Red stamps and green tea: fieldwork negotiations and dilemmas in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands

Sarah Turner

Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada H3A 0B9

Email: sarah.turner@mcgill.ca

The socialist spaces within the upland Southeast Asian Massif are home to over 70 million people belonging to geographically dispersed and politically fragmented ethnic minority populations. State authorities have long considered these upland margins as frontier regions where 'inconsequential peoples' lag behind national standards. Over time, the Chinese and Vietnamese states have worked to enclose these spaces through a range of 'development' programmes and politico-economic strategies. Undertaking qualitative social science research here is underscored by a specific set of challenges (red stamps), dilemmas and negotiations (green tea). In a contemporary context that interweaves economic liberalisation with centralised and authoritarian political structures, I explore how I have negotiated and manoeuvred access to ethnic minority voices. Specifically, I focus on fieldwork endeavours in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands to answer two core questions. First, in these socialist arenas, how can researchers negotiate access to still-marginalised groups misunderstood by the central state? And second, what are the most pressing ethical questions raised by cross-cultural fieldwork in these spaces and how might these be addressed? While debating these ethical and methodological challenges, I reflect upon the numerous roles of gatekeepers, concerns over the well-being of interviewees and the importance of self-censorship.

Key words: *Vietnam, China, ethnic minorities, positionality, critical reflexivity, fieldwork negotiations*

Introduction

Over 70 million ethnic minority people live in the politically socialist spaces of the Southeast Asian Massif encompassing upland southwest China, northern Vietnam and Laos. Within this context, my fieldwork is concentrated in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, a high-elevation area where more than a million ethnic minority people undertake predominantly semi-subsistence farming livelihoods. The term 'closed context', used by Natalie Koch in this special issue's introduction to label the spaces in which our research is undertaken, seems particularly apt for my fieldwork locale. In 2009, political scientist James C. Scott argued in his book *The art of not being governed* that the Southeast Asian Massif (or 'Zomia', following van Schendel 2002; see Michaud 2010a for a disambiguation) represented 'the last enclosure'. Scott proposed that while these frontier upland regions have long been linked to lowlands via trade relations – certainly the case for the Sino-Vietnamese border-

lands (Turner 2010a) – modern states have vigorously pursued the enclosure of these uplands, incorporating them in processes variously labelled as 'development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration' (Scott 2009, 4). On the ground, this has included replacing common property with private land use rights, the introduction of cash cropping and the push to make shifting cultivators become permanent, settled farmers. The aim, Scott continues, is less about making upland individuals more productive than about 'ensur[ing] that their economic activity [is] legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that [are]' (2009, 5). This relationship between lowland rulers and those living in the uplands tends to continue today (World Bank 2007), while the contemporary political structure heightens state surveillance and censorship at all levels of community structure. The result is an (en)closed context in which ethnic minorities eke out a livelihood as best they can while attempting to avoid the wrath of local state representatives. Concurrently,

government-sponsored businesses work hard to extract valuable natural resources, lowlanders arrive searching for new economic opportunities and officials operate to their own specific tune and directives. Into this milieu wanders the foreign researcher.

In this context, my collaborators, graduate students and I attempt to form robust analyses of the activities, interactions and power relations that occur among Kinh (lowland Vietnamese), Han Chinese and upland minorities such as Hmong and Yao. Our fieldwork takes place in Lào Cai, Hà Giang and Lai Châu provinces in northern Vietnam and Honghe and Wenshan Autonomous Prefectures in Yunnan, China. We examine how upland ethnic minority residents have negotiated an international border during highly antagonistic political circumstances – imperial, colonial, socialist rule – and how they adapt their livelihoods and trade patterns to today's market conditions and political environments. We also investigate food security and environmental decisionmaking in an attempt to advance understandings of local, culturally based practices and approaches.

How can one realistically address such research objectives within the enclosed contexts of two socialist states? The aim of this article is to critically reflect on 15 years of research with ethnic minorities in these borderlands, highlighting some of the ethical dilemmas that this research has raised. I focus on how one can gain access to still-marginalised groups misunderstood by the central state and the gatekeepers to be negotiated *en route*. It quickly becomes apparent that in this research environment, the boundaries between formal procedures and on-the-ground negotiations are often flexible. I discuss how foreign researchers can reflect the voices and opinions of ethnic minority individuals while remaining cognisant of silences in a general culture of mistrust. The dilemmas and concerns raised here are not unique – many are applicable elsewhere in the Global South (and North) – but this specific juncture of ethnic minority peoples, political borderlands and socialist spaces tends to add particular twists.

Fieldwork procedures and practices for foreign researchers in China have been fairly well documented (see among others Thurston and Pasternak 1983; Curran and Cook 1993; Herrold 1999; Pieke 2000; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Hsu 2010). Yet discussions regarding fieldwork among ethnic minorities in China are less common; the few academics to have examined this process include Smith (2006) working in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Hansen (2006) working with Naxi and Han migrants to ethnic minority regions, Yeh (2006) working in Tibet, and Harrell (2007) working in southwest China, especially with Yi and Nuosu. More recently, Harrell and Li, Gros, Sturgeon, Fiskesjö and Cornet (in Turner 2013) have contributed timely pieces on fieldwork in upland

Socialist Asia among minority nationalities, questioning the social scientist's positionality and subjective gaze.

Far less has been written on fieldwork practices in Vietnam. Scott *et al.* (2006) profile the conditions they met as graduate students completing fieldwork in three different sites in low and midland Vietnam in the late 1990s, concentrating on the gatekeepers and bureaucratic difficulties they encountered. Now, as the country opens up to foreign researchers, a few scholars such as Sowerwine (2004; 2013) and Bonnin (2013) are beginning to reflect on their graduate fieldwork experiences with ethnic minorities in the uplands. This paper extends these works through a cross-border analysis, examining how researchers can negotiate access to marginalised groups.

Context: the last enclosure

'Market-socialism', 'transforming socialist countries', 'post-socialist' or 'socialism with Chinese principles' are terms often used interchangeably when contextualising contemporary events in the People's Republic of China and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. There exist important political differences between these Asian locales on the one hand and 'post-socialist' Eastern Europe and the former USSR on the other. State socialism crumpled in the late 1980s in the former USSR and its satellites, with the move towards market integration and capitalism taking place swiftly as these states departed entirely from Marxism. In comparison, economic reforms in China since 1978 and Vietnam since 1986 have been more gradual, while, crucially, both remain single-party states with socialist governments determinedly holding on to centralised political control. While certain public protest is now allowed in both countries, this is tightly controlled, and any sign of ethnic discontent is rapidly quelled.

The somewhat artificial binary of open/closed contexts is further complicated when considering communities on the margins of these two states. Through centuries of migration, trade, peace and hostilities, the Southeast Asian Massif has become an ethnically heterogeneous mosaic. Approximately 2.5 million Hmong reside in southwest China, where they are officially subsumed within the 'minority nationality' (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) category of Miao, while 1.06 million Hmong live in upland Vietnam where they are one of 53 minority nationality groups (*các dân tộc thiêu sô*). Yao/Dao groups also reside in these borderlands, numbering approximately 2.6 million in China and 751 000 in Vietnam. The Zhuang, a broad label covering 16 million individuals in China, encompasses the Tày group, of whom 1.6 million live in Vietnam (National Bureau of Statistics 2002; Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010).

Since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, minority nationalities in China

have been granted specific 'affirmative action' measures, including exemptions from the one child policy, tax breaks and preferential university admission – at least in theory (Gladney 2004). Even so, relations between Han and minorities tend to remain '*de haut en bas* [top down], with the borderlands being [considered] inferior, benighted places, their darkness lit by the distant rays of the brilliant centre' (Lary 2007, 6). Those living on the margins in the Massif are treated as strange, exotic and less culturally evolved than Han (Mackerras 2003).

To the south, the Vietnamese state has worked to integrate – or enclose – upland ethnic minority communities into the broader national economy for decades (Michaud 2009). 'Selective cultural preservation' may best describe this approach: cultural performances, material culture and tourist items are preserved, while 'unsavoury' practices such as slash-and-burn/swidden agriculture and devoting resources to rituals and shamans are strongly discouraged (McElwee 2004). Concurrently, lowland Kinh continue to characterise upland ethnic minorities as 'backward' and 'lazy' (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Sowerwine 2004; Duncan 2004; Scott 2009). In this context, it is not just place that matters in creating enclosure, but the political and socio-cultural circumstances surrounding specific people in specific places.

Flexible boundaries?

Working among borderland ethnic minorities, I have sometimes found myself in direct opposition to the state's wishes – in terms of state discourses as well as local bureaucrats' opinions – in my desire to help support local customs and livelihoods. In this case, 'professional detachment' is neither an option nor my goal. This stance creates dilemmas. My approach to fieldwork and my informants challenges the boundaries that scholars often place between observation and empathy, and between detached scholarship and advocacy, requiring on-going critical reflexivity and an acute awareness of positionality. This reflexivity entails 'the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher' (England 1994, 82). Furthermore, this approach forces me to be 'more open to challenges to [my] theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises' (1994, 89). Theoretical and conceptual tools take on new meanings and perceptions in the field and, in turn, these shifts impact my analyses and interpretations.

Reflexivity also alters relationships between me as a researcher and others in the field. Importantly, 'the authority of the researcher can be problematised by rendering her agency as a performative effort of her relations with her researched others' (Rose 1997, 316). As this iterative process renders my 'researcher' identity fluid, I have to think more in terms of 'situated knowledges', 'hybrid

spaces of research' and 'webbed connections' (1997, 308, 315, 317). While documenting these considerations remains relatively uncommon for field researchers in Asia, here I point to three spheres where critical reflexivity remain crucial: negotiating gatekeepers, accessing interviewee voices and self-censorship.

Red stamps and green tea: gatekeepers to entering the field

Before I even enter 'the field' (a rather debatable boundary itself, cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Massey 2003) and approach those whose voices I wish to hear, I encounter a number of gatekeepers, individuals who control 'opportunities to interact with others in the chosen research site' (Hay 2000, 114). Though a rather narrow definition, this fits many situations in which I have negotiated with authority figures to access field sites and interviewees. Yet gatekeepers can also positively impact one's fieldwork experiences, at times being 'those who provide – directly or indirectly – access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional or informational' (Campbell *et al.* 2006, 98; Heller *et al.* 2011).

To undertake officially authorised social science fieldwork in China or Vietnam, one needs access to the correct research visa and a variety of 'red stamps'. These stamps must adorn letters and authorisations provided by all levels of the state apparatus from the national to provincial/prefecture, county/district and commune levels – this is when a lot of (often lukewarm) green tea sipping occurs. One's initial visa and red stamps are usually obtained through the relevant gatekeeper state research institution, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) or Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS). Alternately, local universities can sponsor work in the country, while some researchers have completed fieldwork via non-governmental organisational affiliations (cf. Scoggin 1994). These official visas hold sponsoring organisations to certain responsibilities, including supplying a research assistant (at the researcher's expense), maintaining contact throughout one's stay and reporting to higher authorities one's whereabouts and activities.

The initial, individual gatekeepers I contact before leaving Canada (not to mention the various committees who eventually have the last say on my research funding bids) are embedded within the institutions in China and Vietnam with whom I associate formally to gain a research visa. These gatekeepers, many of whom have become close friends, sometimes advise me to make my project proposal more 'bland and grey' to avoid phrases that hint at political curiosity or other sensitive topics. This not only helps me gain access to a visa, but can reduce the surveillance placed on my forthcoming sponsors within the country.[1]

Once I reach the field, everyday gatekeepers continue to shift the boundaries of what is permissible. Interestingly, one of the most obvious differences between my fieldwork in China and Vietnam concerns accessing border marketplaces and crossings to observe flows of goods and people. In China, where Vietnam is seldom considered a serious threat as a hostile neighbour and the southern Yunnan population is not considered a danger to state security, I am rarely stopped from accessing these sites by local officials. Alternatively, in Vietnam, access can involve numerous permissions from provincial and military administrators or, more commonly, flat-out refusal.

Other gatekeepers who maintain control over my work include state institute research assistants – placing my work far from the myth of 'lone ranger research' (cf. Geertz 1983; Davidson Wasser and Bresler 1996). While some assistants have become friends over the years, their institutions still need to keep a watch on me and these assistants must report back regularly on our activities. During my first trips to the northern Vietnam uplands in 1999, I was accompanied by junior staff from the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS). Some were completing internships with the hope of being hired as permanent state employees (*biên chế*), while others were newly minted *biên chế*. These assistants, mostly trained in quantitative survey techniques if trained in research methods at all, had no preparation in the qualitative methods I anticipated employing. They were often uncomfortable or unskilled in undertaking interviews with ethnic minorities (ignoring my requests to interview women or visibly upsetting interviewees in a variety of ways), were often very young, and in some cases were away from family for the first time. After a few weeks, they were frequently homesick and sometimes returned to Hanoi for extended periods, leaving me 'officially unobserved' in the field.

This situation allowed me to blur the boundaries between formally monitored research and fieldwork away from the official gaze. In addition, the requirement for such assistants appears to have relaxed to some degree as Vietnam has opened up to outsiders – and perhaps because I have consistently avoided 'getting into trouble'. This respite, though, is not constant and surveillance can change yearly and from province to province. While I still carry a research visa and the appropriate red stamps from Hanoi, my work in the uplands increasingly relies on privately employed research assistants, namely ethnic minority women who have learned English from tourist interactions. My fieldwork with these women has been some of the most rewarding to date, especially since differential power relations between lowland interpreters and ethnic minority interviewees are avoided (cf. Alcoff 1991). Chinese and Vietnamese state employees (and

friends) holding senior research or faculty positions are usually willing to humour my 'odd' qualitative techniques, especially when collaboration has financial benefits for their team. Clearly, this results in working relationships laden with complicated power dynamics (cf. Molony and Hammett 2007; Turner 2010b).

Age and gender play key roles in my interactions with lowland and upland state officials and locals. Looking younger than I am and being a woman routinely convinces officials that I am 'harmless'. I slide under the radar in many marketplaces and rural towns to observe daily life without official concern. Nevertheless, there is a price to pay. When I do 'interview up' and undertake official discussions, it is rare that senior male officials take my questions very seriously, and it is often only when my older male Canadian collaborator arrives on the scene that we get down to business. Past the lukewarm tea stage, this is usually paralleled by extended drinking sessions of potent upland alcohols, an important bonding social ritual on both sides of the border. Thankfully, my gender plays a positive role here as I can opt in or out of these rituals; I am not expected to drink by local gendered norms, but if I do, Chinese and Vietnamese officials salute this unusual event.

Actions like rewording official proposals to downplay sensitive issues and negotiating access without official research assistants clearly invite questions regarding the ethics of one's work. Academics from the Global North undertaking fieldwork are usually required to submit ethics applications and report to Institutional Review Boards (IRB), which are governed very differently from university to university and country to country. From my own on-going experiences on an IRB committee and those of colleagues elsewhere, IRBs can either be operated in the spirit of trying to prevent harm to participants and researchers, or they can be a purely legalistic measure to protect a university from lawsuits. Clearly, ethical fieldwork goes beyond routine procedures or 'ethics for ethics' sake' (Boyd *et al.* 2008, 38; Hay 1998; Thrift 2003; Guillemin and Gilliam 2004). Being ethical in practice needs to go hand-in-hand with the reflexive, self-critical methods that guide our moral decisions and encourage us as researchers to explore the ethical dimensions of fieldwork as they arise (Kleinsasser 2000; Gold 2002). My moral stance is that accessing informants' voices by blurring the boundaries of official state compliance is valid when first, respected local state gatekeepers have sanctioned my approach, and second, these voices would otherwise not be heard outside their communities.

Accessing interviewee voices

These dilemmas point to concerns over the safety and well-being of interviewees. Ethnic minorities in these

uplands frequently endure state researchers and government representatives probing their private lives (Hansen 2006). Many have come to realise that such investigations can have serious consequences for their lives and livelihoods, including 'loss of illegally cultivated land, children sent to school, birth control' and so on, far beyond the matter of mere privacy (2006, 82). Given the scope of state intervention, researchers in China and Vietnam walk 'in the footsteps of the Communist Party' (2006, 82). Foreign researchers need to be cognisant of how we are positioned when we arrive in the field with a letter of invitation or a research assistant from a powerful state institution, given the unforeseen consequences that research has had in the past – and may have in the future.

At the most fundamental level, my ability to access local individual ethnic minority voices in this (en)closed context depends on trust, respect and humility. More than once I have been humbled by a Hmong or Yao elder woman noting, 'you're not like the others who come here [state officials], you listen to us'. The disempowerment felt by these women is at once distressing and a rally call, fuelling my drive to make their voices heard through presentations to researchers and non-governmental organisations in Kunming and Hanoi, conference papers and journal articles, but it also reminds me of the care I must take in doing so. Repeated visits to the region seem to have facilitated long-standing connections with individuals – ranging from official gate-keepers from whom I gain official authorisations to Hmong and Yao interviewees and friends – that in turn help increase trust. This trust allows me specific insights into ethnic minority livelihoods (cf. Michaud 2010b). For instance, only after hours of oral histories, informal conversations, shared meals and marketplace gossip did I begin to hear stories of the complex concerns minority individuals have with state officials over land rights, education and healthcare access, distrust of state market officials, the impact of bans on opium and tree felling, concerns over cross-border kidnappings and so on (Turner 2012a 2012b).

In comparison, my graduate students must learn that when they first reach their field sites, they are unlikely to immediately gain important insights from local interviews, especially when accompanied by a state assistant in a white shirt and shiny shoes. In such cases, informants usually throw the student's research assistant the party line. These students learn not only that they must have patience and persistence, but just how subtle ethnic minority coping strategies can be when dealing with an all-pervasive state apparatus. Students learn to negotiate access and build trust and rapport to gain a deeper understanding of these enclosed spaces – while keeping in mind their own deadlines.

Self-censorship

As an overseas researcher, the tension between official procedures and maintaining field access over repeat visits on the one hand and the desire to publish local voices and concerns on the other can lead to concessions regarding published data and raise debates over the integrity of academic research. If I publish findings that are offensive to the government and a senior official reads it, it is highly likely that access will be denied – for myself, those I associate with or future foreign scholars (see Salemink 2013). Often, the problem lies in distinguishing what exactly counts as a 'controversial' finding. Topics that might not initially appear sensitive (like one's sampling strategy when using qualitative methods)[2] can become precarious when faced with changing political decisions or economic interests, or when protests miles away cause a government to feel threatened (see Smith 2006; Svensson 2006; Hsu 2010). There are also consequences for Chinese or Vietnamese researchers if I, as their overseas collaborator, publish critical research, calling attention to crucial issues of self-censorship (Curran and Cook 1993). At times this boils down to judging who is in an audience and when it is better to dampen critique or stay quiet.

Final thoughts

What makes research in 'closed' places different from (or similar to) more 'open' settings? Given my fieldwork experiences elsewhere in the Global South and North, I would suggest there are many similarities, yet four nuances regarding fieldwork in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands seem to stand out. First, it can be extremely difficult to reach the voices one wants to hear, with many layers of bureaucracy controlling access; patience is an important virtue. Second, these negotiations and their numerous understated assumptions can bring a high degree of stress and exhaustion for the researcher. While part of this occurs because of cross-cultural dialogues, the fact that the goalposts of 'acceptable' are constantly shifting for purely strategic reasons makes a consistent research path almost impossible. Third, while there are certainly situations elsewhere where interviewees have good reason to be cautious regarding what they say to outsiders, this is especially true in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands because of on-going upland–lowland tensions and these socialist states' policies on and critiques of upland communities. Finally, working here requires the researcher to be highly sensitive to what is *not* being said by interviewees, and to consider why silence and self-censorship is necessary in specific circumstances.

Relationships between researchers and their subjects fall along a spectrum from 'reciprocal' to 'potentially exploitive', while continuing to be 'inherently

hierarchical' (England 1994, 82, 86). One cannot, in my opinion, continue to work with and gain information from local individuals without giving back – whether through gifts of food, blankets or medicine, accompanying locals on visits to the hospital and paying their way, helping with official procedures, taking them on trips, practising language skills or simply being a sympathetic ear. Yet gift giving is of course another negotiated process that can raise numerous ethical dilemmas, again pointing to the importance of critical reflection and contextual awareness. As an academic, I try to get local voices heard as widely as possible through publications and discussions with local, like-minded officials and academics within Vietnam and China during talks, conferences and collaborative research (cf. McDowell 2010). But is this enough, given how far I have been able to come in my own career? No; the inherent hierarchies remain. While there are certainly circumstances in such socialist settings that render the foreign researcher 'quite helpless' (Wolf 1996, 22), I am frequently in a position of relative power compared with my interviewees (cf. Svensson 2006). As a foreign researcher I must therefore use this power to the best of my ability to be an advocate for those who are currently enclosed.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 This approach is not particularly unusual (see Cornet 2013, for her work in Guizhou, China; Sowerwine 2013, in northern Vietnam; and Petit 2013, in Laos).
2 The specific sensitivity here was having too many of a certain ethnic group in my sample, although I was using chain-referral sampling (snowballing) to gain insight into a specific question on livelihoods.

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