), Zhang (2006, p. 222) postulates that such an analysis can be supplemented with "shifting perspectives", whereby "we might compare conceived space, perceived space and lived space as three cameras projecting simultaneously onto any organizational event". We follow the latter approach here, arguing that the production of any given space is contingent on the simultaneous and dialectical interactions between each of the three moments of the spatial triad.

### ***Everyday politics***

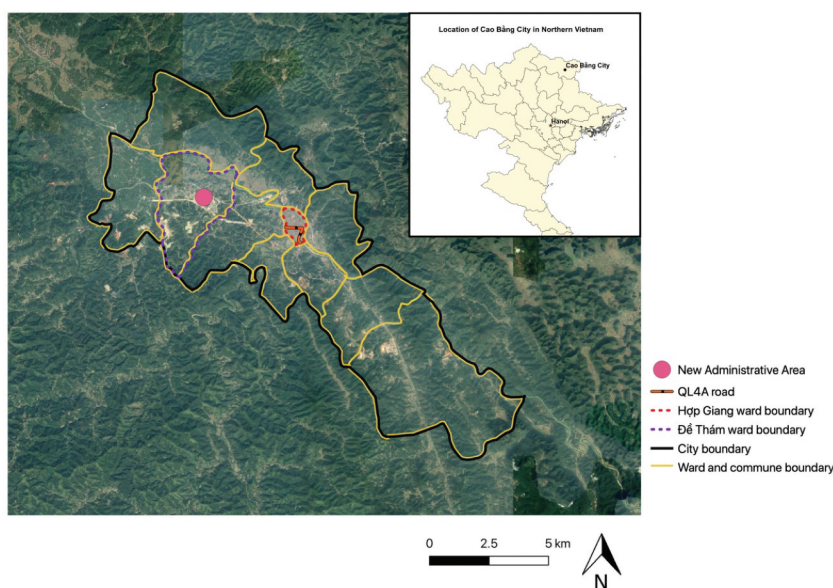
To more closely examine the experiences and spatial practices of Cao Bằng residents, broadly framed by Lefebvre's "lived space", we also draw on Ben Kerkvliet's (2009) concept of "everyday politics". Kerkvliet defines everyday politics as "people embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions" (Kerkvliet, 2009, p. 232). These everyday politics are further differentiated into four categories: support, compliance, modifications and evasions, and resistance. Kerkvliet (2009) defines support as individuals actively endorsing a prevailing political system, while compliance is engaging in supportive actions without any given thought. Modification and evasions occur when individuals demonstrate an indifference to a political system and "cut corners" to get by, while resistance here refers to actions individuals take in opposition to perceived injustices by those in more powerful positions. This final element is similar to James Scott's (1985) notion of "everyday resistance", namely the ordinary actions of subaltern populations that are subtle and non-direct ways of pushing back against those in power (see also Vinthagen & Johansson, 2013). We draw upon everyday politics to understand whether the "mundane actions" of Cao Bằng residents might be acts of resistance or other everyday political reactions to official regulations governing urban space.

### ***Cao Bằng province and city***

Cao Bằng Province is located in the far north of Vietnam, a mountainous region bordering Guangxi Province, China (Figure 1). Cao Bằng Province has 522,400 inhabitants spread across 12 districts, the vast majority of whom are rural-dwellers with livelihoods based predominantly on semi-subsistence agriculture (Cao Bằng Statistics Office, 2016). Located in the geographic center of the province, the capital Cao Bằng City is home to 68,600 residents. The city is centered on a peninsula at the confluence of the Bằng and Hiến rivers and is divided politically into eight urban wards and three rural communes<sup>1</sup> (shown in Figure 1).

The Vietnamese state's present-day plans and priorities for Cao Bằng City are best understood in the context of the region's recent history. Since the late 19th century, Cao Bằng Province has served as a center for cultural interfacing and economic exchange in the northern





**Figure 1.** Cao Bằng City, showing the official city communes and wards Sources: First author (2019) and CNES/Airbus (2019).

Vietnamese uplands. The area that is today's Cao Bằng Province was ruled by the French military administration from 1886 to 1954, and was part of the second *territoire militaire* from 1906 onwards (Michaud, 2013). Cao Bằng “town” was a regional administrative headquarters for the French, who established military outposts across the northern uplands to establish territorial control (Michaud, 2000). Cao Bằng town gradually became a hub for cross-border trade with China and home to small groups of diverse ethnicities including Tày and Nùng from the surrounding upland villages. Increasingly, Kinh (the lowland Vietnamese majority) laborers and traders also arrived from the Red River Delta, accompanying French bureaucrats and soldiers to the region (Billet, 1898, as cited in Korff et al., 2014), while Chinese merchants crossed the border to trade, with some settling in the town. Much of the city's contemporary spatial arrangement, including its road network and the location of prominent landmarks, is based on an original plan devised by French colonial authorities during this time.

Cao Bằng city was the site of two important military battles; one against French troops in 1949 and another against Chinese soldiers in 1979. Together, these led to the destruction of most of the city's buildings, with haphazard reconstruction processes due to limited state funding (oral histories, 2017). The city did not see significant investment until after the Vietnamese state initiated a series of market liberalization reforms known as *Đổi Mới* in the mid-1980s. These reforms increased inter-regional mobility by allowing citizens to exchange land leases and procure essential goods from small-scale private enterprises (Dang et al., 1997). By the 1990s, many rural-dwelling Vietnamese were migrating to pursue burgeoning economic opportunities in urban centers, including in Cao Bằng town, which received an increase in lowland Kinh migrants, as well as ethnic minority individuals from neighboring villages (oral histories 2017; Turner et al., 2020). With greater access to financial capital after *Đổi Mới*, Cao Bằng town residents were able to construct or renovate their homes, with a surge

in number of single-family houses, guided by few controls or inspections (oral histories, 2017). This was to change though, in the late 1990s, when the state began to take a closer interest in the growth and form of small cities in these uplands.

### Interpreting state planning visions for Cao Bằng City

National policy initiatives have played an integral role in shaping the urbanization trajectory of small Vietnamese cities since the late 1990s. In response to the accelerated expansion of Vietnam's largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, the central government has focused on dispersing economic growth and urban development across Vietnam's small and medium-sized urban centers (World Bank, 2011). Across Vietnam, the key policy mechanism developed to encourage and standardize urban development is a classification system that arranges six classes of urban centers in a hierarchal order, determined by specific factors including population, population density, economic activity, infrastructure, and physical development (World Bank, 2011).<sup>2</sup> Our observations in Cao Bằng City suggest that replicating this centralized model of urban development in the northern uplands often ignores the needs of local residents pursuing their livelihoods or attempting to access urban spaces, in favor of bolstering regional trade and economic activity.

The urban classification system allows for the implementation of national-level development objectives via specific urban policies at the local scale. Higher ranked cities gain more resources from the central state apparatus, with officials implementing related policies often individually benefitting as well. Municipal officials responsible for urban development are thus highly motivated to meet the specific criteria required for "their" urban locale to climb the classification ladder, rather than responding to local, context-specific needs (Coulthart et al., 2006). We found that Cao Bằng City's conceived space is no exception to this pattern, with city planners consistently aligning local planning directives with benchmarks set by the national classification system. While the Ministry of Construction upgraded Cao Bằng City's classification from a Class Four "town" to a Class Three "city" in 2012 (People's Committee of Cao Bằng Province, 2012), in 2017 we observed local officials already working to elevate the city's classification again. A planner working at the municipal Department of Construction confirmed: "The current goal for our department is to increase the city's classification to Class Two by 2020" (interview, 2017), a goal still to be reached as of October 2020.

Given that land area and population size are key criteria in Vietnam's urban classification system, increasing Cao Bằng City's physical area and population size continue to be core priorities in city planning. Communes from neighboring Hòa An district have already been redistricted and absorbed into Cao Bằng City's jurisdiction, with large parcels of land and population incrementally added to Cao Bằng's urban administrative boundaries in 2002 and 2010, before its classification upgrade to a Class Three city (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2010).

Alongside increasing Cao Bằng City's land area, state officials are also partitioning the cityscape into separate single-use zones, to be connected by an extensive road network (Vi, 2013). While the city center currently contains a mix of commercial, residential, and administrative functions in a compact area of 100 hectares, recent plans for mono-functional clusters have resulted in provincial government buildings being relocated to



a New Administrative Area in Đề Thám ward, five kilometers west of their current location. In turn, the mixed-use city center will be gradually transformed into a specialized hub for trade and commercial activity (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2010). Factories located around the city center are being relocated to new industrial zones in the urban periphery, with plans for an 80-hectare industrial park (People's Committee of Cao Bằng Province, 2016). Moreover, large-scale residential areas are planned on agricultural land east of the city center, in Sông Bằng ward, a controversial planning approach that emerged in Vietnam during the late 1990s (Labbé & Boudreau, 2011; People's Committee of Cao Bằng Province, 2012).

An urban development strategy which focuses on urban expansion, single-use zoning, and expansive roadways replicates planning observed elsewhere in the country in both lowland cities like Hanoi and other upland cities in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands like Lào Cai. Urban scholars have criticized these cities' planning approaches for producing fragmented urban spaces and increasing local reliance on private transportation, in turn exacerbating traffic congestion and environmental pollution (Henein et al., 2019; Labbé & Boudreau, 2011). Nonetheless, Cao Bằng City's urban planners are adamant in their aspirations to emulate these larger cities. When discussing the widening of the highway that connects Cao Bằng to Hanoi, a high-ranking member of the Architecture Association of Cao Bằng explained: "Like the roads in Hanoi, we want roads in Cao Bằng to be 20 meters wide" (interview, 2017). He also imagined the future spatial arrangement of Cao Bằng to replicate that of Lào Cai City which already has separate, designated areas for commercial, administrative, and residential purposes.

Expanding and developing northern upland cities like Cao Bằng and Lào Cai serve to bolster economic activity across the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, a region targeted for socio-economic development by both provincial and national officials. A recently constructed expressway connects Cao Bằng City to the newly inaugurated Trà Lĩnh international border gate, some 40 kilometers away. Provincial officials have planned for the city to serve as a trans-shipment point for Chinese goods entering Vietnam, and more generally as a crucial economic node between the northern upland region and Hanoi (People's Committee of Cao Bằng Province, 2012). In the following sections, we illuminate how these planning visions have been implemented by officials attempting to cultivate a sanitized and orderly city center, devoid of the entanglements and informalities found in mixed-use environments. This has resulted in the fragmentation of Cao Bằng City's built form while negatively impacting the livelihoods of residents, especially those already living in precarity.

### **Rapidly changing contemporary built form**

Urban planning policies adhering to the metrics of Vietnam's urban classification system have produced striking contrasts in Cao Bằng City's perceived space, notably between the sprawling, single-use development, satellite areas and the typical patterns of mixed-urban form in central Hợp Giang ward. The incremental (re)construction of Hợp Giang ward on the foundation of a street plan drafted by French colonial authorities has produced a highly contiguous urban fabric. Here, a blend of commercial, administrative, and residential land uses overlap to produce a densely populated, walkable core. Roads are typically narrow, allowing for no more than two lanes of traffic, and the relatively short

distances between intersections facilitate a high degree of connectivity within the peninsula (See [Figures 2](#) and [3](#)). Density in the ward is further achieved by the prevalence of “tube houses”; multi-story buildings characterized by significant depth, a narrow street frontage, and minimal space between each other, which proliferated across Vietnam in the years following *Đổi Mới* economic reforms (Kien, 2008).

Traversing Hợp Giang ward’s primary east-west axis, the *Quốc lộ 4A* or national highway 4A (QL4A), continues off the peninsula to Cao Bằng’s satellite neighborhoods and connects to intercity highways. As a result of the city’s expanding size (to upgrade the city’s classification), large tracts of agricultural land from surrounding communes have come under municipal jurisdiction. The emergence of low-density, single-use planning in these peri-urban locales is exemplified by Đề Thám ward, west of Hợp Giang, where authorities have levelled the terrain to construct a New Administrative Area, as noted previously. Unlike in Hợp Giang ward, pedestrian accessibility in Đề Thám ward is limited due to few sidewalks, along with increased road width, high traffic volume, and long block lengths. Here, the QL4A is lined with commercial towers, karaoke bars, and hotels, many constructed from steel and glass, and set back from the road by at least 10 meters to make room for vehicular parking, while being cordoned off by tall gates ([Figure 4](#)). The recent proliferation of these placeless towers mirrors similar changes to perceived space in Hanoi, where Nguyen and Kammeier (2002) observed the transformation of Hanoi’s French colonial quarter, from a dispersal of sprawling villas to an increasingly dense collection of high-rise office towers, apartment buildings, and hotels.

Following the QL4A, five kilometers west of the city center, is the New Administrative Area, characterized by spectacle-oriented, socialist architecture complete with wide boulevards, an expansive plaza, and monumental structures, as also found elsewhere in urban Vietnam ([Figure 5](#)). Scholars Logan (1994) and Matsumura (2013) have argued that state officials in post-independence Vietnam have used symbolic structures in open spaces to evoke the grandeur and scale of state power. Such a monumental locale on the city outskirts, coupled with the sprawling, low-density development of Đề Thám ward, testifies to the spatial transformations in progress in this small upland city.



**Figure 2.** A typical road in Hợp Giang ward. Source: First author (2017).



**Figure 3.** An alleyway in Hòp Giang ward. Source: First author (2017).

### **The right to a small city undergoing rapid change**

Through the rhetoric of state Master Plans and the construction of new buildings, highways, and urban areas, official imaginaries of Cao Bằng’s “modern” future are rapidly taking shape. However, local residents, particularly those excluded from participating in official urban ideals, interface with state planning initiatives in unexpected ways to create specific lived spaces and to assert their right to the city. Here, we draw on Kerkvliet’s (2009) everyday politics, to explore how residents support, comply, modify, or resist entanglements with state-led urban design and policy in two newly developed sites: the New Administrative Area, and the state’s “showpiece” boulevard in Cao Bằng’s city center, the QL4A road. We also focus on how residents’ ethnicity is being relegated to specific functions by state officials and the ramifications.



**Figure 4.** A recently constructed commercial establishment in Hợp Giang ward. Source: First author (2017).

### ***Clashes in the new administrative area***

The New Administrative Area was formerly agricultural land on which nearby village residents undertook rice paddy cultivation. This nearby village has since been demolished due to the city's expansion plans. During interviews, former residents expressed their frustrations regarding the recent changes and explained that many now return to appropriate space in the New Administrative Area to maintain their agricultural livelihoods. For example, a middle-aged farmer revealed that after land excavations began five years ago, he lost grazing pasture for his buffalo. He thus decided to bring his buffalo to graze on patches of undeveloped





**Figure 5.** The central plaza in the new administrative area. Source: First author (2017).

grassland around the central plaza of the New Administrative Area. Being fully aware that security patrols would disapprove of this practice, he maintained a clandestine daily routine for accessing the space undisturbed: “I bring my buffalo here everyday at 1 pm, when there’s no one here, and I stay until 5 or 6 pm, when other residents and the security guards start returning to the area” (interview, 2017).

A second elderly farmer explained that she takes advantage of the near-deserted central plaza of the New Administrative Area to sun-dry her rice crop. While still cultivating rice one kilometer away, the land where she dried her rice was confiscated by the state. When a security guard arrived during our interview and told her that her rice-drying was forbidden and she had to leave, she later confided to us: “I won’t come back tomorrow but I’ll return in the future. I know what I’m doing here is forbidden and once the government buildings are fully constructed, I won’t be able to come here at all” (interview, 2017). These farmers’ access to the New Administrative Area, while made complicated by security patrols, remains possible while construction is incomplete. It is unlikely to remain viable, however, once the area’s government offices are occupied. For the time being, the daytime lull in activity provides an opportunity for farmers like our interviewees to enact everyday politics, evading official space use restrictions to access a livelihood denied by encroaching urban development (Kerkvliet, 2009).

While not as frowned upon as the cases above, as evening approaches, other former villagers appropriate the pavement space surrounding the central plaza with makeshift stalls and plastic seating. From here, they sell beverages or rent out recreational equipment and toys to other city residents, mostly youth and families, who use the space for exercise and recreation. While the local government financially compensated local villagers to purchase homes elsewhere, many villagers can no longer pursue their agricultural livelihoods which relied on larger land tracts than they could afford to buy with the state’s compensation. Interviewees explained that these informal rental enterprises have therefore become one of their few remaining avenues to maintain a livelihood.

Kerkvliet (2009, p. 237) argues that in countries with political systems that emphasize social conformity and discipline, “any behaviour that is exceptional – out of line with

what authorities expect – is a transgression, a ‘genuine denial of the system’”. These former villagers are inscribing new functionalities – grazing pasture, crop processing sites, or small-scale commercial enterprises – to the spectacle-oriented space of the New Administrative Area that official policy had aimed to transform into an orderly, ceremonial space. Through such practices, residents re-inscribe “rurality” and informality onto the New Administrative Area, in turn articulating an everyday resistance to state-led urban transformations in the city’s periphery.

### ***No place for street vending on the QL4A showcase***

Street vending is a common livelihood option, especially for lower socio-economic status women, throughout urban Vietnam (Turner & Schoenberger, 2012). Yet, state authorities often place restrictions on street vending in the name of “urban beautification,” a tactic wherein officials draw upon discourses of “beauty” or “civilization” to restrict urban space use by certain populations (Appadurai, 2000). In Hanoi, vending has been banned from a number of specific streets and public spaces since 2008, with further police crackdowns during high-profile, international events, that attempt to project the image of a sanitized urban environment on the international stage (Eidse et al., 2016; Koh, 2008).

Likewise in Cao Bằng City, urban expansion and beautification goals have led local authorities to enact punitive measures on street vendors whose presence on highly “visible” sidewalks infringes on the orderly aesthetic local officials wish to project for the city. Ward-level officials regularly police street vending along the QL4A, where most provincial and municipal state buildings are currently located. It is here that Cao Bằng City is “on display” to visitors such as official delegations from Hanoi. As one vendor flatly remarked: “The government does not want us here vending in front of their buildings, because they think it looks unsightly to outsiders” (interview, 2017). While street vendors still attempt to take advantage of high traffic volumes here, ward officials frequently intervene, telling them to move elsewhere, or confiscating their equipment outright. Nonetheless, some vendors noted they are able to negotiate informal agreements with ward officials to continue their trade, with a “brown envelope” payment or due to social ties.

Indeed, we found that vending restrictions differ by place, the official involved, and the specific vendor. While interviewing a woman in her late sixties selling rice cakes opposite the provincial People’s Committee building on the QL4A, we observed the same ward official who had told other vendors to move away from the area completely, only requesting that this vendor confine her trading to the inner pavement. After the ward official left, the vendor explained: “The government does not bother me about my trade because I tell them I’m old and I have no family” (interview, 2017). Scholars researching street vendor livelihoods in Hanoi have noted similar tactics used there, with Turner and Schoenberger (2012) revealing how vendors mobilize self-narratives of poverty or war veteran status to convince ward authorities to “look the other way” when policing Hanoi’s sidewalks. To dispute the state’s control over small-scale commercial enterprises and public spaces, Cao Bằng street vendors perform subtle resistance measures such as relaying affective personal histories or defying official instructions outright; forms of everyday politics that allow them to challenge ward authorities (Kerkvliet, 2009).



### ***Placing ethnic diversity on show – selectively***

Cao Bằng Province as a whole is marked by a high degree of ethnic diversity, with Kinh (lowland Vietnamese majority) only comprising five percent of the province's population (General Statistical Office of Vietnam, 2009). By contrast, Cao Bằng City has a significant population of Kinh residents who have migrated from the lowlands to seek economic opportunities and who are gradually reducing the proportion of ethnic minorities (Turner et al., 2020). Since Independence, the Kinh-dominated Vietnamese government has consistently aimed to integrate “backwards” and “uncivilized” ethnic minority populations into the socialist state and the national economy (Sowerwine, 2011), rather than protecting ethnic minority customs, and cultures (McElwee, 2004; Turner & Pham, 2015). With regards to how ethnicity is incorporated into the state's conceived space ideals for Cao Bằng City, we find that ethnic minority identity and culture have been discursively relegated to the “rural” domain of mountain villages, while Cao Bằng City itself is imagined as the domain of the politically dominant, lowland Kinh culture.

This dichotomous rhetoric was reflected upon and confirmed by seven Kinh, one Nùng, and 12 Tày residents, to whom we asked questions regarding how ethnic minority cultural practices and identities have changed in Cao Bằng City over time. Some Kinh residents imagined the city as solely the domain of Kinh culture. For example, an elderly Kinh man (whose wife was Tày), became increasingly agitated when asked about ethnic minority culture in the city. He contended that once ethnic minority people move to the city, they leave their culture behind and assimilate into Kinh culture. Towards the end of our interview, he bluntly noted: “If you want to know about Tày people, go to the villages in the mountains, not here”. While Kinh respondents tended to brush off the importance of any minority cultural elements being present in the city, Tày interviewees were more contemplative of the specific ways by which their culture was being marginalized. A young Tày café worker lamented the decreasing presence of Tày heritage, stating: “I'm afraid the city is losing its Tày identity as lowlanders migrate to the city and as leaders from the lowlands take power in local government”. Similarly, a Tày government official bemoaned: “The loss of Tày heritage is an inevitable part of life in a modern city” (interview, 2017).

During fieldwork in the city, we observed no presence of Tày culture in the form of spoken language, attire, or ritual practices. Nor did interviewed officials or social planning documents reveal any initiatives to preserve or celebrate ethnic minority heritage in the city. *Provincial* state officials are however beginning to incorporate ethnic minority architectural motifs in Cao Bằng City's built form for the purposes of bolstering regional tourism and economic productivity. The Vice-President of the Architecture Association of Cao Bằng explained that select buildings in Cao Bằng City, such as a museum, will incorporate design motifs found in traditional Tày and Nùng village houses to highlight regional cultures for visitors (interview, 2017).

These recent state initiatives to accent select buildings in Cao Bằng City with ethnic minority aesthetics appear part of province-wide efforts to leverage local ethnic minority cultures to revitalize regional tourism (for similar cases elsewhere in Vietnam's uplands see Michaud & Turner, 2017; Ó'Briain, 2018). For example, in advertising for the nearby Cao Bằng “Geopark” (a sustainable tourism initiative sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), local ethnic minority groups are

promoted as an alluring attraction, with photographs of Tày men and women in their traditional clothes smiling alongside stilt-house architecture and scenes depicting ethnic minority festivals (Cao Bằng Geopark Steering Committee, n.d.). Encouraging minorities to retain more perfunctory elements of their culture, while abandoning those deemed “backwards”, emerged as a state strategy with the post-1975 “selective cultural preservation” policy that grants Vietnam’s ethnic minorities a right to cultural preservation as long as they do not hinder Socialist state progress (Michaud, 2009). The eagerness of local authorities to leverage ethnic minority culture for tourism may serve to strengthen regional economic development and in turn herald progress for the Vietnamese nation-state, however without policies safeguarding different elements of their cultural heritage and practice, ethnic minority residents of Cao Bằng City are left to face slow assimilation into the dominant Kinh culture.

### Small cities as tools for territorializing Vietnam’s uplands?

With approximately 70,000 individuals, Cao Bằng City is dwarfed in population size by other northern upland provincial capitals such as Lào Cai City (popn. 175,000) and Lạng Sơn City (popn. 150,000). Nonetheless, the state’s plans for Cao Bằng City closely resemble those reported for Lào Cai City, its regional big brother (Henein et al., 2019).<sup>3</sup> As with Lào Cai, official plans and policies for Cao Bằng City’s growth and urban form seek to create an orderly, “civilized” city, devoid of the “messiness” of mixed-land usage, ethnic discord, or informal livelihoods. These shared approaches make us question whether the state is enacting a form of “territorialization” in these upland urban locales.

We build our understanding of territorialization from the fundamental idea of territoriality, defined by Sack (1986, p. 19) as “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area.” Territoriality, Mann (1984) further argues, is an essential operation for the nation-state in maintaining “infrastructural power”, the ability to assert political authority and infiltrate the everyday affairs of civil society. In their analysis of state power and territoriality in Thailand, Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) focus specifically on *internal* territorialization, wherein the modern state asserts control over the provisioning of natural resources, alongside the people who access these resources, within national boundaries. These approaches inform our notion of “territorialization” in the Vietnamese context, where we see the central state exercising control over ethnic minority populations and natural resources in the northern uplands and assimilating them into the nation’s political and economic spheres.

In political scientist James C. Scott’s provocative book *“The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia”*, he suggests that the nation-states of Southeast Asia – including Vietnam – have long aimed to systematically territorialize the upland regions of their respective countries by sedenterizing and assimilating nomadic ethnic minorities as well as commodifying the region’s natural resources (Scott, 2009). Furthermore, he contends that by the end of World War Two, the territorialization of Southeast Asia’s uplands was almost complete, noting “the sovereign nation-state [in mainland Southeast Asia] is now busy projecting its power to its outermost territorial

borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty” (p. xii). Could Cao Bằng and other frontier cities in Vietnam’s northern frontier be experiencing this “mopping up?”

Contemporary scholars have theorized important mechanisms driving frontier dynamics and state territorialization projects elsewhere in Southeast Asia’s borderlands (Fold & Hirsch, 2009). In particular, scholars have emphasized the key role that the proliferation of agricultural cash crops (including timber, cassava, coffee, and rubber) has played in incorporating the region’s frontiers into national and global economic networks (Hall, 2011; Mahanty, 2018). Scholars working in Vietnam have highlighted the state’s mobilization of forest conservation policies and peasant settlers as mechanisms for territorializing the country’s uplands (e.g. McElwee, 2016; Sowerwine, 2004). Yet, there has been limited scholarly attention to the potential role of *urban* development as a mechanism for the state to territorialize its remote frontiers and the populations living there, either in Vietnam or elsewhere in the region.<sup>4</sup>

We argue the experience of Cao Bằng City points to an emerging, yet under-theorized pattern of territorialization wherein small cities in frontier regions of upland Vietnam are specifically targeted for development. Scholars have argued that small cities often play an intermediary role in facilitating population and resource exchange between rural and more urbanized areas (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Bolay & Rabinovich, 2004). As such, it is feasible that increasing control over the small cities of northern upland Vietnam would allow the central state to leverage the intermediary position of these cities to assimilate the region’s remaining out-of-reach people and resources.<sup>5</sup> The disappearance of ethnic minority heritage and practices in Cao Bằng City also suggests that ethnic minority residents are continuing to be assimilated into the national – that is Kinh – sphere (Michaud, 2009; Sowerwine, 2011). In exchange, key infrastructural investment will ensure truck-loads of international goods can be processed in the city and distributed to the nation at-large (Ngoc, 2013). While this incorporation of the small, yet rapidly growing, urban spaces of the northern uplands within the Vietnamese nation-state facilitates the reliable flow of capital and resources that politicians desire, we have highlighted the homogenization faced by ethnic minority individuals and the disruption and ongoing marginalization of livelihoods deemed peripheral to the state’s territorialization project.

## Concluding thoughts

Based on the evidence from our case study and ongoing observations in these uplands since 1999, it appears that Vietnamese state officials are integrating small upland cities like Cao Bằng into the economic and political spheres of the Vietnamese nation-state, as diligently as possible. From our analysis of Cao Bằng Province’s Master Plans, it is clear that the city’s conceived space is directly tied to national, regional, and provincial socio-economic development strategies. These and other policy documents reveal that the central state aims to promote economic opportunities in the nation’s smaller cities partly to curb high levels of migration to the largest Vietnamese cities (Coulthart et al., 2006). Highlighting the city’s “intermediary” position, Cao Bằng’s provincial documents also argue for the strategic development of Cao Bằng City, bringing industrialization and modernization to the province at-large, as well as promoting cross-border trade with China (Ngoc, 2013). The central government pursues such goals through institutionalized policy mechanisms and incentives, including a hierarchical urban classification system, to ensure peripheral cities develop in close adherence to national development strategies (Prime Minister of Vietnam, 2014).

Nationally mandated visions of modernity and economic development are thus driving the rapid transformations of Cao Bằng City's perceived space – notably its built form and spatial arrangement. We have observed construction projects for high-rise hotels, grandiose state buildings, as well as expansive roadways leading to new urban development projects in the city's peri-urban districts. The resulting landscape is highly fragmented and characterized by nodes of single-use development that are only connected by broad roadways. Ultimately, by circulating a uniform urban landscape model from Hanoi (Labbé & Boudreau, 2011) to this small upland city, regional urban characteristics and identity are eroded in favor of a “modern” yet placeless cityscape. This is confirmed further by the leveraging of regional ethnic minority cultures through selective cultural preservation and “othering” that affirms urban Vietnam as the domain of the Kinh ethnic majority.

The territorialization of Cao Bằng City thus appears fairly complete. However, we cannot ignore the contestations regarding this process. The state's “modern” cityscape ideal is inconsistent with the lived space and space-use norms and requirements of many local urban residents, especially those of lower socio-economic status, such as displaced farmers and street vendors. Mobilizing conceptual ideas from everyday politics and resistance literatures reveals how such residents push back against formalized and sanctioned space-use policies, and by extension, the upland territorialization project at-large, through everyday, oft-covert spatial appropriation tactics.

Investigating the novel intersections between territorial regimes of urbanization and local space use in Cao Bằng City offers a sound response to scholarly calls for documenting urban experiences from a range of “ordinary” cities in the Global South that are oft-ignored in urban literature (Parnell & Robinson, 2012). While urban studies scholarship has yet to realize a cohesive framework for interpreting the experiences of small cities, we hope we have highlighted elements from the experiences of Cao Bằng City that could be incorporated into such a “small city” framework. Scholars have emphasized the importance of mobilizing relational metrics when determining “smallness” (Bell & Jayne 2009; Véron, 2010), and how small cities act as intermediaries between smaller and larger scales of human settlement. Cao Bằng City mediates between the resources and peoples of the northern upland region and the Vietnamese nation-state. The experiences of Cao Bằng City offer a glimpse into how this role of intermediacy shapes how a small city – particularly a frontier city within a market socialist context – is conceived, constructed, and lived in. Through centralized planning mechanisms, the Vietnamese state's territorialization project is shaping a progressive uniformity in Vietnam's upland small cities (Henein et al., 2019). We nevertheless find that a diverse cadre of local actors are pushing back against this standardization in their everyday tactics to assert their rights to livelihoods and access to urban spaces, producing a dynamic, continually contested small city.

## Notes

1. These eight wards are: Sông Bằng, Duyệt Trung, Tân Giang, Hoà Chung, Đề Thám, Ngọc Xuân, Hợp Giang, and Sông Hiến; and three rural communes of Vĩnh Quang, Chu Trinh, and Hưng Đạo (Cao Bằng Statistics Office, 2016). A city in Vietnam can be officially comprised of urban wards and rural communes.
2. Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are Vietnam's two Special Class cities which are highest in the hierarchy, followed by Classes One through Five.

3. Unlike Cao Bằng City, Lào Cai City is physically situated directly on the Sino-Vietnamese border, across the Red River from Hekou, China. Lào Cai City is more prominent as a site of contemporary cross-border trade and point of transit for both goods and travellers between Vietnam and China.
4. Interestingly, scholars have examined how the development of small settlements may enact *transnational* territorialization in the frontier regions of Myanmar and Laos, bordering China. Here, Chinese corporations have been granted land concessions to construct tourist infrastructure, resulting in the proliferation of communities that increasingly resemble Chinese exclaves (Nyíri, 2012; Than, 2016). Yet this is far less likely to occur in Vietnam's uplands, given China and Vietnam's long antagonistic history.
5. This pattern is evident in China's neighboring Yunnan province, as two recent studies have shown. There, Chinese state officials are keen to develop the small city of Ruili, due to its strategic location for importing products from neighbouring Myanmar and developing an expanding trade network between China, Myanmar, and the broader Southeast Asian region (Qian & Tang, 2019). Meanwhile, officials in Jinghong city, southwest Yunnan, much like in our study site of Cao Bằng City, have marketed an exoticized narrative of local ethnic culture to promote tourism and have instigated a campaign of modernization in what is regarded a "backwards" region (Neo & Pow, 2015).

## Disclosure statement

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