



# Itinerant livelihoods: Street vending-scapes and the politics of mobility in upland socialist Vietnam

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This paper explores the politics of mobility for a group of rural inhabitants attempting to diversify their livelihoods in an especially prescribed environment, namely ethnic minority street vendors living and working in upland socialist Vietnam. These Hmong, Yao and Giáy individuals face a political environment where access and trade rights shift on a near-daily basis because of the impulses of state officials, and where ethnicity is central to determining who gets to be mobile and how. We analyse three groups of itinerant vendors—those vending on the streets of an upland tourist town, the mobile minority wholesalers who supply them and other traders, and vendors who trek with Western tourists—to reveal the nature of this trade environment, while also highlighting the ways in which ethnic minority vendors negotiate, work around and contest vending restrictions in numerous innovative ways. We find that this focus on the micro-geographies and everyday politics of mobility is essential to understanding how rural Global South livelihoods are fashioned and diversified, in this case revealing specific relationships and negotiations regarding resource access, ethnicity, state authority and livelihood strategies.

**Keywords:** mobility, livelihoods, ethnic minorities, Hmong, Vietnam, street vending

## Introduction

The Vietnamese state has championed market integration in the country's northern mountainous provinces since the mid-1980s. Through specific policies, 11 million upland residents—including six million ethnic minorities—have been encouraged to engage with the market economy to a greater extent than ever before. The state is rapidly expanding upland infrastructure such as roads, dams, communication networks and fixed marketplaces. It is also instituting the widespread implementation of hybrid seed technology and cash cropping, while strongly encouraging shifting cultivators to become settled farmers. By doing so, the Vietnamese state is engaging what James C. Scott (2009: 11) refers to as 'distance-demolishing technologies' to bring these uplands under its control, replacing informality with formality and customary ways with so-called modernity. In this context, ethnic minority men and women are having to diversify their livelihoods, with an increasing number attempting to do so by 'going mobile'. For some, this has involved initiating itinerant street vending in an upland tourist town and nearby trekking villages, with others beginning to act as mobile wholesalers for such trade. These individuals now face a political environment where fines and retribution for their mobile approach can shift on a daily basis depending on the whims of state officials. Moreover, in this highly ethnically divided trading-scape, ethnic relations and tensions play a central role in determining who gets to be mobile, how and when.

Street vending is a common livelihood strategy in the Global South, albeit one usually undertaken in urban contexts with a significant customer base. As a result, street vending research in Vietnam has tended to focus on the two largest cities, the capital,

Hanoi in the north (see Drummond, 1993; DiGregorio, 1994; Tana, 1996; Higgs, 2003; Jensen & Peppard, 2003; Koh, 2008; Mitchell, 2008; Turner & Schoenberger, 2009; Eidse & Turner, 2014) and Ho Chi Minh City in the south (Mehra *et al.*, 1996; Sung, 2011; Kim, 2012). In-depth research on street vending in these urban settings has produced important insights into how lowland Vietnamese (Kinh or Việt) vendors make a living and negotiate selective street-vending bans. Yet, no literature focuses on mobile vending in Vietnam's uplands (cf. Bonnin & Turner, 2012; Endres, 2014 on upland fixed marketplaces). We focus here on the use of mobility by ethnic minority street vendors to underscore their livelihoods, while also examining how everyday politics and resistance strategies are part and parcel of these mobility tactics, highlighting how mobility is indeed political (Kerkvliet, 2009).

Our case study stems from fieldwork conducted annually since 1999 in Sa Pa district (with a population of 54 000) by the first author. Close to the Sino-Vietnamese border, Sa Pa is a popular tourist destination in Lào Cai province, which received over 610 000 tourists in 2012 (General Statistics Office, 2013). What follows draws on over 100 conversational interviews with ethnic minority (Hmong, Yao/Dao, Giáy) and Kinh street and market vendors, and wholesalers. Interviewees were overwhelmingly female (representative of the overall vending population), aged between 18 and 86 years old. Conversational interviews, oral histories and life stories were also completed with 30 Kinh long-term residents, both male and female. Semi-structured interviews were completed with two Kinh marketplace officials, while observations of changing spatial patterns of vendor trade and enforcement were undertaken annually.<sup>1</sup>

After briefly contextualizing our study within livelihoods and mobilities literatures, we analyse three distinct forms of mobility linked to specific ethnically rooted livelihood approaches: street vending in Sa Pa town, mobile wholesaling of textiles, and vending while trekking with Western tourists. We detail how police and town officials interact with these vendors, before focusing on the everyday politics and tactics vendors undertake to pursue these livelihoods in the face of ever-changing rules and regulations. We conclude that while mobility helps these vendors maintain a presence on the streets, a strong state preference for either immobile, regulated trade or other forms of mobility deemed 'modern' impedes ethnic minority mobile traders from achieving steady incomes or secure livelihood options.

### **Conceptualizing mobile livelihoods in the uplands**

While scholars have shaped and drawn on a diversity of livelihood frameworks for over 50 years (Department for International Development, UK, 1999; Ellis, 2000; Scoones, 2009), several common elements inspire recent studies. These elements include a comprehension of assets and vulnerabilities, such as the presence or absence of different forms of capital, often categorized as human, physical, natural, financial and social. The strategies that allow people to deploy or exploit their existing capitals are also important, as are the access or barriers to resources (see Chambers & Conway, 1991; Bury, 2004; de Haan & Zoomers, 2005). Indeed, when focusing on the livelihoods of ethnic minorities in the Vietnam uplands, it is vital to consider how individual and household livelihoods are shaped by 'local and distinct institutions (e.g., local customs regarding access to common property resources, local and national land tenure rules) and by social relations (gender, caste, kinship and so on), as well as by economic opportunities' (Ellis, 2000: 6).

In upland Vietnam, as is the case in many Global South locales, rural livelihood diversification is occurring because of a complex range of factors including eroding farm

profits, environmental degradation, increasing extreme weather events, land shortages from population growth or displacement and the closure of land frontiers. Moreover, new nonfarm opportunities, social and cultural change (media, education, new consumption trends) and a greater need for financial capital related to state development programmes and agrarian change can also trigger diversification (de Haan & Zoomers, 2005; Eakin *et al.*, 2006). Defined as 'the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle for survival and in order to improve their standards of living' (Ellis, 1998: 4), rural livelihood diversification can take many forms, including a move towards on-farm cash cropping often involving an increase in waged labour, a greater reliance on on-farm, nonfarming activities such as furniture production and textiles for market sale, or off-farm local work, such as small-scale trade, factory work and public sector employment. Migration is likewise a diversification strategy (Chambers & Conway, 1991; Rigg, 2006). Yet, to date, work focused on how livelihood portfolios are created, adjusted and diversified in the face of changing opportunities and constraints has seldom considered the core role that everyday mobility plays.

Thus, in framing the case study that follows, we also draw on mobilities research. As is now well known, the recent 'mobilities turn' within the social sciences and humanities trains analytic attention to the character and quality of movements and flows. Of course, rich bodies of work around transportation, diaspora, migration, globalization and more have long brought scholarly attention to the importance of mobility to social and spatial debates. But mobilities approaches are set apart by a particular take on the *process* of movement. They unravel the entanglements of movement with meaning and, as such, emphasize the social, cultural and political production of movements and flows, while attending to the 'fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations, and practices' (Cresswell, 2010: 18). They seek not to privilege a 'mobile subjectivity' but rather to track 'the power and politics of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis' (Hannam *et al.*, 2006: 3–4). This mobilities literature is extensive, covering the mobilities and immobilities of people ranging from elite businesspeople, tourists and students to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. This literature also focuses on entities that help or hinder mobilities, such as roads, airports, transmitters and borders, extending debates in scalar terms from the body to the globe. Further, in order to understand mobile tensions and frictions, mobilities scholars are particularly attuned to how mobility is a 'product of geography' (Cresswell, 2006: 167), with a key focus on the way that flows and movements, as well as barriers and moorings, intersect in places and help shape them.

In adopting such a 'mobilities' framework, we join other scholars such as Langevang and Gough (2009) and Lund (2014) in noting that despite this general attentiveness to the specificities of context, there is a problematic geographical bias in the literature, as it focuses on the Global North.<sup>2</sup> As such, we build on and contribute to the small body of work that takes a mobilities approach to studies of rural livelihood transformations in the Global South (Rigg & Salamanca, 2011; Wang *et al.*, 2013; Lund *et al.*, 2014). Concurrently, we note that although not cast as 'mobilities' research *per se* and often overlooked by those writing within this 'turn', a considerable body of Southeast Asian studies scholarship on employment, trade patterns, migration and more has never been sedentarist (e.g., Ong, 1987; Mills, 1999; Derks, 2008; Lindquist, 2008). So, while we find a mobilities framework useful for interpreting our ethnographic material, we offer this case not with the intention of extending insights of the Euro-American mobilities turn to new locales but in the spirit of calling out its unmarked Western bias and

initiating conversations between mobilities scholars and area studies scholars, who have long recognized the importance of the politics of movement and flow.

### **Ethnic minorities and upland mobility dynamics**

The livelihoods of over six million ethnic minority residents of upland northern Vietnam are predominantly semi-subsistence. Organized around a core of rice and/or maize cultivation, these livelihoods are supported by home gardens, livestock rearing, forest product harvesting and small-scale trade and barter. Since the mid-1980s, numerous state programmes have attempted to integrate upland inhabitants more directly into the market economy: a process some have adopted willingly, and others less so. New trade opportunities, technologies and communications advances have all aided an agrarian transformation in these uplands, while making minority populations more legible for the lowland state (Scott, 1998). Yet while the broad agrarian changes in these uplands are beginning to be better understood through a range of case studies (Michaud & Forsyth, 2011; Sikor *et al.*, 2011; Turner, 2012a; 2012b; Turner *et al.*, 2015), how ethnic minority households have adopted small-scale trade as a livelihood diversification strategy has been largely ignored.

Livelihood diversification for minority households has not resulted in rural-to-urban migration but in some highly localized patterns of mobility. Indeed, ethnic minority migration from these uplands remains fairly rare, the exception being one large-scale migration to the Central Highlands during the 1990s of about 40 000 Hmong, who hoped to open up new farming land as population pressure stretched land availability in the north (GSO, 2013). Additionally, some minority farmers, probably less than 1000, have recently crossed the border to work in China in seasonal farming and mining.

Other upland farmers remain rooted in their hamlets but trade part-time in livestock and commodity goods, rotating around a number of periodic marketplaces. Historical records since imperial times show that marketplace trade has occurred in these uplands, with salt being the most urgent necessity bringing traders together (Michaud & Turner, 2003). Today, since the implementation of *Đổi Mới* (1986–) market reforms and the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations (1991) and because of market integration imperatives, marketplace trade has become an increasingly important livelihood diversification strategy for upland households.<sup>3</sup> Notably, part-time trading enables farmers to have ready cash to purchase seed, fertilizer and pesticide inputs for the cultivation of state-endorsed hybrid rice and maize (Bonnin & Turner, 2012).

Forty kilometres from the Sino-Vietnamese border, the upland marketplace town of Sa Pa, head town of Sa Pa district, has expanded swiftly since 1993, when the region was reopened to independent foreign tourists for the first time since the colonial period. International tourists arrive seeking trekking adventures and interactions with ethnic minorities in nearby villages, while lowland Vietnamese tend to remain in the town, enjoying the climate (Michaud & Turner, 2006). Commercial, infrastructural and service development has boomed and demand for agricultural produce has climbed, as numerous hotels and restaurants have become established. This demand for agricultural produce has been largely met by incoming Kinh traders and intermediaries with trade networks in the lowlands, and as a result, local minority producers have limited business opportunities. However, demand for traditional ethnic minority handicrafts has increased dramatically, and niche trade opportunities, steeped in new mobilities, have arisen for ethnic minority women (Turner, 2007).

The People's Committees of Lào Cai province and Sa Pa district play a powerful role in determining trade opportunities, urban planning and infrastructure development for

the town. Despite lowland Kinh comprising only 16 per cent of the district's population, Kinh representatives control most key positions of the state apparatus, while Kinh businesspeople operate all the hotels and restaurants, bar a handful with overseas investment (GSO, 2010). Ethnic minorities, many of whom do not speak Vietnamese, have little opportunity to contribute to district or provincial politics; hence their voices are routinely silenced. These relations are rooted in a pervasive discourse among Kinh that renders upland ethnic minorities as backwards, unmotivated or lazy (van de Walle & Gunewardena, 2001; McElwee, 2004; World Bank, 2009). This majority/lowland-minority/upland dichotomy becomes increasingly apparent when one assesses ethnic minority access to vending opportunities today. Indeed, the Vietnamese state keeps a close watch on upland activities; upland ethnic minority groups, especially Hmong and Yao, are not considered to have strong loyalties to the state project, as they have transnational histories in China and beyond.

Five groups of traders, with different degrees of mobility, shape the informal trade scene in Sa Pa district. First are ethnic minority itinerant and fixed street vendors selling on the main streets, sidewalks and public spaces of Sa Pa town. These vendors include Hmong and Yao women selling textiles, tourist trinkets and seasonal fruit (mostly peaches) from their land; Giáy women selling peaches, plums and other agricultural produce; and Hmong men selling orchids and less frequently song birds and honey. Second are ethnic minority women (or husband-and-wife) textile wholesalers from other villages who visit the town on market day and sell from the sidewalks to local ethnic minority women vendors. Third are ethnic minority Hmong and Yao women vendors who follow tourists to different villages from Sa Pa on trekking trips (or wait for them in villages). These first three groups are the focus of this paper because of their mobilities, ethnic minority status, and vulnerability to police restrictions on trade activities.<sup>4</sup> Discussed here briefly for comparative purposes are a fourth group of traders, Kinh and ethnic minorities who vend in the town's marketplace from fixed stalls for which they pay rent, and a fifth group, Kinh street vendors who operate small fixed stalls selling grilled food snacks, *Bia hoi* (draft beer) and lottery tickets. Therefore, in this paper, we work to broaden understandings of rural livelihood diversification strategies, as experienced in upland Vietnam, through an examination of the politics of mobility with which these livelihoods are infused.

### **Itinerant vending-scapes**

#### *Agrarian change instigating livelihood diversification*

In 1999, as Sa Pa district's tourism boom was taking off, young Hmong girls and women began walking around Sa Pa town's main streets befriending newly arrived tourists, mostly Western backpackers. These young girls wanted to have fun while making new friends, learning some English (or other foreign languages) and selling small trinkets, especially Jew's or jaw harps and woven braid or metal bracelets to tourists (itinerant traders, pers. comm., December 1999 and January 2000). Also at this time, elderly or divorced Hmong and Yao women, or those with time to spare from household and agricultural tasks, sold home-made textiles itinerantly on the town's streets, retrieving their wares out of woven baskets carried on their backs. This merchandise was mostly second-hand embroidered jackets and intricately embroidered collars and patches, along with simple bags they had refashioned from their embroidery. For both groups, their mobile selling 'hot spot' was where minibuses dropped off backpacker tourists after the one-hour road trip up from Lào Cai city train station, where tourists had disembarked from the overnight trip from Hanoi.

While the number of ethnic minority youth walking around the town's streets befriending tourists has remained fairly stable, those selling textiles along the streets has increased dramatically, reaching over 200 on weekends in 2014 (with many more, including Giáy, selling fruit). Moreover, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, half of the top floor of the town's renovated two storied marketplace was gradually filled with ethnic minority vendors selling textiles, mostly Hmong and Yao women in their 20s–60s.<sup>5</sup> Demand for such trade spots soon exceeded supply, and the remaining Hmong and Yao vendors took to selling on the streets. Initially, both market and itinerant vendors remarked that they traded predominantly to earn extra cash and to socialize. Since 2000 however, the need for cash has been cited more frequently, and their trade linked more directly to purchasing hybrid seeds and other agricultural inputs such as chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Since 2008, vendors have also noted an additional need for cash to offset food shortfalls because of a rising number of extreme weather events, such as late rains in 2012 that resulted in decreased rice harvests (see Delisle, 2013). Yet, for textile traders, this livelihood diversification approach is only available to women who have their own textiles (or cash to buy from wholesalers, to be discussed in the next section), have transport if vending in Sa Pa town, have at least a limited ability to converse in English with tourists and have no reproductive duties at home. One Hmong woman, Mai, explained, 'Others don't do it because they are shy, because they have children to look after and fields too, or because they are too far away from the marketplace in Sa Pa' (pers. comm., August 2006).<sup>6</sup> With new vendors tending to join relatives in town to learn the tricks of the trade, this mobility is also circumscribed by the politics of social networks.

### **Vending on the streets: ethnic minority mobile and fixed street vendors**

Police and district officials prefer Hmong and Yao sellers either to trade as nonmobile traders in the marketplace or to return to their villages, with one policeman claiming that 'it's bad to chase the tourists [while selling itinerantly]' (pers. comm., June 2004). However, Hmong and Yao traders have mixed feelings about the marketplace option. Until 2015, the town's marketplace was located on the main road. Trading at the marketplace was secure, as it was locked at night and provided shelter from the weather and a stable locale where goods could be stored in metal boxes (purchased independently). Yet, the space allocated for ethnic minority textiles traders was about 50m by 30m, and with around 80–90 traders in such a small space, vendors considered their sales far lower than on the street, as 'there's too much competition' in the marketplace (pers. comm., Yao trader Ly, August 2013). In January 2015, all traders (Kinh and ethnic minority) were shifted from this marketplace to a larger, new marketplace more than 1 km from the town's centre. While there is more space in this market, ethnic minority traders are extremely unhappy about this move, as few tourists are visiting their new stalls (market traders, pers. comm., March 2015).

One female Hmong interviewee, Sho, who began selling handicrafts in 1989 when only select tour groups from socialist-friendly countries came to visit on fixed itineraries, said that she used to wander along the street hoping to bump into such groups during their scheduled 'free time'. These days she prefers to sell on the streets from a small fixed spot, rather than in the marketplace, because 'if you sell in the market, you have to write your name down and sell there every day. I don't have enough time for that, so I just sell in the street' (pers. comm., February 2009). Hence a paradox emerges: town

officials want these vendors to become immobile and yet create the conditions (need for literacy and fixed schedules) that hinder numerous ethnic minority women from doing so.<sup>7</sup> As Sho continued, her trading time is limited and must remain flexible, because ‘my daughter-in-law has passed away, and I live with my son and have to help with the family and the grandchildren’.

Since the early 2000s, police have become increasingly interventionist regarding ethnic minority traders who vend itinerantly on the town’s streets or sell from small roadside stalls (usually an embroidered blanket or square of plastic on the ground, on which goods are displayed). Chi, a Hmong woman in her 50s selling at the town’s marketplace explained, ‘The government doesn’t like Hmong selling in the streets. The government officials sometimes confiscate their goods if the traders are walking around on the streets trying to sell to tourists’ (pers. comm., July 2006). This interventionist approach is in part due to the increasing numbers of both sellers and tourists but also due to perceived congestion resulting from an upsurge in ‘essential’ tourist vehicles including more full-sized and minibuses: namely, forms of movement that are privileged and encouraged. Hotel construction as well as road and dam building nearby (prioritized as signs of ‘development’) has also resulted in heavy machinery and trucks passing through the town in larger numbers than ever before.

Yet, police actions towards street sellers fluctuate wildly. If there is a specific event in town, such as a conference, official dignitary visit or national holiday, then street vendors, both fixed and itinerant, are cleared, and their trade is often harshly clamped down upon. Sometimes, vendors are given warnings broadcast over the town’s loud-speaker address system in Vietnamese, a language not all minority vendors understand. More often, police will just do a street sweep, leaving Hmong and Yao sellers scrambling to collect their goods and hurry out of sight. As Ly, a Yao informant, noted (pers. comm., March 2009):

If an important person is coming to town or there is an important event, then we’re told to get off the streets. Nowadays it’s about 1–2 times per month. Police don’t usually give us any warning; they just come and take our stuff.

It should be noted that Vietnamese street vendors have a clear advantage here, as they can understand and respond to the official broadcasts. While some Vietnamese have temporary street stalls selling grilled snacks and small souvenirs and are also forced to move for special events, they are seldom targeted by unannounced raids. The power dynamics of vending become acute in such circumstances, with the positionality of certain mobile subjects as non-Vietnamese speaking ethnic minorities placing them at a distinct disadvantage.

Moreover, from the mid-2000s onwards, police started to concentrate on weekend selling, aiming to clear the sidewalks and streets for the weekend ‘market rush’ (Figure 1). Police patrol the town’s streets for vendors from Friday to Sunday, when more minorities from surrounding villages arrive in town and correspondingly when most tourists arrive to observe the market activities. Again, surveillance and clearance is haphazard, with police more active in some years than others. The approach taken is also dependent on the whims of individual personnel. Some police officers are sympathetic to older vendors, while others treat all ethnic minority vendors as a nuisance. In 2013, one outdoor Hmong vendor noted that ‘it’s more difficult to trade now. The police are making things more difficult, and also it’s difficult because of more people overall’ (pers. comm., August 2013).



Figure 1. *Hmong and Yao textile sellers setting up their stalls in the main town square in 2010 (a banned selling locale as of 2014). Photograph by Sarah Turner, 2010.*

Here we have a market town that swells in size over the weekend—and has done so for over 100 years—because of the periodic nature of its core trade days and the importance of periodic marketplaces for ethnic minorities to come together to socialize (Michaud & Turner, 2003). In turn, this regular event creates a specific mobility among international tourists, who frequently arrive in town on a Saturday morning to experience local trade at its busiest, which in turn has created more mobility among street vendors to meet tourism demands for cultural textile products. This spiral of mobility is now stimulating a chain reaction of state control over ethnic minority vending on the town’s streets.

Not only does state surveillance change because of one-off events and vary on a weekly, monthly and yearly basis, but the specific locales where street-side stationary vending is allowed change arbitrarily. One year a certain stretch of road will be acceptable, and the next year it is banned. When talking about a recently banned 60m stretch of road bordering the town’s main square, a Hmong street vendor with a small fixed stall noted (pers. comm., March 2009):

Nowadays you cannot sell anywhere around the square or on the road, even if Hmong and Yao still do it . . . the police are angry about that. When the police pass they take your blankets and things for sale. You have to look for police, and when you see them coming, you take everything down [from display] and hide it.’

Arbitrary rules of where vendors can sell around the town and the unpredictable consequences of being caught keep vendors on their toes (oftentimes literally). A Hmong woman in her 60s, Sho, whom we met earlier, explained, ‘If you sell just walking around it’s usually OK, but if you sit around the top of the square, then they come and take your things. You can’t sit there, the policemen will come and take your goods’ (pers. comm., February 2009). She added that ‘you’ve got to run’, having had her goods confiscated twice. The first time she was caught, the police confiscated her large embroidered blanket. She was angry and confused, as there had been no warning. She decided to go the police station with a friend to try to retrieve her goods, telling the policeman, ‘I didn’t know I couldn’t sell; if I know, then I won’t sell here, so please give

me my blanket back and I will not sell again.’ Her friends had warned her that she would need to bribe the policeman, but instead the policeman replied, ‘You’re very old so I will not take your money.’ The second time her goods were confiscated, she did not attempt to recover them, afraid that the policeman would remember her from their initial encounter. Nonetheless, another Hmong woman, Mu, noted that they did indeed have to pay to gain their goods back from the police and if you have no money ‘then you lose your stuff’ (pers. comm., March 2009).

As already outlined, the most common reaction to a police raid—a mobile act that, in itself, is infused with power—is to pack up one’s goods as fast as possible and run. Hmong and Yao women reported being constantly scared of the police, with one Yao interviewee noting that ‘if you don’t run away, then they take everything, they grab everyone’s things’ (pers. comm., March 2009). Yet Lan (a Hmong woman who does not trade but with relatives who do) noted—with some pride—that vendors selling on the streets ‘know to run and hide when the police come around’ (pers. comm., August 2013). As a livelihood coping strategy and covert resistance measure, ethnic minority street vendors take note of the patrol schedules of the police and town officials and work around those days, visiting the town on alternative days instead if they can. However, this strategy is not always profitable, since tourist numbers rise so dramatically over (well-patrolled) weekends.

While ethnic minority interviewees noted that trading itinerantly makes them less likely targets of the police, this approach is only an option for those with the stamina to constantly be on the move. This limitation highlights a generational and (dis)ability aspect of mobility and the complexities of uneven access. On a daily temporal scale, some Hmong and Yao, who trade in the marketplace during the day, walk the streets in the evenings with lighter goods if they are renting a room to stay overnight in the town. In the evenings it is also safe for ethnic minority sellers to display their wares on blankets on the roadside since the police are off-duty; vendors know there will be no night-time patrols or confiscations. This evening mobility is fairly new, having started in the early 2000s when Hmong women started to rent rooms in town, after negotiating with their families to be away from the hamlet overnight. Hence such vending is restricted to a specific subset of individuals.

The politics of street vending is not only under the gaze of state officials however, with other actors also involved in enabling or impeding vendor mobilities and opportunities. In 2011 a specific clampdown on fixed and itinerant street vendors came from a new origin, namely local Kinh shopkeepers. The People’s Committee supported the shopkeepers’ argument that they were losing business because of street vendors. News of the ban on street vending was disseminated not only in Sa Pa town but also in minority villages nearby. Nonetheless the number of vendors, while temporarily reduced, was back in force by 2012.

### **Ethnic minority textile wholesalers: a spatially broad mobility**

Travelling to Sa Pa town every two to three weekends are approximately 20–30 Hmong wholesalers from elsewhere in Lào Cai province and from neighbouring provinces (including Bình Lư town in Lai Châu province, a 2.5-hour bus journey from Sa Pa and Mù Cang Chải in Yên Bái province, a 6-hour motorbike journey). These wholesalers, mostly women, but sometimes wife-and-husband teams, bring used textiles from rural villages by motorbike (if accompanied by husbands) or bus, often leaving home around 1am to arrive in Sa Pa in time for a frenetic morning trade. In Sa Pa, these wholesalers

sell in the main town square or on the sidewalks around it, sometimes also venturing into the market with their large sacks, before heading back home (wholesalers, pers. comm., February 2009 and August 2013) (Figure 2). Often these women speak no Vietnamese and only come to trade with local Hmong, who then act as intermediaries for Yao and Kinh town traders. As one wholesaler, Pang said, ‘I’m shy to speak to Vietnamese people as I don’t really understand them; so I trade with Hmong people here’ (pers. comm., August 2013). When asked about the returns in relation to the effort required for this long distance trade, another Hmong wholesaler from Mù Cang Chải explained, ‘You know, the chemicals and the fertilizer now are very expensive to buy’ (pers. comm., August 2013). Hence the additional financial capital demands of hybrid rice and maize production necessitate her trade.

Not only is long-distance travelling, sometimes across provinces, to sell goods a new trade and mobility pattern for ethnic minority women in these uplands, but the purchasing of used textiles in remote villages is also setting up new local mobilities: wholesalers roam their village hinterlands to acquire new stock, in mobility patterns that they would only have followed for cultural and kinship reasons in the past (such as Hmong New Year celebrations or funerals). In these remote villages they pay for their trade goods up front with cash or exchange plain black cotton fabric or synthetic skirts from China, for the old textiles that are coveted by Hmong, Yao and also Kinh traders in Sa Pa who refashion these textiles into tourist commodities. While some wholesalers travel the countryside on motorbikes with their spouse, most do not have the luxury of owning a vehicle and will walk a day or two to visit villages, staying with distant relatives overnight. Wholesaler Pang explained, ‘We can stay with family in other villages. We might take two to three days to do a trip buying old skirts’ (pers. comm., August 2013).

When in Sa Pa Town, these wholesalers tend to be ignored by police, perhaps because of the very temporary nature of their trade or their fairly early trading hours in the morning. Nonetheless these men and women keep a sharp lookout for police trucks



Figure 2. A Hmong wholesaler from Yên Bái province presenting her goods to ethnic minority sellers in Sa Pa town’s marketplace. Photograph by Sarah Turner, 2013.

and have their sacks ready to bundle up their goods at a moment's notice if needed. They tend to face more harassment from the Kinh market manager if they try to sell to stallholders there. If wholesalers are deemed to be blocking the aisles and stopping the pedestrian flow of tourists, they are noisily 'shooed out' of the market with little respect; again the mobility of some (foreign and Kinh tourists) is privileged over that of others (ethnic minority wholesalers).

### **Diversifying further: mobile vendors trekking with tourists**

A new form of mobile trading appeared in the mid-2000s, as the numbers of Hmong and Yao traders in Sa Pa continued to rise and ongoing police raids intensified. At this time, enterprising minority women realized that if they followed Hmong or Yao trekking guides leading tourist groups down the nearby valley on day or overnight homestay treks, they could try to convince tourists to purchase their wares en route (Figure 3). Tagging along with a tourist group for a while, these women strike up a conversation (if their English language skills are good enough) and help tourists cross streams and navigate muddy paths. Then, at an opportune time—often during lunch or a break—a passionate selling pitch begins, and tourists frequently feel obliged to buy a few textile pieces. Khu noted (pers. comm., June 2010):

It's better to follow the tourists to the villages and engage with them, because then the tourists feel guilty and will buy something. In the [Sa Pa] market, the tourists are only looking, and they only buy if they see something that they like.

To date the police have no policy response to this approach, being more concerned about street traders in Sa Pa town itself.

It should be noted that very few Vietnamese tourists go on such treks, and when they do, minority women do not try this approach, given the historical inter-ethnic antagonisms that remain and the negative stereotypes Kinh often hold of minorities. Indeed, when asked why they did not interact with Kinh tourists, two groups of young

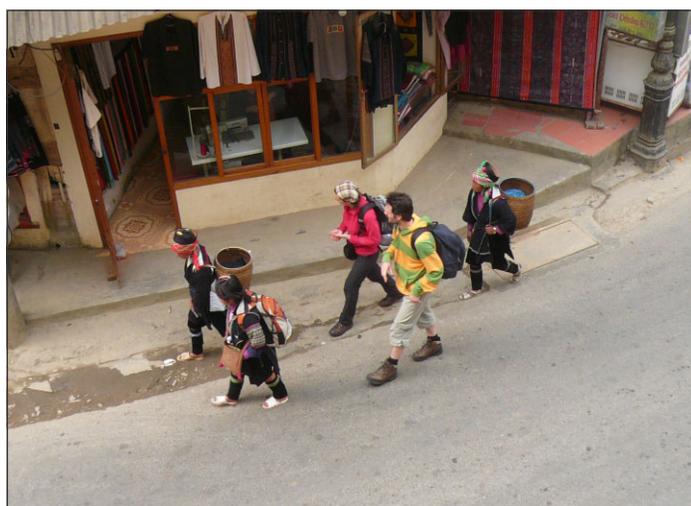


Figure 3. A Hmong guide (backpack) and two mobile sellers with a tourist trekking couple. Photograph by Sarah Turner, 2009.

Hmong women all pulled faces and explained, 'They call us Meo<sup>8</sup> and say that we eat monkeys' (pers. comm., August 2006 and July 2014).

This mobile trading has created new, often uneasy, relationships between mobile sellers and young Hmong and Yao women trekking guides. Sometimes tourists ask the guides to tell the trading women to stop trying to sell goods to them, but the guides explained that if they pass this information to the sellers in Hmong or Yao, the sellers often do not believe it is the tourists' request and claim that the guides are being selfish. Given that these interactions produce antagonisms between young guides and the often older sellers who are sometimes kin, guides are reluctant to intervene and usually just say nothing, creating their own everyday politics of compliance with cultural norms (cf. Kerkvliet, 2009).

Other Hmong and Yao women now sell from their homes if they live in a village through which treks pass. This has created new animosities as village-based traders are unhappy with those following tourists and vice versa. Mobile minority sellers pointedly remind tourists, 'I walk with you, why you no buy from me?' On the main tourist trekking route down the valley from Sa Pa, the number of mobile vendors has grown so large that some women who were initially selling from villages have given up and started to trade on the streets in Sa Pa town instead, if other household responsibilities permit. Hence one form of mobile trading and the cultural and village politics that surround it has reinforced yet another—in the face of official opposition.

One specific case that should not be overlooked is Tả Phìn village, approximately 12 km from Sa Pa town and a long-time destination for tourists wishing to visit a village easily accessible by minibuses on organized tours from Sa Pa. Although a mixed Yao and Hmong village, Yao vendors dominate the village trade scene and have gained a reputation for being particularly assertive in their quest for a sale. At times, 30–40 Yao women will literally run to be the first to meet minibuses that pull up with tourist groups. As tourist complaints grew over the insistent selling behaviour of these women, a nongovernmental organization and local officials tried to set up market stalls along the main walking route from the car park to village to keep Yao traders in one place (Figure 4). As one Yao trekking guide said with a laugh, 'That didn't work at all. Because as soon as one person walks with tourists again, they all want to do it' (pers. comm., August 2013). Mobility can be key to making a sale.

### **Itinerant street vending-scapes: the embodied experiences and politics of mobility**

As a socialist state working hard to capture market opportunities and compete in the capitalist global economy (much like China), Vietnam has experienced fundamental economic and social restructuring since 1986. As part of this development push, the state has sought to reform the northern uplands through numerous policies supporting market integration and agrarian transformations. With rising cash needs for agricultural inputs and stresses brought about by shortages of agricultural land and poor harvests due to extreme weather events, vending mobility has been helping sustain broader household livelihoods for many of our interviewees. There is, in other words, a pressing need to examine mobilities as a factor of rural livelihoods, as regions in the Global South like Vietnam continue to experience capitalist expansion and market reforms.

As mobilities scholarship emphasizes, movement is meaningful and power laden rather than simply instrumental. In line with this assertion, we find that vending, as a mobile livelihood occupation in these uplands, is highly politicized and marked by ethnicity. By focusing on the mobilities of these vendors, we begin to better understand



Figure 4. The deserted market stalls at Tà Phìn village. Note the sign: 'Please support the local community by purchasing handicrafts at this shop and help avoid the problem of street vendors'. Photograph by Sarah Turner, 2010.

the intersections among mobility, ethnicity, local politics and livelihood diversification strategies. We find that street vending in this tourist town is opposed by district and provincial state officials for numerous reasons. At the micro-scale, vendors are viewed as disrupting traffic and pedestrian flows and as making the streets look messy, especially during important state delegation visits. More broadly, street vending is deemed informal, backwards and outdated. The state works to curb this mobility, which is deemed 'traditional', while promoting other sorts of 'modern' mobilities such as Western pedestrian tourists and modern vehicles. Police raids and fines hence become instruments to restrain specific mobilities: to limit, channel and regulate movement. As such, vendors and their livelihood options are shaped by 'power relations of mobility and immobility, including rights to move, to enter, to dwell, to leave' (Adey *et al.*, 2013: 4).

It is clear that the politics of trade mobility in this upland town are socially and cultural constructed and controlled. There are obvious discrepancies in interethnic relations between local government and police officials, who are overwhelmingly Kinh, and ethnic minority traders. Discriminated against for decades as 'backwards' uplanders and naïve 'tribal peoples' (World Bank, 2009), ethnic minority traders are far more likely to be targeted to clear the streets. Many are additionally disadvantaged because of a lack of Vietnamese language skills and hence are unaware of upcoming street clearances even when the latter are publicly advertised. Further, not only does ethnicity play a vital role, but also *within* ethnic minority communities we find that language ability, road access, reproductive duties in the home and social networks make important differences to who gets to trade, how and where. New intraethnic relations and tensions are also emerging because of language skill levels, age and ability to be mobile. By bringing a mobilities lens to these livelihood approaches, we hence highlight 'the relation between human mobilities and immobilities, and the unequal power relations which unevenly distribute motility, the potential for mobility' (Hannam *et al.*, 2006: 15).

But while this case clearly demonstrates the assertions that 'mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power' and that 'mobility is a resource to which

not everyone has an equal relationship' (Skeggs, 2004: 49; Morley, 2000), where there is power, there is also resistance. In setting out this analysis of vendor livelihoods in the Vietnamese uplands, we have shown that 'instead of viewing people as victims of such transformation, we need to understand how they strategize and respond to increasing connectivities by being mobile' (Lund, 2014: 4). By tracing the mobile practices of ethnic minority traders, the ways in which they subtly challenge official regulations become apparent. Such covert challenges to state power and surveillance are essential in keeping these livelihood diversification strategies in play.

## Endnotes

- 1 Interviews were carried out in Hmong, Yao or Vietnamese with the aid of interpreters/research assistants of the same ethnicity, or were completed independently.
- 2 The most developed strand of work explicitly focusing on 'mobilities' with a Global South focus is work on mobilities of youth, and particularly street youth (Gough, 2008; Porter *et al.*, 2010; Butcher, 2011; van Blerk, 2013). Work has also been completed on the urban poor, with particular emphasis on gender differences in access to mobility options (Mandel, 2006; Srinivasan, 2008; Tanzarn, 2008; Ureta, 2008; Salon & Gulyani, 2010; Jaffe *et al.*, 2012). A significant body of work also examines internal and cross-border migrations, including work on south-south, north-south and south-north migrations (Stephenson, 2006; Uteng, 2006; Bastia, 2011; Hammond, 2011; Crang & Zhang, 2012).
- 3 For more on the history of upland marketplace trade see Michaud and Turner (2003) and Bonnin and Turner (2014).
- 4 The three trader groups we focus on are predominantly women since textile production and sewing are generally considered 'women's work' by these upland ethnic minority groups. Following similar gendered, cultural norms, traders at markets selling livestock and blacksmithing materials are men, while both men and women sell fruit and vegetables, cooked food and homemade alcohols.
- 5 Giáy do not grow hemp or weave textiles like the Hmong, nor intricately embroider their clothes like Yao and Hmong. This could be one reason why they have not become very involved in the tourism-linked textile trade.
- 6 All names are pseudonyms.
- 7 Few ethnic minority Hmong and Yao women in Lào Cai province older than 30 are literate.
- 8 Mèo means 'cat' in Vietnamese and is considered a highly derogatory nickname by Hmong in Vietnam. Although the origin of this expression in Vietnam is not confirmed, it is likely to do with the fact that in China, Hmong officially belong to the broader ethnic classification Miao.

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