

Hanoi's Ancient Quarter Traders: Resilient Livelihoods in a Rapidly Transforming City

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[Paper first received, July 2007; in final form, March 2008]

Abstract

Within the rapidly transforming city of Hanoi, Vietnam's capital, lies the Ancient Quarter, home to a broad array of small entrepreneurs and traders since the 13th century. Utilising a longitudinal study approach, supported by a livelihoods framework, this paper investigates the impacts of both historical political and economic policies and current market economic reforms on Ancient Quarter trader livelihoods. Drawing on oral histories with elderly residents and interviews with current traders, it analyses the influence of French colonial rule and the First Indochina War, before turning to ascertain the consequences of the socialist period and the Second Indochina War. By doing so, the paper reveals the diverse livelihood strategies that traders have put in place to survive through these turbulent times.

Introduction

Since the introduction of the 1986 *Đổi Mới* market economic reforms in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, rapid changes have been occurring in the country's major urban locales such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Targeted most frequently for foreign direct investment, these metropolitan areas display the highest per capita income in the country (Waibel, 2004). From the early 1990s, the built environment of the capital city of Hanoi, whose population now exceeds 3 million,

has been transforming and expanding substantially, chiefly in an uncontrolled manner. Areas on the periphery of the city are experiencing the pressures of city growth as rural land is turned into high-density urban forms. A sharp increase in unregulated and illegal building activities has occurred and land prices in the central city have skyrocketed.¹ Concurrently, there has been a dramatic rise in private businesses and a notable increase in public sites of consumption, due in part to a growing middle class. Such growth has not been without its downsides, however, and

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intraurban social disparities have been rising simultaneously (see among others Rossi and Pham, 2002; Thomas, 2002; van den Berg *et al.*, 2003; Koh, 2004; Waibel, 2004; van Horen, 2005; Bradsher, 2006).

In Hanoi, three notable players stand out regarding the recent building boom and urban development. First, the state is planning many new residential areas on the periphery of the city. Boasting superior infrastructure services, these sites, some also supported by overseas private developers, are being marketed to the rapidly growing number of upper- and middle-class urban residents. Secondly, overseas and domestic investors have tended to concentrate on the French colonial quarter of the city to date, with its French-style mansions and large villas in need of repair and restoration to their former grandeur for use as office buildings and upscale restaurants. Thirdly, and the focus of this paper, local residents have been key players in the shaping and reshaping of the city's Ancient Quarter (Leaf, 2002; Waibel, 2004).

Located in the historical heart of Hanoi, the Ancient Quarter of 36 *phố phường*, has been home to a broad array of small entrepreneurs since the 13th century. The Quarter lies to the north of Ho Hoan Kiem (the Lake of the Restored Sword), to the west of the Red River and to the east of the ancient citadel area (Figure 1). It was originally the locale for craftspeople and traders who, arranged in *phường* or neighbourhoods, undertook activities such as lacquer painting, silver jewellery production and silk dyeing. More recently, the area has come to house numerous small scale enterprises and trading firms selling commodities from household goods to tourist handicrafts and operating Internet cafés and small hotels. The Quarter is a lively location as shown in Figure 2, with non-stop traffic, numerous narrow lanes running between the wider, constantly busy and noisy streets, and shops displaying their wares pouring

out over the sidewalks (until police remind shopkeepers to move their goods back to official boundaries). In terms of its current administration, the Quarter, detailed in Figure 3, is part of the central-city district of Hoan Kiem covering 529 hectares (van den Berg *et al.*, 2003, p. 37), with an approximate population of 165 080 people (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1999).

Initially the site of craft production for the imperial court during imperial rule (1010–1800),² the Quarter began to include a broader range of activities after the court moved south in 1802. From 1883 when French colonial rule commenced, to the beginning of the First Indochina War in 1946, the Quarter changed again in both spatial and occupational characteristics, before a turbulent 30-year span of wars and occupations brought trade in the Quarter to a virtual—but not complete—standstill until 1975. Socialist rule was then more fully realised during the ensuing calmer period, with the co-operative system transposed over previous trading forms. Since 1986 when the Vietnamese economy opened up to a more capitalist economic style of operation, albeit still with socialist overtones, the Quarter has yet again been transformed.

Nowadays, in the Ancient Quarter—one of the most densely spatially organised commercial and residential areas in south-east Asia—a rapid increase in land prices is underway. Development pressures are intense and many former residential buildings are being converted into commercial sites, including 'mini-hotels' to cater for growing local and overseas consumers.³ Revitalisation of the Quarter has become a cause of displacement—a cause quite different from those experienced in the past—resulting in an unexpected demographic change as residential population densities in the area decrease (Waibel, 2004). At the same time, new forms of trade competition are locating right on the Quarter's

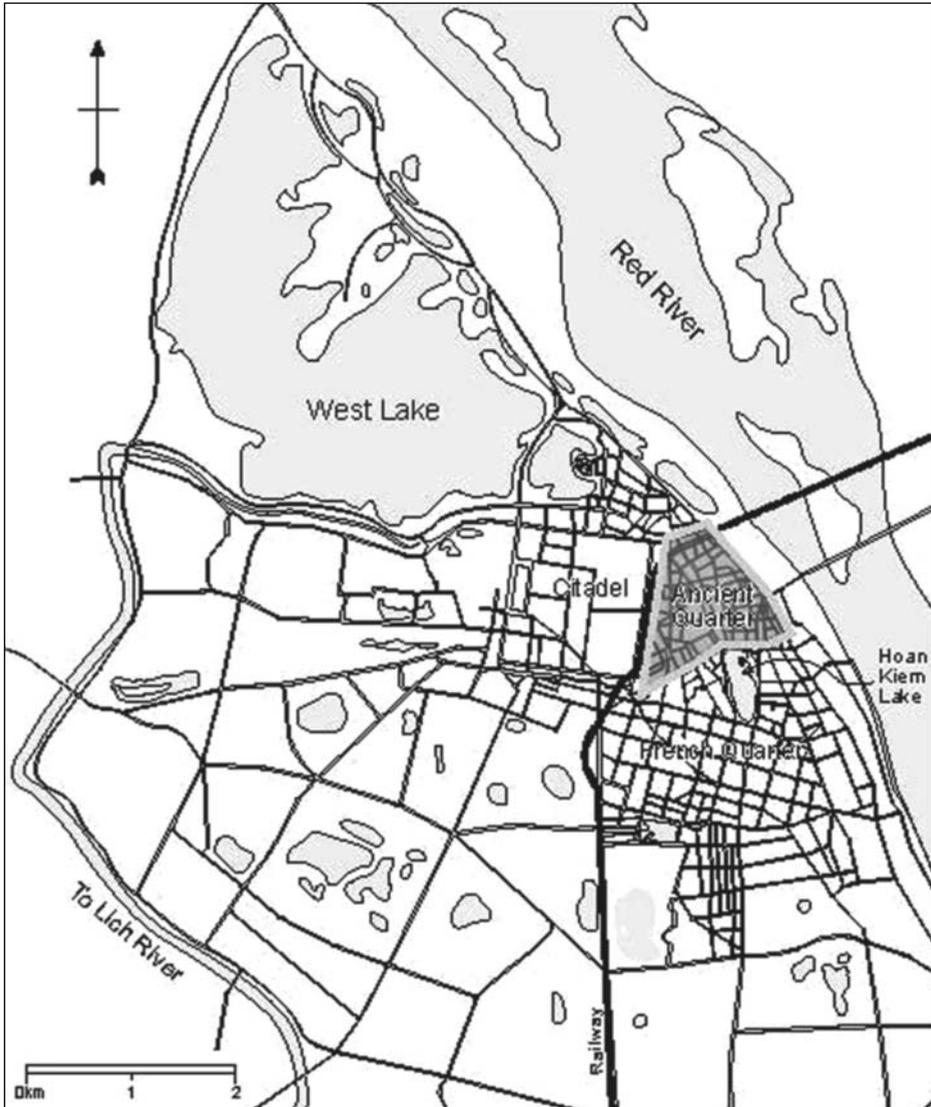


Figure 1. The Ancient Quarter and surrounding landmarks, Hanoi

Source: Adapted from Vietnam Ministry of Construction (1999)

doorstep: new supermarkets entice the middle-class consumer, selling goods imported from around the world; while upscale modern shopping malls and boutiques are located close by (Moustier *et al.*, 2006; Jensen and Peppard, 2007; Maruyama and Le Viet Trung, 2007). With accession to the World Trade Organisation in 2006, Vietnam is opening its

doors even further to global trends in competition and consumption (Han, 2008).

In the context of a rapidly changing capital city, then, this article explores the livelihood activities of small entrepreneurs and traders in this Ancient Quarter, a site that reveals complex features of both dislocation and regeneration. Drawing primarily upon the



Figure 2. A typical trading street in the Ancient Quarter

Source: author.

narratives of elderly traders I analyse how, through dramatic political and economic regime changes, these traders, and others around them have continued to sustain a living.⁴ I ask: with such a turbulent past, is it possible that some current trader livelihoods in the Ancient Quarter are historically rooted? If so, what have been the techniques and practices that they have drawn upon to survive through time? And how have recent economic and political institutional decisions impacted upon the trading practices and livelihoods of traders currently operating in this locale? This discussion is presented in four sections. First, I draw upon livelihood literature to establish a conceptual framework for this study. Secondly, I set the scene for the analysis by briefly contextualising the Ancient Quarter with regard to its establishment in the 13th century to colonial times in the early 1880s. Thirdly, the paper explores, from the end of the French colonial period in 1954 to

2008, the different strategies that traders have used to maintain their livelihoods and to survive in the political and economic conditions of the time. Finally, I consider how these adaptations are reflected today in the livelihoods of those continuing to trade in the Ancient Quarter.⁵

Conceptualising Ancient Quarter Livelihoods

Livelihood studies are increasingly facilitating an improved understanding of individual and household income-generating approaches in developing countries. While there are a number of different livelihood approaches employed, they have as their underlying stand-point the need to understand how combinations of assets (forms of capital that include human, social, financial, physical and natural),⁶ and vulnerabilities, as well as strategies (how people organise or take

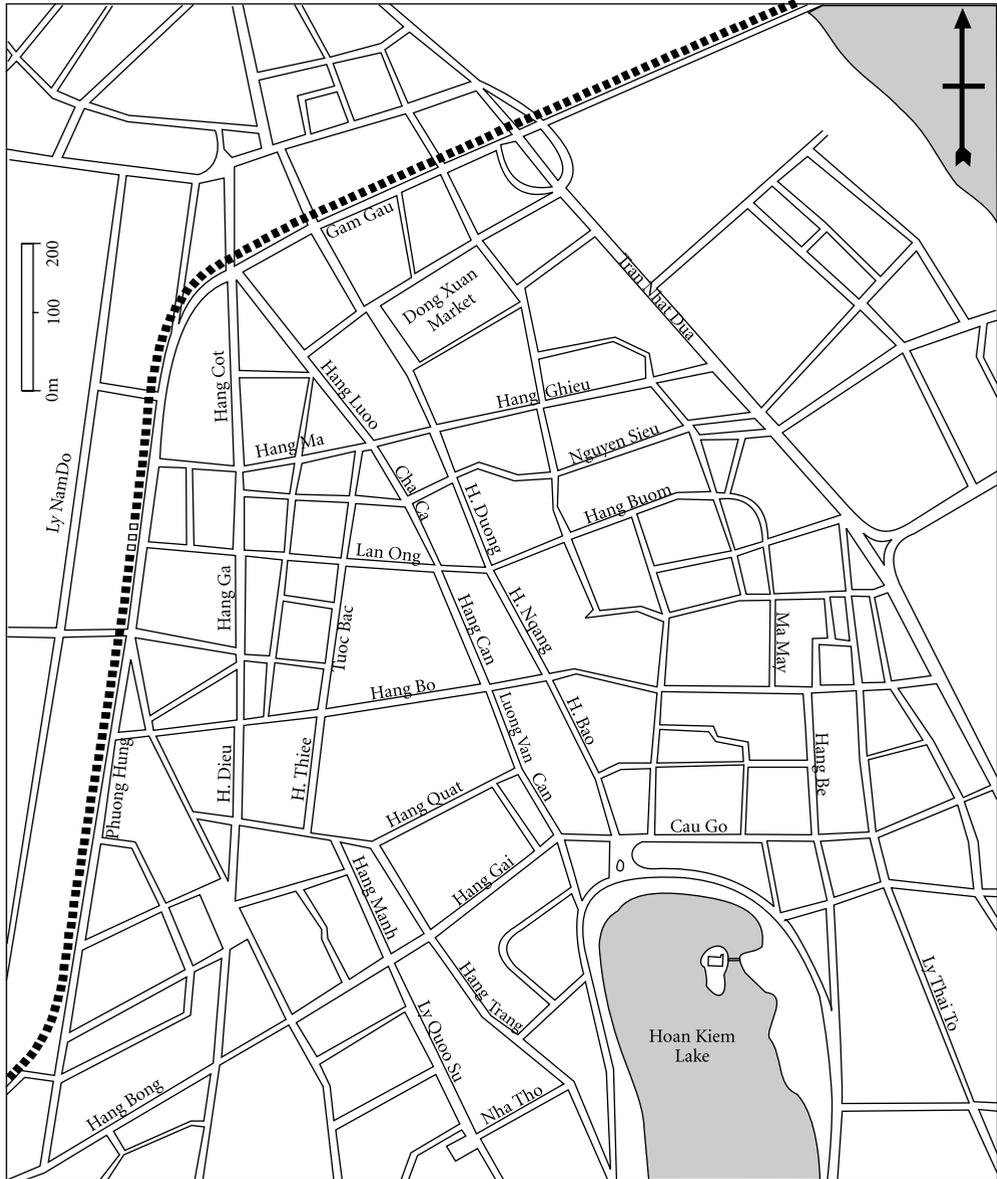


Figure 3. The streets of the Ancient Quarter, Hanoi

Source: Adapted from Vietnam Ministry of Construction (1999).

advantage of existing assets) and access or barriers to resources (which can include social relations, ideologies and institutions) shape different livelihood outcomes (Chambers and Conway, 1991; de Hann and Zoomers, 2005; Ellis, 2000; Rakodi, 2002).

Building on such an approach, especially important to this particular study is an awareness of how livelihoods can be shaped by policies, institutions and processes, including “the operation of government and institutions, legal restrictions and market forces that in

turn are influenced by the cultural and political landscape” (Brown 2006, p. 15). With Vietnam’s turbulent political history, this institutional framework must be taken into central consideration to understand Ancient Quarter trader decision-making strategies. In addition, analysing vulnerability means that we should study not only potential threats to livelihoods, but also trader resilience, that is “their ability to mobilize assets to exploit opportunities and resist or recover from the negative effects of the changing environment” (Rakodi, 2002, p. 15; see also Adger, 2000; Adger *et al.*, 2002).

Thus, to endure in such an environment—one that has rarely been static in Vietnam—it is necessary that livelihoods are reactive and flexible to shifts in the conditions that shape them (Hapke and Ayyankaril, 2004). An understanding of this need has led to the development of the term ‘sustainable livelihood’—namely, one that can

cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term (Chambers and Conway, 1991, p. 6).⁷

An additional value in applying this concept to the current study is that it introduces the notion of “long-term flexibility” (de Haan and Zoomers, 2005, p. 31), thus stressing the importance of understanding access to different capitals over time. Indeed, Bouahom *et al.* (2004, p. 615) have argued that the fluidity of livelihoods has been largely ignored to date and that “the extent to which livelihoods are being constantly reworked, particularly when the wider economic context is fluid, is often underplayed”. An investigation of this reworking of trader livelihoods in the face of fluid economic and political contexts is at the core of this paper.

The Pre-colonial Ancient Quarter

Historical records that include explicit references to the Ancient Quarter date from the year 1010 when King Ly Thai To moved his capital to the site. The capital was then divided into two sections, the Royal Citadel and the Commoners City and it is from the latter that the Ancient Quarter emerged. The origins of trade here stem from court workshops in which conscripted labour produced goods for the nobility such as brocade and fans. The craftspeople were organised into craft associations or guilds that occupied and controlled a certain length of street, divided from each other at night by gates preventing free movement. The streets were named after the guilds, hence the origins of the alternative name the area is known by, the 36 *phố phường* (Logan, 1994; Papin, 2001).⁸ People of the same occupational group lived close to each other, were members of the same guild, often came from the same village and maintained close village contacts (Hoang and Nishimura, 1992; Huu, 1998; T. H. Nguyen, 2002). These guilds acted as a multidimensional space that, like the village, had their own customs, festivals, cults, spirits and territory. Indeed, Papin (2001, p. 176), has labelled each of these *phường* a ‘village in the town’ (see also Masson, 1929/1983; Papin, 1998; V. K. Nguyen, 2002).

Hanoi was to be modified significantly in its political status when, in 1802, Emperor Gia-Long moved the capital to Hue in central Vietnam. This resulted in major changes for the traders and merchants in the Ancient Quarter, since certain crafts moved to Hue with the court, such as minting coins, that remained officially forbidden elsewhere. Other traders arrived in the Ancient Quarter, however, and local and overseas trade flourished. By 1873, the Ancient Quarter was becoming increasingly crowded as a range of talented craftspeople moved there producing

goods such as lacquer work, mother-of-pearl inlaying and embroidery (Hoang and Nishimura, 1992). Funds earned in the city could not be easily invested elsewhere other than in the rural village, where the roots of the community's social fabric remained. Such wealth was highly visible there through purchases of land and conspicuous consumption by the urban-dwellers, opening the door to honours and social promotion. To have possessions in the rural village was a constant preoccupation, reinforcing links between the city and the village (Papin, 2001).

Transformations of Ancient Quarter Livelihoods

Colonial Rule until the First Indochina War 1883–1946

The French conquered Hanoi in 1883, changing its status again, labelling it a 'first-class city', along with Hai Phong and Saigon. Four years later, Hanoi became the capital of the French Indochinese Union, comprised of the protectorates of Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia and Laos, and the colony of Cochinchina (Logan, 2000). Nevertheless, in the early 1880s, the city's commercial area was nearly totally destroyed by looting and arson undertaken by the 'Black Flags', a group of Chinese pirates and irregulars (Huu, 1998). As a result, the Ancient Quarter had to be rebuilt and most of the buildings in the area today post-date the arrival of the French (Logan, 1994). By the late 1880s, the gates that had stood between the different guilds were removed and, in 1889, Dong Xuan market, in the north-eastern corner of the Ancient Quarter (shown in Figure 3), was built by the French colonial administration (Logan, 1994; Huu, 1998). Situated close to the Red River, boats with merchandise could stop to unload and the market acted as a wholesale trade site—as it still does today—with products arriving from all over the country to be retailed by other traders, regularly

those in the Ancient Quarter (Huu, 1998; ID17 19 June 2000).

During this period, the infrastructure of the Ancient Quarter was modified to meet the demands of an emerging well-to-do merchant class who sought two-storeyed accommodation, whereas previous regulations had kept houses single-storey, lower than the King's palace (Hoang and Nishimura, 1992; Matics, 1994). Seventy-year-old Trung reminisced from his parents' stories of that time

Drastic changes were found in houses in the old street Hang Dong after Hanoi was occupied by the French. There was the realignment of the street, the installation of drainage, pavement and lighting. The road was asphalted. Thatch houses were replaced with brick-walled and tile-roofed houses (Trung, OH, 6 July 2005).

Nga, an 84-year-old woman retired from selling jute, remembered that in the early years of the 20th century

most homes were one and two floors ... at that time the road was very clean, beautiful and clear. No one threw rubbish into the street as now because Vietnamese and foreign police used to patrol in the streets, families would be punished for throwing rubbish (Nga, OH, 4 July 2005).

Hung, a 63-year-old, recalls his father telling him about the streetscapes and trade during those years

People did not encroach on pavements to sell goods [like they do now] ... sometimes several French cars carrying families who went to eat passed the street. In the evenings, the people of the street still carried water with shoulder poles from a public hydrant ... in that period, trading was easy and comfortable, there were a lot of kinds of goods for customers to choose from, meeting the demands of people at that time (Hung, OH, 21 July 2005).

The demands of customers could be met all the more by the 1930s when the market and

surrounding shops were selling a far wider range of goods than in the past, including fruit such as apples and oranges imported from as far away as Hong Kong and San Francisco, as well as luxury vegetables like cauliflower and celery grown in highland areas such as Da Lat and Chapa (today's Sa Pa). During two oral histories, Hung (21 July 2005) noted that French goods were especially favoured, while Nga (4 July 2005) recalled "footwear, wooden shoes, cow-hide, buffalo-hide, pelt, rope, cord, tailor shops, camera shops and candy shops" all traded on or near the street where she lived in the Quarter at that time.

Troubled Times

First Indochina War, 1946–1954. Ho Chi Minh unilaterally declared Independence on 2 September 1945. Just over a year later, in December 1946, the First Indochina War broke out and after the fighting that followed between the Viet Minh and the French (aided by the Republican Chinese and British), the colonial forces regained control of Hanoi in 1947. During this period of upheaval (especially December 1946 to February 1947), all of Hanoi's essential services were destroyed, along with nearly all of its industry, yet for the most part the Ancient Quarter survived, with the majority of the destruction occurring in Hanoi's suburban zones. Nevertheless, by 1948–49 it was estimated that the population of Hanoi may have dropped to as low as 10 000 people, in comparison with 120 000 in 1943 due to mass out-migration to the surrounding rural areas (Turley, 1975, p. 371). Kien, a 79-year-old man who used to trade vegetable cooking oil, remembered that almost all the streets were evacuated, leaving behind a deserted Quarter until residents gradually returned from evacuation in 1948 (Kien, OH, 8 July 2005).

The French retook control of the city again between 1947 and 1954, albeit under a constant state of siege from Ho Chi Minh's forces in the countryside. At this time, the industrial

base which had been destroyed was not rebuilt (Thrift and Forbes, 1986). It became increasingly difficult to feed the city's population locally, in part due to 'insurgents' in the surrounding countryside, and the city grew ever more dependent on external sources so that, by 1954, 70–80 per cent of Hanoi's rice was arriving from Saigon. However, the distribution of such essential goods required traders and a number—many previously resident in Hanoi wishing to return to trade, as well as others not before living in the capital—arrived in the city.

By mid-1954, about 40,000 market stall keepers, shop owners, peddlers and sidewalk hawkers served the metropolitan area of 400,000, and one family in every two made its living from trade (Turley, 1975, p. 373).

Kien, introduced earlier, noted that during this period

life was hard, but the spirit of the street's residents was happy—everyone longed for liberty and they were all whole-heartedly with the Communist Party and the state (Kien, OH, 8 July 2005).

Interwar period, 1955–64. In July 1954, the Geneva Accord halted the First Indochina War and divided the country along the 17th parallel, recognising the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under socialist control in the north (Logan, 1994). As a consequence, Hanoi was definitively cut off from its main supplier of goods, its colonial power France, and there remained only eight small privately owned factories in the city, alongside 496 small private machine shops. These shops were poorly equipped and, due to a lack of raw materials, only operated intermittently (Thrift and Forbes 1986).

An exodus to the Republic of Vietnam in the south took place by the northern capitalists who had operated under French rule, along with the more successful amongst the petty bourgeoisie. Because many of these had been

living in the Ancient Quarter, the district became predominantly repopulated with newcomers, many of whom were war refugees returning to the city from the rural countryside to which they had fled (KI 3, 2000). It was at this stage that one of the most significant breaks from the previous traditions of Ancient Quarter livelihoods occurred. A number of these newcomers were settled in the area under the specific direction of the state, it having been decided that each local district was to house a certain number of police, teachers, medical doctors and so on. Hence, many newcomers were situated in the Ancient Quarter to meet these criteria, while others were Party members rewarded for their war efforts by being allowed to occupy the houses of those who had left (KI 9, 2003). Thuy, a 70-year-old woman selling sedge matting, remembered that

the state managed the migration and allocated dwelling places to people who had participated in the nation's war. One house was divided for two to three households (Thuy, OH, 12 July 2005).

Nga also recalled that

the residents of Hang Dieu [see Figure 3] in particular were much muddled [*sic*] with one-third of the people in the street moving to the south before October 1954. A number of people in the old resistance areas or in other areas moved in to live in the street (Nga, OH, 4 July 2005).

During the two years of 1955 and 1956, private enterprise was tolerated and even allowed to increase in an effort to reduce unemployment (Turley 1975). Then, in 1958, along with the rest of the country, Hanoi began to implement the government's three-year plan (1958–60) to socialise all existing and new industries. State trade was heavily emphasised and markets such as Dong Xuan and street stalls declined in activity (Huu, 1998). Nga could clearly describe the situation in Hang Dieu street, conditions that

reflected the Vietnam state's specific take on socialism

There were five or seven families who were regarded as 'industrial bourgeoisies'. They had to make a self-criticism on their trading processes, after that they made a list of properties including capital, stores, means of production, facilities and transportation means. And then they submitted the self-criticism and lists for the city industrial and commercial transformation board's inspection and approval. Relying on that, entrepreneurs would be confirmed to be improved bourgeoisies and were allowed to put up banners with golden words 'a joint state and private undertaking'. After completing that process, they would have a joint business and they were considered to have made a financial contribution to state business (Nga, OH, 4 July 2005).⁹

Coping with such drastic realignments to their livelihoods, these traders also paid monthly interest on their stock to the government, but found that their trade suffered considerably, some closing shortly after the conversion (Nga, OH, 4 July 2005).¹⁰ Most commonly, traders in the Ancient Quarter became part of larger collectives and by 1960 the collectivisation of Hanoi's small industries and handicrafts was nearly complete, with 95 per cent of craftspeople having joined production or service co-operatives (Thrift and Forbes 1986). Minh, a male 80-year-old retired rice vendor, clearly recalled that

especially in 1960 the state required individual businessmen to join co-operatives. This made a great impact to business here. Some households stopped their business (Minh, OH, 15 July 2005).

Others who became co-operative members appeared to fare slightly better, as was the case for Duc, a 69-year-old man who had been a member of the 'Hong Thai co-operative' of welders. He reported that

the co-operative operated well and was relatively prosperous. However, incomes of the

workers were just enough to eat, not plentiful enough to save (Duc, OH, 19 July 2005).

Many interviewees recalled the difficulties during this period in the Ancient Quarter. Ration coupons were used for staple goods such as sugar, rice, cloth and meat that could only be obtained at state-operated stores and small trade was actively discouraged. Many of the entrepreneurs in the Old Quarter limited their activities or closed their doors completely, afraid of being accused of being “capitalist exploiters” (Nga, OH, 4 July 2005). Kien (OH, 8 July 2005) remembered it as a “poor and tough time. It was a shabby life and there were shortages of food and clothes”. It is interesting to note though, that a few traders of ‘illegal goods’ during that period managed to keep their livelihoods afloat, trading behind closed doors, such as Hue’s father who sold religious statues, flags and wall plaques (ID2, 15 June 2000). People knew where to purchase these items by word of mouth, but goods were kept well out of sight at the back of the family’s home. Such tactics point to the diverse livelihood strategies put in place during this time to survive in a political environment hostile to small enterprise trade. These days, Hue continues to sell such goods, now openly.

Second Indochina War, 1965–75.¹¹ In February 1965, after American air strikes in the north, the order was given to evacuate children and old people, and approximately 50 000 people left the city. Then, after operation ‘Rolling Thunder’ heavily bombed Hanoi in April 1966

only the indispensable were allowed to remain in the city. Artisans, teachers, small shopkeepers, children and day labourers all had to leave (Thrift and Forbes, 1986, p. 146).

It is estimated that perhaps as much as another third to half of the city’s population left, from a total of around 750 000, although many

returned shortly afterwards (Turley, 1975). The year 1968 saw the city’s commercial activities grind to a near-halt with the government discouraging migration back to the city, until bombing stopped in November of the same year (Hoang and Nishimura, 1992). Yet the respite was brief and, while the city’s population rapidly swelled again to 1.2 million with return evacuees, it was to be reduced yet again in 1972 when bombing resumed. This time, up to 75 per cent of the city’s inner population was evacuated and between 550 000 and 720 000 people in total moved from Hanoi (Thrift and Forbes, 1986).

During these bombing raids, the Ancient Quarter, being of little strategic importance, remained fairly intact although certainly not untouched, while its pavements were “practically deserted” of human activity (KI 7, 2003; see also Hoang and Nishimura, 1992).¹² Being located close to the Red River, Ma May street (Figure 3) was bombed in 1972, an event that 84-year-old Anh remembered clearly. She elaborated

American planes bombed Ma May street. To save lives and to make travelling more convenient, residents dug shelter-pits along the road sides. These were about three to five metres long a pit. Houses and streets were connected to each other underground. People had to worry about food all day long so they had no time and money to think of other necessities (Anh, OH, 15 July 2005).

On the cessation of bombing in the North in 1973, in-migration was rapid. Yet, although the city was expanding quickly, due to infrastructural chaos it was only the city’s handicraft sector and some small individual businesses that were able to maintain an increasing level of output. It was thus accepted that Hanoi’s ‘quasi-private’ handicraft sector could increase production to help the reconstruction effort in a temporary deviation from long-term socialist goals, demonstrating how not only war, but also state economic policies, directly

impacted upon trader livelihoods at this time (KI 8, 2003).

Socialist Rule since 1975

After the fall of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in 1975, Hanoi became the capital of the reunited Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The city's population continued to grow, so that by 1979 Hoan Kiem district, in which the Ancient Quarter is located, had a population of 154 000 people (Thrift and Forbes, 1986, p. 149). With socialist rule still in place, the majority of trader livelihoods in the Ancient Quarter remained within co-operatives, although many were "low-level" meaning that traders jointly purchased goods yet continued individually to ply their trade" (Abrami, 2002, p. 96). Other traders became linked to state production more directly, producing goods on site that were then sold through state outlets elsewhere. In a few cases, shop houses in the Ancient Quarter became outlets for state production—for example, shoes produced in factories on the outskirts of the city were traded for coupons in shops in the Ancient Quarter (KI 4 and 6, 2001).

Post-war trade diversified fairly quickly and throughout Hanoi, including the Ancient Quarter, goods could be found from Ho Chi Minh City as early as 1976, due to previous trading links—often family-based—between there and Hanoi having been renewed (Hoang and Nishimura, 1992). A black market trade was also emerging to fill gaps in the socialist system and a small number of Western consumer goods, most of which were smuggled into the country or sent home by Vietnamese living abroad, could be found if one knew where to look, highlighting at this time the importance of social capital—"it's not what you know, but who you know"—in determining livelihood outcomes (KI1, 1999; see also Thrift and Forbes, 1986; Hoang and Nishimura, 1992; Turner and Nguyen, 2005). Nevertheless, during this period it was still not acceptable to be observably prosperous in

one's trade. Minh (OH, 15 July 2005) recalled that "before 1986, the year of the reform, business was still limited by the state. People showed no good will to those involved in business and sneered at them by calling them traffickers", a point returned to later.

Đổi Mới: Economic Renovation

Starting in 1986, the Vietnamese government initiated a programme of economic renovation called *Đổi Mới*. The purpose was to create a market-orientated economy, while undertaking a series of structural reforms to end the country's economic stagnation.¹³ The reforms changed the previous long-term employment opportunities of many Vietnamese, with major retrenchments in the state sector. Yet at the same time, opportunities for new income-generating activities rose, with the private sector becoming legally recognised and from 1988 entrepreneurs being allowed to hire employees and expand their businesses (Le and Rondinelli 1993; Appold *et al.* 1996).

In general, interviewees estimate that most Ancient Quarter streets retain around 20 per cent of residents who had maintained livelihoods there prior to 1954, with even fewer preserving traditional ties with rural villages. Often, over time, such traders changed the commodities they traded in relation to the shifting demands of the urban population. This has occurred frequently since 1954 due to state policies, a manoeuvre that highlights how traders attempted to preserve their livelihood security while coping with stresses brought on by state decrees. Some of these changes were quite dramatic—for example, Kien had originally sold vegetable cooking oil, but since *Đổi Mới* has been selling shoes (Kien, OH, 8 July 2005). He regretted the fact that his street, Hang Dau was now known to be 'a shoe street', whereas "in Hang Giay, traditionally a street of shoe cobblers, no longer can shoes and sandals be seen", a reflection of some of the considerable changes

to have occurred in the trading patterns in the area. Likewise, Thuy (OH, 12 July 2005), selling sedge matting, noted that more than 200 households on Hang Chieu had changed from selling this product in the past, to plastic, rope and canvas goods more recently.

Turning to focus on new enterprises that have emerged since 1986, it is estimated that

more than seventy per cent of those people who left the state-owned sector because of re-organisation started working in the non-state sector by creating small enterprises or being employed by small business owners (Le and Rondinelli, 1993, p. 9).

Livelihoods in the private sector were enhanced by the 1992 Constitution of Vietnam that legalised the market economy concept ensuring that any Vietnamese had the right to engage in entrepreneurial activities (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 1992; quoted in Le and Rondinelli, 1993, p. 14) and by the 2001 Enterprise Law (effective January 2002). The latter introduced substantial legal reforms in favour of private enterprises, allowing for improvements in business licensing procedures helping many small enterprises to become established (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2001).

It is also worthy of note that since 1986 many of the new enterprises to have emerged in the Ancient Quarter and others that have been able to expand, have done so due to wealth 'hidden' during the stricter socialist period. During the latter, state employees were paid a wage, but there was a limited selection of goods or services upon which to spend it and, furthermore, the state strongly disapproved of any notable differences in income or expressions of wealth, hence many families accumulated significant savings. More recently, these savings have been injected into numerous small enterprises (KI 1, 1999) and state employees able to maintain privileges from the pre-*Đổi Mới* socialist economy as well as exploiting new opportunities,

have clearly benefited from this 'political capital'. In this context, such 'hording' is a livelihood strategy that, while initiated to cope with exogenous shocks and protect social reproduction, has more recently—in a new economic climate-enabled recovery and expansion (Rakodi, 2002).

Four Categories of Trader Livelihoods Today

So how is this turbulent past reflected in the livelihoods of traders who reside in the oldest trading district of Hanoi today? Livelihood insights gained from an analysis of oral histories, questionnaires and in-depth interviews show that those currently trading in the Ancient Quarter can be divided into four broad categories based on when they emerged on the trading scene, with each group also highlighting diverse livelihood strategies.

First, there are still a select few residents in the Ancient Quarter who can trace their ancestry back to the period of imperial rule and, even through the turmoil of the 20th century, have maintained some historical rural and guild ties. Today, for example, residents of Hang Bac (Figure 3) still participate in festivals that link them to the rural village of Chau Khe, especially during *Tet*, the lunar new year, making return trips to the village. Other trades undertaken in the Ancient Quarter have similar historical connections. For example, the lacquer ware that can now be bought in streets such as Hang Gai has contemporary designs and colours, yet the craft was initially learnt before 1300AD coming under Chinese influence regarding techniques and motifs (KI9, 2003; Huu, 1998). One could therefore argue that these are especially sustainable livelihoods in the long term, with skills and techniques handed down from generation to generation and surviving through a number of turbulent periods.

Second, are those who began operations during French colonial rule or shortly afterwards,

were organised into co-operatives under socialist rule and since *Đổi Mới* have continued to undertake the same tasks within a new management structure. Such 'long-term flexibility' has supported a number of entrepreneurs to maintain sustainable livelihoods via their resilience and adaptability. In the Ancient Quarter, this was found to be the case amongst a number of jewellery, textile, welding and mechanical repair shop operators. Indeed, one interviewee, Tuan (ID5, 15 June 2000) repairing power tools and fans, explained that, between 1959 and 1986, the business had been run as part of a co-operative involving all the local shops repairing power tools. Then, in 1986, the state had decided it was an unprofitable business, especially with increasing numbers of imports of new tools and fans, and therefore those working in the co-operative were granted permission to take over the businesses again. Now Tuan keeps his profits, but maintains that the legal owner of the business is still the state.

Third, are those traders who used skills they gained in state employment during the socialist period prior to 1986 to establish small trading enterprises in the area. A textile shopkeeper, Mai Lan, selling embroidery threads, embroidery frames and fake designer labels for clothes (such as 'Calvin Klein'), had been an employee in a textile company in the past and, after 'retiring' from the state company in 1990, had decided to establish her own shop with her sister, utilising the knowledge she had gained from her previous employment (ID16, 19 June 2000). Another woman, An, with a small jewellery store selling silver, gold and jade, had been an accountant for a state-operated fine arts import-export business, before she decided to establish her own jewellery business, again in 1990, possible she said because of her previous training and contacts (ID3, 15 June 2000). Such diversification shows how many livelihoods have been constantly reworked in innovative and flexible ways in the face

of broader economic and political changes, often with the help of enhanced human and social capital.

Finally, new goods are rapidly infiltrating the Ancient Quarter, often traded by newcomers diversifying their own livelihood approaches with trading concerns that have emerged since 1986. The lifting of the US trade embargo in February 1994 also played a significant role in increasing the open display of new goods for sale. Today, one finds CDs and DVDs for sale, a *Lego* shop and a number of Internet cafés as well as backpacker-style hotels. Indeed, the growth of international tourism since the early 1990s has seen more and more services catering for this group becoming established in the Ancient Quarter.¹⁴

Conclusion: Resilient Trader Livelihoods

Used in the context of the Ancient Quarter in Hanoi, Vietnam, a livelihood framework compels us to consider trader practices in the light of—among other factors—the complex institutional economic and political context in which they operate. It is clear that the underlying economic and social situation, including war, civil strife and other features, has produced stresses that are often pervasive (Adger, 2000). This context has decisively shaped the shocks and stresses that traders have had to endure, as a measure of their social resilience (Adger *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, a sustainable livelihood approach focuses attention on the long-term, historical dimensions of such livelihood strategies, helping us to interpret how these strategies have developed, transformed, flexed and diversified to mould to specific economic and political climates over generations.

Clearly, there have been times in Hanoi's history when livelihood vulnerability has been at breaking-point—and, indeed, throughout history there have been waves of small traders in the Ancient Quarter unable to cope with

the external political and economic stresses placed on them by wars, as well as radically fluctuating political and economic policies, socialist rule being among the more extreme. Yet, this study has also revealed traders located in this central Hanoi setting who, for many years, have sustained resilient livelihoods. This cohort of residents—a group of highly resourceful individuals—has managed to remain in place and trade commodities through many upheavals. These traders have been operating in livelihood contexts formed through time by dramatic political and economic shifts in policy, each with its specific characteristics, demands and consequences. In turn, this research has revealed livelihood strategies that have been numerous and complex. During the socialist and war periods, these included not only going ‘underground’, but also selling goods through the co-operative system or becoming part of a joint private–state enterprise. Through those times and since, trading behind closed doors or openly, traders have constantly responded to new market demands, diversifying or, if necessary, completely changing their products, consequently offsetting adverse trends and highlighting their social resilience (Adger *et al.*, 2002). Drawing upon different combinations of assets, they have utilised human capital such as skills handed down through the generations, or those learnt during the socialist period; they have activated social capital, calling on contacts from previous occupations to help them get ahead; and, most recently, they have mobilised financial capital in the shape of savings that were safely hidden during the socialist period. Such strategies highlight that, while innovative coping mechanisms and strategies have transpired among this group of Vietnamese traders

markets and legal restrictions influence the extent to which one asset can be converted into another, the scope for which influences people’s ability to manage their portfolio to

withstand shocks and stresses and take advantage of opportunities (Rakodi, 2002, p. 15).

In the Ancient Quarter, then, we find many livelihoods that could be considered sustainable in their ability to “cope with and recover from stress and shocks” (Chambers and Conway, 1991, p. 6). Such traders have proved to be flexible *vis-à-vis* macroeconomic policies, the economic strategies of other local actors, and the political context, while drawing on considerable individual resourcefulness. What is interesting in this case is that such ingenuity has not been used to directly challenge often stifling macroeconomic and political frameworks. Instead, individuals have built upon their knowledge, connections and experiences during different regimes to build sustainable livelihoods; indeed, multiple, highly resilient ones, able to survive and operate in ever-changing, often turbulent, trading environments.

So what does the future look like for these trader livelihoods? For many of the traders who formed part of this sample, the post-*Đổi Mới* period is seen as one of hope and opportunity. Complaints that taxes are now very high are offset by comments that an increase in living standards is the greatest transformation in the Ancient Quarter. Residents, both old and new, are happy to note that the streets are becoming more lively, concluding that this is the most significant change in the area since 1990. Others believe that the “buildings are nicer” (Q77), there is “fast information now” (Q90), there are “many transport means available” (Q83) and “the market economy creates favourable conditions for enterprises to be developed” (Q22). Nevertheless, at the same time, others have reservations and, along with the high taxes, traders are concerned that the “ancient streets are reconstructed and rebuilt without planning, it’s a worse sight now” (Q10) and that “it’s crowded but the streets are lacking

politeness" (Q32), while it is argued that "the economy has got growth but not development" (Q13).

In sum, these responses suggest that the local environment in which small enterprises are operating is, yet again, in a state of flux, reflecting broader socioeconomic changes in the city and country as a whole, like those described at the start of this paper. Facing competition from supermarkets on the Ancient Quarter's periphery, new department stores nearby and rapidly changing urban consumer patterns, the livelihood strategies of Ancient Quarter traders operating in this environment remain vulnerable to policy shifts, increased competition, changing consumer preferences and new international pressures. While recent research such as that by Jensen and Peppard (2007) and Maruyama and Le Viet Trung (2007) reports that urban consumers in Hanoi are still more likely to visit marketplaces and small enterprises for the majority of their consumer goods, rather than the new supermarkets and shopping malls, and that products continue to be distributed via more traditional channels, there are also predictions that smaller operations will decline in the future (Maruyama and Le Viet Trung, 2007). In such an uncertain climate, if the "idea of resiliency suggests a proactive stance towards risk" (Pelling, 2003, p. 7), then these traders must continue to be dynamic and adaptable—as they have been in the past—in order to maintain positive livelihood outcomes.

Notes

1. It should be noted that a 1993 land law verifies that all land in Vietnam is the property of the people, but managed by the state. Hence one cannot buy or sell land, but can exchange, transfer, lease, inherit and mortgage the rights for land use (Corlin, 2004). Thus, land has gained a commercial value, one which is rapidly rising in Hanoi.
2. In 1010, Hanoi was called Thang Long, a name it is still sometimes nostalgically called today. However, from 1307 onwards it was to be re-named several times (Sidel, 1998).
3. While the current global financial downturn has had important impacts on the rates of construction in the city, in the Ancient Quarter these conversions are still unmistakably ongoing as of March 2009.
4. Oral histories were completed with 21 elderly residents of the Ancient Quarter in 2005. These interviews were loosely structured around questions regarding the trading history of their enterprise and the impacts of different state regimes. These individuals had been trading in the Quarter for over 30 years and ranged in age from 55 to 84; eight were female. These data were supported by questionnaires and in-depth interviews completed in 2000 and a series of key-informant interviews with Vietnam specialists from Vietnam, France, Canada and the UK undertaken between 1998 and 2008. Questionnaires were completed with 200 small traders in the Ancient Quarter, undertaken with the help of researchers from the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS). I also undertook in-depth interviews during the same year with a further 20 residents targeting a diversity of trader activities. Finally, since 1998, I have observed the changes occurring in the Ancient Quarter, mapping the goods sold there at regular intervals. The 21 oral histories undertaken in 2005 are labelled (OH, date) and gender-specific pseudonyms are used. The nine key informants on the whole wished to remain anonymous and are thus cited as (KI#, year of interview). Individual information from the 200 questionnaires undertaken in 2000 is labelled (Q#), while data from the 20 in-depth interviews completed that same year are labelled (ID, date) with gender-specific pseudonyms.
5. Studies focusing upon recent industrial change and urban planning in Hanoi are growing rapidly (see amongst others Thrift and Forbes, 1986; Leaf, 1999, 2002; Logan, 1995, 2000; Forbes, 2001; Waibel, 2004; van Horen, 2005; Surborg, 2006). Urban-based itinerant traders have also been the foci of a smaller number of studies (such as DiGregorio, 1994; Li, 1996; Higgs, 1999, 2003; Abrami, 2002; Jensen

- and Peppard, 2003), while only a handful of researchers have focused specifically on 'permanent' small enterprises and traders in Vietnam's urban locations to date (for example, Le and Rondinelli, 1993; Appold *et al.*, 1996; Lloyd, 2003; Turner and Nguyen, 2005). Although Hanoi's Ancient Quarter has attracted much attention regarding its built heritage (see amongst others Hoang and Nishimura 1992; Logan, 1994, 2000; Sidel, 1998; Forbes, 2001; Quang and Kammeier, 2002; UNESCO, 2003; Waibel, 2004), there have been no longitudinal studies that focus on *trader livelihoods* in this important commercial space.
6. These five assets comprise: human capital—capabilities such as skills, education, ability to labour and health (Ellis, 1998); social capital—linkages, trust and social networks employed by individuals or groups to 'get by' or 'get ahead' (Turner and Nguyen, 2005; see also Portes, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000); financial capital—cash that can be accessed, such as income, pensions, remittances and transfers from the state; physical capital—human-made infrastructure, such as buildings, transport, and electrical services; and natural capital—non-renewable resources including minerals and soils, and renewable resources including nutrient cycling and ecosystem services (Bury, 2004; see also Carney, 1998; Bebbington, 1999). For critiques of the use of these five terms, see Conway *et al.* (2002) and Toner (2003).
 7. Interestingly, when the UK Department for International Development (DFID) took up this approach the definition of sustainable livelihoods was modified slightly to reduce the emphasis on the need to produce benefits for others, as this was seen as an unrealistic demand (Carney *et al.*, 1999).
 8. The term *phố* relates to a road, or a piece of terrain occupied by villagers. The expression *phố phường* hence refers to an area divided by many roads. The confusion regarding these two terms has resulted in the expression *36 phố phường*, referring to the number of *phường* said to have existed in this district in the 15th century. Papin (2001) argues, however, that at that time this figure was probably an exaggeration.
 9. For an interesting comparison, see Huseby-Darvas' (2001) discussion on Hungarian women small traders during and after the socialist period.
 10. Small traders were compelled to share ownership of their enterprises with the state if they employed several workers (Turley, 1975; see also Shabad, 1958).
 11. Given that the United States never officially declared war against Vietnam, the precise dates of the beginning of the Second Indochinese War are disputable. Some authors state that it began in 1948 when the US sent advisors and funds to aid the French, others maintain 1955 was the starting date, after the defeat of the French against the north Vietnamese in 1954. Others still, consider 1965, the year US President Johnson sent the first ground troops to Vietnam, as the start of the war. I have labelled the war period here as beginning in 1965, only because this is the year air strikes in the north began to impact directly on Hanoi's population.
 12. See Turley (1975) for a thorough account of the evacuations of Hanoi during the Second Indochina War.
 13. It is not the aim here to enter the debate as to whether this transition took place rapidly, or if it was more gradual in nature, due to differing views regarding state and society relations (see Fahey, 1997; Kerkvliet, 1995).
 14. See Lloyd (2003) for more on the development of traveller cafés and small tourist businesses in this area.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dang Duc Phuong and Nguyen An Phuong for their enthusiastic work and assistance in the field. The author would also like to express her gratitude to Philippe Papin and Jean Michaud for discussions on this topic, Laura Schoenberger for her research assistance and François Fortin-Deschênes for his cartographic skills. Thanks also to the helpful comments of two anonymous referees and Thomas Hutton for the invitation to be part of this Special Issue.

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