

Not at All Costs: Frontier Modernization Schemes and Ethnic Minority Livelihood Debates in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

ACROSS THE GLOBAL SOUTH, states—often in collaboration with or strongly encouraged by private interests—frequently promote capitalist expansion and modernization agendas in their efforts to form and strategically control their territorial frontiers and the populations therein. Cultural reforms are also commonly carried out to “civilize” the livelihoods and social practices of ethnic minority groups residing in these zones (Barney 2009; Fold and Hirsch 2009; Hirsch 2009). Repeatedly, state and powerful nonstate actors become entwined in political, economic, and legal influence as they push these agendas, sparing no expense to overcome the capital demands and labor-intensive nature of both physical and metaphorical frontier “improvement” endeavors (Scott 2009). Yet frontier programs can be negotiated or challenged by local inhabitants whose livelihoods often rely on the “abundant” and/or “pristine” natural resources that frontier development schemes target. Moreover, local cultures and traditions may promote livelihood strategies that differ considerably from the modernization discourses that frontier projects champion.

Within the Southeast Asian Massif, a broad expanse of uplands that extends southeast from the Himalayan Plateau and is shared among ten countries, the Chinese and Vietnamese states are actively and rapidly turning their frontiers from “a battlefield to a marketplace.”¹ During most of the second half of the twentieth century, the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands epitomized what Su (2013, 1219) calls a “military frontier,” with security and control maintaining preeminence over all other state and corporate objectives.² Yet, nowadays, supported by regional development

schemes, such as the Greater Mekong Subregion, and financial support from the Asian Development Bank, both governments are strongly endorsing capitalist expansion as well as campaigns to “civilize” and modernize their “cultural margins.”

In China, frontier schemes epitomize socialist versions of “modernity” that call for “scientific” (*kexue*) and/or “civilized” (*wenming*) development, which are trumpeted on propaganda billboards in Yunnan Province’s borderlands. Meanwhile, “industrialization and modernization” (*công nghiệp hóa, hiện đại hóa*) by the year 2020 is the party line in Vietnam.³ The 2013 Vietnamese Constitution promotes “cultural development” (*phát triển văn hóa*) and “social progressiveness” (*tiến bộ*), while focusing on the “modernization” (*hiện đại hóa*) of the country (Socialist Republic of Vietnam [SRV] 2013, 13).⁴ Although these policies are systematically vague enough to accommodate a range of (sometimes conflicting) socioeconomic objectives, they nonetheless foster concrete development ventures, including the hydropower, village renovation, hybrid seed promotion, and marketplace reorganization schemes we investigate in this article. These initiatives themselves yield specific reorganizations of territory and space that activate and legitimize capitalist expansion and cultural integration into frontier zones as well as subsequent land and resource enclosures (Forsyth and Michaud 2011). Concurrently, such state-endorsed development projects are driving livelihood changes in these borderlands at a scale and speed heretofore unseen. Yet the modernist visions underpinning such development models frequently differ from the core values of local ethnic minority groups regarding their cultures and livelihoods (Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016).

On one hand, what we see here is the expansion of what Pinkaew (2012, 466) calls “frontier capitalism,” a discursive project that justifies resource enclosure in ways that are both arbitrary and often detrimental to local populations when their resource use patterns and livelihoods differ from the state’s economic ideals (see also Barbier 2012; Su 2013; Eilenberg 2014). On the other hand, focusing on a variety of Sino-Vietnamese frontier schemes reveals that in some cases, capitalist objectives come second to state efforts to “civilize the margins,” a core element of nation-state building (cf. Duncan 2004; Scott 2009; Tapp 2010). In our case study sites, these two aspects appear intricately connected. Our investigation into four frontier schemes highlights the close relationships between the economic and sociopolitical objectives that frontier development serves, contributing to a small but growing body of literature on this theme in the Southeast Asian Massif (see Gainsborough 2009; Sturgeon et al. 2013; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015).

While ongoing projects in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands emphasize complex objectives and technologies, we find that they also trigger multifaceted reactions from local ethnic minority populations facing mounting changes and challenges in access to livelihood resources, while also being confronted with the state's view of what their livelihoods should be. We have observed reactions ranging from full endorsement and pragmatic compliance to debates, contestations, and struggles (Kerkvliet 2009). Such reactions, and the cultural factors that underpin them, merit further scholarly attention. Moreover, we want to unpack the social and cultural characteristics that shape these decision-making processes and compare reactions across projects and space. As such, our inquiry extends current scholarship on the frontier by going beyond an analysis of specific narratives in one locale (cf. Sturgeon 2005; Sturgeon et al. 2013).

In this article, we focus on ethnic minority populations' reactions toward four frontier development projects under way in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, namely, a hydropower dam project and house renovation program in China, together with hybrid seed promotion and a marketplace improvement initiative in Vietnam. We first draw on frontier and livelihood literatures to create our conceptual framing before introducing the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands and the Handai and Hmong ethnic minority populations at the core of our study. Then, we probe how these populations experience and relate to state-endorsed initiatives that aim to enclose and tame frontier resources and livelihoods. We argue that ethnic minorities' choices to welcome, resist, or pragmatically integrate aspects of frontier formation schemes into their livelihoods are the outcome of nuanced and conscious calculations of the opportunity costs and benefits of various diversification strategies.

The authors collected the data that inform this study individually during long-term ethnographic fieldwork focusing on local livelihoods, state development projects, and cross-border trade practices in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. Since 2009, Rousseau has completed household surveys and semistructured and conversational/unstructured interviews during regular research trips to Handai communities (a subgroup of the Dai minority nationality), approximately one hundred kilometers from the Sino-Vietnamese border, in southeast Yunnan's Honghe Prefecture. Each year since 1999, Turner has utilized similar fieldwork methods in the northern uplands of Vietnam, especially in Lào Cai Province, with Hmong and Yao (Dao) minority households living twenty to one hundred kilometers from the border (Figure 1). Fieldwork in both China and Vietnam has been completed with the assistance of ethnic minority, non-state-employed research collaborators. In Honghe, Rousseau conducted

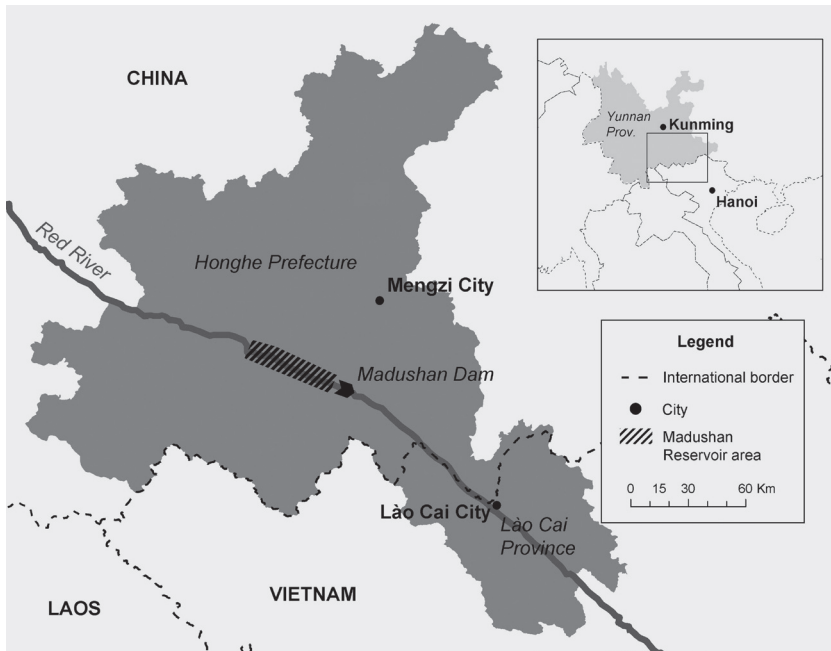


Figure 1. The frontier regions of Honghe Prefecture, Yunnan Province, and Lào Cai Province, Vietnam.

interviews in Mandarin Chinese, while his local collaborator led and translated interviews conducted with non-Mandarin-speaking informants. Turner’s collaborators translated interviews conducted in the Hmong language. Our local collaborators bear a significant imprint on our results and cultural understandings; however, the sensitive nature of some of our research means that on both sides of the border, collaborators asked to remain anonymous (see Turner [2013] for more on the complexity of undertaking fieldwork in upland Socialist Asia).

■ CONCEPTUALIZING FRONTIERS AND DIVERSIFYING LIVELIHOODS

Frontiers

In the Southeast Asian Massif, frontiers are important conceptual and relative markers when considering resource-rich, extractive landscapes where important ethnic minority populations dwell. Historically, the concept of frontier has had two divergent definitions, both very much rooted in place. Frederick Jackson Turner (1894, 200), writing on the Western conquest of the United States, famously defined the frontier as “the meeting

point between savagery and civilization,” seeing in prairie landscapes the inspiration for white settlers to expand the realm of their democratic ideals. He drew a distinction between the U.S. and European versions of the frontier, suggesting that in contrast, European frontiers consisted of “a fortified boundary line running through dense populations” (200).

Four decades later, Owen Lattimore (1940) utilized Turner’s North American conceptualization of the frontier as the backbone of his study *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*. Lattimore portrayed frontier relations as the march of Chinese modernity over marginal lands and people, with the frontier a constantly mobile region.⁵ Yet Lattimore also argued that taming the frontier was a difficult endeavor requiring extensive work and financial investment, adding nuance to former representations of frontier expansion as a steady and unilinear process. Cleary (1993, 331) likewise noted that framings of the Brazilian frontier as “the absorption of peripheral regions by an expanding capitalism” portray frontier developments as driving homogenous economic structures and social relations. Cleary and others argue that this framework creates too much of a “tendency towards homogeneity in economic structure and social relations in the cycle of frontier development” (331; cf. Tsing 2003; Redclift 2006).

This scholarship on frontiers is extended by James C. Scott’s (2009, 4) argument that the Southeast Asian Massif represents the “Last Great Enclosure.” Scott proposes that

hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, *corvée* labor, epidemics, and warfare. Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge. (ix)

Scott argues that upland groups made conscious political efforts, including the use of swidden agriculture and oral traditions, to make sure that the “friction of terrain” kept them safe and remote. Scott adds that these uplands have become increasingly enclosed by modern states through a range of processes aimed at incorporating their populations, such as “development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration” (ix). This has given rise to the gradual replacement of communal property with private land-use rights, the introduction of cash cropping, and efforts to turn shifting cultivators into permanent farmers. The aims of such programs have not necessarily been to make upland individuals more productive but rather to guarantee “that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were” (5).

Yet, while acknowledging that these uplands are under the gaze of the state to a greater degree than in the past, authors have argued that the agency of contemporary upland communities has not been damaged irreconcilably and that local approaches to indigenizing modernity and resisting state prescriptions abound (Michaud 2010; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Moreover, as Hung (2015) has noted in the Yunnan context, Chinese authorities are caught in a dilemma between promoting the state's socioeconomic modernization programs and preserving traditions that go against this agenda but that have nonetheless acquired a market value, including the ancient and nonmodern tea forests about which Hung writes.

Livelihoods

Frontier populations, such as those of the Handai and Hmong individuals informing this research, must weigh trade-offs between local cultural markers and traditions and modern, supralocal schemes that further expose them to the benefits and risks of the market economy. Their management of these trade-offs is the outcome of meticulously weighted calculations accounting for dynamic and place-based conceptualizations. Livelihood studies help us decipher these and how their outcomes unfold.

Numerous livelihood frameworks exist, the majority of which emphasize the diversity of assets that individuals and households utilize to construct and give meaning to their livelihoods (Bebbington 1999; Carney et al. 1999; de Haan and Zoomers 2005). One such framework organizes livelihood assets into a “pentagon” comprising five capitals, namely, financial, human, natural, physical, and social. Although critics argue that the asset pentagon is no more than an attempt to “make sense to economists” (Scoones 2009, 176), its proponents and detractors alike acknowledge that such an approach serves to highlight how livelihoods constitute more than just financial assets and income opportunities, as state categorizations often emphasize in both China and Vietnam (Lu 2012; Liu and Xu 2016). Formal and informal institutions strongly influence an individual's or household's capacity to mobilize these assets, while a lack of access can create livelihood vulnerability or stress (Ribot and Peluso 2003). Livelihood investigations must accordingly account for the wider structures and meso- and micro-scale contexts within which livelihoods unfold. These analyses highlight the interplay of local customs and values with institutions as diverse as market opportunities, laws, property regimes, social relations, and ideologies (Ellis 2000; Scoones 2009).

In the specific context we address here, Forsyth and Michaud (2011, 9) have suggested that ethnicity, which they argue entwines “aspects of

both symbolic and instrumental utility,” is central to how ethnic minority individuals and households make livelihood decisions. They contend that livelihood approaches and development programs tend to underestimate the importance of ethnicity in shaping how minority populations structure their livelihoods. Their arguments echo de Haan and Zoomers’s (2005) point that livelihood decisions are outcomes of both long-term considerations embedded in a society’s historical repertoire and short-term opportunistic motives (see also Turner 2012).

While the criteria that shape how ethnic minorities handle opportunities and constraints and the motives that trigger diversification are varied, reactions can also transpire in numerous ways: livelihoods can become more dependent on one activity or sector, or they can branch out to have multiple foci. Cases of livelihood diversification range from constraint or distress diversification to the willing exploitation of access to new opportunities (Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004; Turner 2007). In turn, livelihood diversification strategies can drive sectorial change and/or occupational diversity (Start and Johnson 2004). Our case study digs further into such motives and reactions.

Contextualizing the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

International borderlines are a key aspect of territorial integrity for modern nation-states in Asia (Thongchai 1994). As French colonizers secured control over Tonkin in the late nineteenth century, they consolidated an early version of what has become the 1,306-kilometer borderline between China and Vietnam (Nguyen 2000; Turner 2010). Like the contemporary frontier processes we examine, the demarcation of the earlier borderline seldom accounted for the complex social realities and histories of migration and trade that characterized this segment of the Southeast Asian Massif.

The Sino-Vietnamese borderlands are today home to a kaleidoscope of ethnic groups. The Chinese state has officially recognized fifty-five “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu*) since 1981, thirty-two of which are resident in the southwest frontier. In Vietnam, fifty-three distinct “minority nationalities” (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have been officially recognized since 1979, with forty-nine of these groups living mostly in upland regions (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Both categorization projects were directly based on the Soviet model, placing specific emphasis on linguistic criteria (Ito 2013; Mullaney 2011). These projects also ranked ethnic minorities according to their level of social evolution, with Han and Kinh majorities considered models of “Socialist Man,” with a duty to help “Traditional Man,” that is, ethnic minorities, to “relinquish his simplicity

and reach the superior levels of civilization of the lowlands as quickly as possible” (Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016, 417). As such, in government and lowlander majority rhetoric, paddy-growing societies—such as the Handai in China—are considered as having achieved a higher level of progress than former (and frequently still partial) swiddener groups—such as the Hmong in Vietnam (Harrell 1995; McElwee 2004). In Vietnam, for instance, “swiddening (*nuông rẫy*) has almost universally been called *lạc hậu* (backward, primitive) when it is described by government officials” (McElwee 2004, 198).

On the Chinese side of the border, ethnic minorities total 34 percent of the population of Yunnan Province and 57 percent of Honghe Prefecture’s 4.4 million inhabitants (Honghe Prefecture Government [HPG] 2011; Yunnan Bureau of Statistics 2011). In Vietnam, upland ethnic minority individuals total 65 percent of Lào Cai Province’s population of 614,595 (SRV 2010a). Within these borderlands, land-use patterns vary considerably, with climatic regimes, environmental conditions, social characteristics, and individual livelihood choices promoting different farming systems and crops (Trinco, Pham, and Turner 2014; Zhang et al. 2014).⁶ Nonetheless, the communities informing our research predominantly consist of semisubsistence smallholder farmers who have historically produced a significant portion of the food they consume. This has tended to persist for Hmong households in Vietnam but has changed recently for Handai households in Yunnan. A range of modernization policies and opportunities have continued to further alter these equilibriums.

We focus on six Handai villages located along a section of the Red River Valley where hydropower dams and village improvement schemes have recently been implemented. Located along ancient trade routes, these Handai settlements and their populations have a long history of interacting with external individuals and influences, including traders who used to lead horse convoys along the Red River (cf. Yang 2004). Handai customary farming systems are centered on wet rice—the local staple—intercropped with a host of greens, as well as maize used for pig feed. Fields were traditionally plowed by water buffalo, although gas-powered rotovators are now utilized widely. Yet water buffalo still fulfill ceremonial purposes, most importantly during funerals. House courtyards are utilized as small gardens and for raising chickens, ducks, and one or two pigs, which are usually butchered for lunar new year celebrations or weddings. The six case study villages total some four hundred households, all of which have experienced the consequences of hydropower development since the late 2000s. Four of these six villages have also participated in an ongoing village renovation scheme since 2013. These projects are part of

a web of national campaigns aimed at achieving objectives ranging from reducing wealth inequalities between western and eastern provinces, urban and rural citizens, and Han and minority nationality populations to fostering environmental improvement, agricultural intensification, tourism development, and sustainable development (Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Goodman 2004). Infrastructure development is a core priority in programs like the Go West (*xibu dakaifa*), Building a New Socialist Countryside (*shehuizhuyi xinningcun jianshe*), and Beautiful Homeland (*meili jiyuan*) initiatives. Yet neither these broad, top-down schemes nor local authorities' implementation of them in the Yunnan borderlands typically succeeds in accounting for the socioenvironmental landscapes where development occurs. Policy failure is therefore frequent.

Vietnam's northern borderlands are also undergoing important socioeconomic transformations. Lacking the extensive financial means of its northern neighbor, Vietnam relies on more international support to achieve its vision for this frontier. For instance, as part of the Greater Mekong Subregion, which aims to connect the uplands of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and China's Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, numerous infrastructure projects, such as highways, railways, telecommunication systems, hydropower dams, and urban development schemes, are being promoted. In Lào Cai Province, the hybrid seed promotion and market improvement programs we focus on affect Hmong communities that were traditionally horticulturalists, practicing swidden-based subsistence agriculture. Through time, their livelihoods have become increasingly those of sedentarized peasants focusing on rice or maize production as their staple crop. Hmong farmers in this borderland region have never been entirely self-sufficient, with barter and the monetary economy always playing a role in their livelihoods. For centuries, they have regularly been in contact with residents of neighboring valleys and beyond for small-scale trade. Hmong kin groups are patrilineal, and when a son marries (following clan exogamy), he inherits his own fields. Alongside state-sponsored sedentarization and an agroecological environment with limited areas capable of supporting irrigated paddy cultivation, this practice is placing pressure on land availability (World Bank 2009; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). Rounding out these livelihoods, Hmong households usually maintain small gardens for everyday use, while some also depend on rotational swidden plots despite an official ban. Moreover, the collection of forest products provides honey and game as well as medicinal herbs. Hmong households also engage in small-scale commercial exchanges, gaining cash via the sale of cultivated cardamom, textiles, livestock, and rice and maize alcohol.

These commercial exchanges are becoming increasingly important—and increasingly under the state’s gaze—as we will see shortly.

■ EXPERIENCING THE FRONTIER: DEVELOPMENT SCHEMES, LIVELIHOOD IMPLICATIONS, AND FARMER REACTIONS

Handai Encounters with Dams and House Renovations

In 2011, the Madushan dam was completed along the Chinese section of the Red River (Figure 1). The dam was built by and for stakeholders from the eastern provinces, and no social or environmental impact assessments were conducted in the case study villages prior to construction (village interviews, November 2011). Survey data gathered in three Handai settlements located upstream of the Madushan dam reveal that half of all the riverside landholdings available in these locales were flooded as a result of the Madushan reservoir being formed (Rousseau 2017). To cope with their reduced landholdings, all of the Handai smallholders surveyed who still have access rights to some land—95 percent of the 106-household sample—have revised their livelihood strategies via agricultural intensification with the specific aim of increasing the cash income they can obtain from their remaining fields.⁷

This agricultural intensification focuses on two main tactics. First, Handai farmers have begun to abandon the main food crops they have long grown, namely, wet rice, maize, tubers, and all sorts of vegetables, and increasingly concentrate on a few specific cash crops, with bananas now the most widely grown crop in this area. Accordingly, survey results show that agricultural diversity decreased by 20 percent in the affected villages after the Madushan reservoir was created. Discussing how rice has shifted from a central livelihood asset to a food commodity like others, one informant explained, “Wet rice is our staple food, we eat it three times a day, and our customary farm system is centred around it. Now we virtually grow no rice anymore. Rather, we buy most of our rice from faraway Jianshui [County]. It’s cheap, but not as good as ours” (interview, November 2016).

Agricultural intensification has resulted in the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Seventy-five percent of our surveyed Handai households reported using more chemical fertilizers now than they did before the reservoir was created, despite their reduced landholdings. Handai farmers now allocate on average 10 percent of their annual income to such farm inputs. Also, while they still produced virtually all their food supply by the mid-2000s, they now buy most of it in the market. The pressure for them to secure cash revenue has therefore increased

markedly. Since 2012, many farmers have started to harvest bananas annually on the same land parcels for three consecutive years, compared to two previously. Those who do so acknowledge that they are increasingly pushing their land to the limit.

None of our Handai informants embraced this agricultural intensification entirely enthusiastically, being well aware of the negative impacts upon their land and on both the quality and safety of food. One villager explained, “We are aware that we always need to use more [chemical] fertilizers and that this is bad for the land. There’s nothing we can do about this. The priority is now to secure more revenue” (interview, December 2011). Discussing food safety, another Handai farmer noted, “I do not use fertilizers and pesticides in my garden. I know that pesticides are dangerous, and I only use them for growing the crops that I sell” (interview, November 2011).

Even though state propaganda actively promotes such agricultural technologies, no financial incentives or technological support is offered to Handai farmers who have decided to intensify their agricultural practices, unlike in other areas of Honghe Prefecture where such benefits have been made available (farmer interviews, April 2012; see also Champalle 2012). Securing higher revenues from any land still available after the creation of the Madushan reservoir has been a powerful enough incentive for Handai farmers to intensify their agricultural practices. In other words, the state’s externalizing of the consequences from hydropower has resulted in farmers embracing another aspect of the state’s modernization program for the frontier—cash cropping—at almost no cost to the local and provincial governments.

To highlight how ethnicity and culture play into Handai livelihood decision-making processes, it is important to note that while individuals belonging to other ethnic groups might have considered work migration as a reasonable strategy for coping with changes in their access to land, this was not the case for Handai individuals. Handai informants retain a core cultural connection to their land, and to stay on their (remaining) land in the face of modernization projects such as hydropower reservoir creation, these farmers have been willing to sacrifice the quality of the food they produce and eat and become involved in agricultural practices they do not valorize. As such, villagers have privileged in situ livelihood diversification strategies first and foremost, as explained by a Handai smallholder: “The Handai do not like to engage in work migration. Yi and Hani [ethnic minority groups] are most likely to do so, but we do not like to leave our land” (interview, August 2011).

A second frontier formation process that has triggered wide-ranging

livelihood changes for Handai households is a central government-subsidized house renovation scheme known as the Beautiful Homeland (*meili jiayuan*) campaign being implemented in Honghe Prefecture since 2013 (Chen 2014; HPG 2014).⁸ By 2015, four participating case study villages had been offered subsidized house renovations, as long as they renovated the exterior of their houses following precise guidelines. Guidelines are advertised on propaganda billboards placed at village entrances, showcasing sketches of neatly aligned and uniform houses that bear no resemblance with local villagescapes whatsoever. House facades are being redesigned and repainted for the sake of state-imposed versions of beauty and modernity. Concurrently, households are required to stop maintaining gardens and raising animals in their courtyards; their gardens must be moved outside the house gate, and their dimensions have been codified. Likewise, each household is now only allowed to raise poultry in one clean bamboo cage in their new garden space, while pigs must be raised in public pens built outside residential areas. A village's involvement in the scheme is decided during public assemblies, and all households from a participant settlement are required to abide by the guidelines.

The exact advantages that villagers receive from participating in the house renovation program vary between local administrations, although the usual benefit packages in the Red River Valley include lump sums ranging between US\$2,000 and US\$4,000 per house. Households are also offered state-backed, low-interest bank loans for home improvement. Finally, the government fully subsidizes exterior repair work for participating households, together with the construction of public areas, such as parks, village gates, and canteens or meeting halls.

Villagers participating in the house renovation program were generally positive about it. For instance, one farmer whose house was about to be renovated explained, "The money will allow me to build a second floor to my house. That will make more room for everyone when our baby boy gets older. We will be more comfortable when the family expands" (interview, April 2015).⁹ Interviewees, however, found it peculiar that the exterior house design chosen by state officials to emphasize "Dainess" did not belong to the local cultural imagery. For instance, one villager explained, "We find the new houses very nice, but it's awkward that the government decided to place peacock sculptures on the houses. Peacocks represent Xishuangbanna Dai [not us]" (interview, April 2015).¹⁰ The Beautiful Homeland campaign also creates opportunities for corrupt authorities and construction companies to divert public funds, which raises eyebrows in the targeted villages (interview, July 2015).

Yet the animal-rearing requirements of the house renovation program

prompted the greatest complaints. First, Handai villagers argued that, unlike chickens, the duck species they also breed do not tolerate being reared in the now required bamboo cages. Second, as one villager explained, “chickens raised in bamboo cages do not taste as good as free-running ones” (interview, April 2015). All Handai informants could easily distinguish free-range from caged poultry, and the former is greatly preferred and priced accordingly. Third, the acceptability of the new pig-rearing guidelines varied among the villages we visited. In villages where the new public pens are located close to residential areas, people consider the change positive, as it frees up space in their courtyards without imposing opportunity costs. Yet things were different in one village, where local authorities planned to develop tourism and accordingly intended to build the pens far from the village. One villager here had a clear opinion:

The government basically wants us stop raising pigs, but it's not guaranteed that we will cooperate. Raising pigs is very important to the Handai. We don't do it for the money, as raising pigs is more expensive than buying meat or a grown pig. People need to sacrifice pigs for the New Year. Also, if we don't raise pigs, we won't have many things to do. There will no longer be any point in growing maize [for pig feed]. (interview, April 2015)

Contrasting with the perceptions toward agricultural intensification outlined earlier, in this specific case, villagers considered resisting state-promoted agricultural patterns. These apparently contradicting responses are driven by the same desire to sustain village-based livelihoods and emerge from villager decisions to accept or refuse specific livelihood trade-offs. Their decisions are based on individual conceptualizations of what is required for maintaining meaningful livelihoods. Taken together, the consequences of agricultural intensification due to dam reservoir construction and the impacts of house-rebuilding schemes also demonstrate how state-driven frontier development schemes influence the availability of core livelihood assets for Handai populations, introduce new rules governing how they are expected to structure their livelihoods, and portray very specific visions of what a Dai villagescape should look like. In turn, the unrivaled importance that Handai peasants allocate to sustaining agriculture-centered and village-based livelihoods shapes their reactions to these frontier modernization processes in important ways.

Hmong Encounters with Hybrid Seeds and Marketplace Reorganization

One key modernization program on the Vietnam side of the border has been the promotion of hybrid seeds for rice and maize, which has impacted

most upland Hmong households since its inception in 1998. Hmong and other ethnic minority farmers are being strongly encouraged to plant state-subsidized hybrid seeds instead of continuing their customary rice and maize cultivation, which historically allowed them to save seeds from year to year. Previously, Hmong farmers also made their own organic fertilizer from a mix of buffalo dung and kitchen fire ash, while the hybrid seeds now require relatively expensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides (interviews, April 2009, October 2012, May 2017).

On the surface, Hmong farmers consider hybrid rice seeds to have positively impacted the size of their yields. Yet when one starts to ask more questions, deep-seated concerns are voiced, and many households are reluctant to become increasingly reliant on this state program. For starters, the official delivery system has been unpredictable, with seed supplies often arriving late at state distribution points, pushing planting back by up to four weeks. This raises anxieties over whether growing and harvesting can be completed within the appropriate seasonal schedule. As one young female Hmong farmer noted, “before, we planted when we heard the sound of the cicada, but now we have to wait for the delivery truck; when it’s late we’re worried we can plant on time for the rains” (interview, October 2012). Relying on state seed delivery also reduces the ease with which labor exchange can be relied on, because everyone now plants and harvests simultaneously rather than at staggered times following household knowledge of appropriate calendars for specific plots. Households must pay cash upon receiving these seeds and the chemical fertilizers and pesticides that go with them, adding new financial pressures to their livelihoods. Although these expenses should be offset by higher yields, farmers are extremely concerned about the new monetary demands. Moreover, prices for hybrid seeds and fertilizers, even when subsidized, have more than doubled between 2010 and 2017. Additionally, there is concern about the loss of traditional, land-race seed varieties, which local community members far prefer in taste compared to hybrid rice. As one middle-aged male farmer noted, “our traditional rice tastes better, it’s sweeter and more filling” (interview, July 2014; see also Bonnin and Turner 2012).

Farmers commented that they will continue to grow traditional varieties as long as they can, reflecting everyday noncompliance with and covert resistance to the state’s agrarian transformation plans. Pressure to switch to hybrids has come in the form of visits from agricultural extension officers as well as state propaganda, such as posters and thematic calendars adorning upland community buildings, marketplaces, and individual houses. Despite this, Hmong farmers attempt to set aside at

least a small portion of their terraces for traditional rice, especially sticky rice, which is prized for ritual and celebratory purposes, and other strains for medicinal purposes. This decision, however, must take into account shrinking land access owing to inheritance division between sons and land-hungry competing development projects like hydropower dams and flower and vegetable farms managed by lowland migrants. The decision to switch to hybrid rice is not made lightly and is often delayed for as long as possible until food security needs become too great.

As noted earlier, this agrarian transformation—if and when the switch to hybrids is made—is causing many upland Hmong farmers to search for new cash income sources, one of which is small-scale trade at local markets. Or, as one Hmong interviewee noted, “now we need cash for everything” (interview, August 2013). From baskets of home-grown cucumbers and chilies to bundles of home-woven textiles or clothes imported from China, marketplace trade involving diverse products is expanding across the province’s uplands. As part of a broad strategy to regulate and control this market trade, the state is now rebuilding and reorganizing upland marketplaces.

French colonial archives reveal that upland market trade was historically conducted in simple conditions with goods displayed on the ground, sometimes with thatched roofs and bamboo stall structures constructed by traders to protect their goods. After Independence, during the subsidy era (*bao cấp*), markets diminished in importance owing to food trade restrictions, and the infrastructure supporting them remained fairly similar to colonial times. Since the 2000s, however, significant structural changes have taken place, with numerous upland markets undergoing official upgrading. The “ideal” market is now a series of buildings with concrete foundations, pillars, and corrugated iron or tiled roofs, set within the grounds of a main plaza. Moreover, traders must now rent a fixed stall space and pay precise fees and taxes.

The Vietnamese state is working hard to bring upland marketplaces under the control and surveillance of local officials. The national-level “Decision of the Prime Minister Approving the Program on the Development of Marketplaces until 2010” has created a series of objectives that include developing pivotal market centers for key commodities and constructing or “modernizing” marketplaces in rural, mountainous, and border areas (SRV 2004). Professionalizing the management of marketplaces and ensuring that marketplace organization becomes “ordered and disciplined” are also key goals (SRV 2004). Specifically, the “Decision Approving the Scheme on Rural Trade Development during 2010–15” places emphasis on the development of wholesale, commune, and border markets and

market networks (SRV 2010b). A hierarchical marketplace stratification has been created, resulting in three grades: wholesale markets (grade 1), daily markets (grade 2), and periodic markets (grade 3). As such, informal marketplaces or trade sites initiated by local people to meet their own needs and priorities—such as being located near a certain border crossing or at a cultural festival—are deemed to be of concern and are frowned upon or demolished (Bonnin and Turner 2014).

Marketplace trade has historically been based on a lunar calendar cycle, with local traders also deciding when to attend in relation to their farming commitments and surpluses. Now, state officials have designated each market's main operating day to be a specific day of the week, forcing traders to pay for a fixed stall space and to be present each market day so that additional taxes can be collected.¹¹ Traders are highly critical of these changes, which also ignore seasonal agricultural commitments, arguing that provincial and local state planning is often at odds with local livelihood concerns and needs. As a female vendor noted, "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" (interview, February 2009).

To take one example, in late December 2014, the marketplace of the upland tourist town of Sa Pa (approximately fifty kilometers from the Sino-Vietnamese borderline) was relocated from the town center to a new, larger site approximately one kilometer outside the town, divorced from any tourist attractions. The central market had for a number of years been a place for upland minorities from nearby villages to meet and socialize on weekends (while growing numbers of Kinh [lowland Vietnamese] traders tended to sell there daily). The international tourism boom starting in the late 1990s, as well as financial needs stemming from the hybrid seed program, had made the market an increasingly important trade site for ethnic minority Hmong and Yao women selling embroidered textiles. When promoting the upcoming relocation to the new marketplace, officials noted that there would be more space for ethnic minority traders, but minority traders were extremely upset at the idea of having to move to the new location because of the perceived lack of international tourists that would visit a market so far from the town's center. Kinh traders were also concerned that their clientele would drop (interviews, May 2015). Indeed, resentment of this plan grew so much that a group of approximately eighty Hmong and Kinh vendors traveled to Hanoi to meet with state representatives to protest the move. After protesting for a week, eventually two Kinh vendors met with representatives, who told them they could stay put in the old market. This advice turned out to be somewhat futile: on their return to Sa Pa, the vendors found that officials

had already moved their merchandise to the new site (interviews, June 2015). As one Hmong vendor noted, “if we didn’t have our stuff already packed up, government people just came and threw it in government trucks and drove it to the new market” (interview, June 2015).

Why was a market that attracted international tourists relocated to the edge of a tourist town? Because international tourists are not the target of the state’s plans for tourism in the uplands, and the livelihoods of the ethnic minority vendors selling there are not high on the agenda of local state authorities; their main trade items—customary, hand-embroidered clothing—are not considered modern (see Michaud and Turner 2017). Kinh vendors who were initially concerned about the move when interviewed in 2015 were far more positive about their new stalls when interviewed again in 2017, noting that Vietnamese tourists all knew where to find the market through word of mouth and could drive and park their cars there. International tourists, however, especially backpackers, who are often the most sympathetic to ethnic minority traders and willing to buy minority wares (which Vietnamese seldom buy, preferring Chinese imports or upland foods and herbs instead, predominantly sold by Kinh), seldom visit the new market, because they do not know of its existence or cannot find it. Indeed, two and a half years after the market’s move, Hmong marketplace vendors interviewed in May 2017 were despondent about their future trade livelihoods, not knowing where to turn for the cash their households needed, especially for agricultural inputs. Some had given up trading and returned to their villages, whereas others had started to follow international tourists on treks to nearby Hmong villages, hoping to guilt-trip tourists into buying their wares en route. This enterprising approach reveals a covert resistance to the state wishing to pin down their trade in one sidelined and state-controlled location.

■ **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: FRONTIER PROJECTS, BUT NOT AT ALL COSTS**

These experiences among rural Handai and Hmong populations demonstrate how state-designed or -endorsed frontier schemes promote, trigger, or enforce capitalist expansion as well as cultural “civilization” or “social progress” through various subtle and overt means. The state now regulates or forbids traditional land uses, livestock rearing, and trade practices and strongly encourages and subsidizes access to modern agricultural inputs, infrastructure, and technologies. All these processes are part and parcel of the socioeconomic “development” projects that Chinese and Vietnamese state and corporate actors promote in their frontiers (cf. Duncan 2004; Scott 2009; Sturgeon et al. 2013).

These frontier schemes have triggered cascading diversification strategies among local Handai and Hmong populations. Notably, through agricultural intensification, Handai farmers in Yunnan have coped with the consequences of reduced land access after reservoir creation, while in Vietnam, a state-promoted agricultural transition has been adopted to varying degrees by Hmong farmers. Both minority groups have found that increasing their use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides brings greater financial needs and deeper engagement with the cash economy. For Handai farmers, this has translated into a spiraling agriculture intensification process, while Hmong informants have become further involved in the trade of other goods to gain the requisite financial capital—while being obligated to carry out this trade within increasingly regulated, state-organized upland marketplaces.

The Handai communities investigated here show a strong will to secure culturally important aspects of village-based livelihoods. For them, as for many other lowland groups in the Southeast Asian Massif, “the land that they inhabit is intrinsically part of their core identity. . . . The political disappearance of their customary domain has been, and for many still is, traumatic” (Michaud 2011, 216). Handai farmers are willing to engage in “modern” state-promoted activities, such as becoming involved in agricultural activities they do not valorize, as long as such activities allow them to increase the financial income they obtain from their land, which itself has now become a key asset to secure village-based livelihoods. Yet political and economic pressures have failed to convince them to undergo other livelihood changes, such as moving pig pens far from villages. Compromises are also made, such as accepting to follow state guidelines and have their houses adorned with symbols that have no cultural meaning for them. Across the border, Hmong householders also privilege the taste and cultural meaning of their traditional rice and continue to grow it for as long as possible, despite strong state pressure to cease doing so. Concurrently, their involvement in marketplace trade, long appreciated for the flexibility and social networking opportunities it offers, is now being tested by rigid state regulations. Protests, surprisingly vocal for minority upland residents in Vietnam, have had disappointing outcomes, and alternative livelihood diversification projects are being frantically searched for.

These rural livelihood strategies are not arising in isolation but are unfolding as dynamic and iterative processes. By focusing on the similarities and differences among projects and local reactions across these frontier spaces, we can see that Handai and Hmong informants do not fight all frontier processes. At times, they might collaborate to some degree, as

when they build new houses, take up hybrid seeds, and experiment with new cash crops, but they also set limits to their involvement based on local cultural, economic, and social criteria. By vernacularizing modernity, they interpret the possible impacts of state modernization schemes on their livelihoods in careful, culturally infused ways (Engle Merry 2006).

To the state and corporate actors that design, promote, and implement precise frontier schemes in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, externalities like identity maintenance, independence over farming practices, culturally accepted food, a house style that resonates with cultural norms, social uses of marketplaces, and farming cycle-friendly trade procedures and routines are deemed nuisances and barriers to the successful implementation of centralized state visions of “social progress” and economic modernization. Through a host of strategies ranging from economic incentives to the use of force, state and corporate actors attempt to convince frontier populations to conform to their rhetoric regarding what constitutes “modern” and “civilized” communities (Scott 2009). Here we have two one-party socialist states rapidly opening up to the market economy. In both settings, a former embrace of Marxist social evolutionism now rubs shoulders with an equally evolutionist neoliberal approach to economic progress, namely, modernization (Michaud 2011). Although we must acknowledge the political and economic variations between China and Vietnam, it is fair to say that official viewpoints on both sides of the border remain rooted in an ideological construct stemming from a lowland, ethnocentric bias that positions ethnic minorities in southwest China and northern Vietnam as the “backward Other,” living in the majorities’ remote periphery. Also, despite differentiated capacities to modernize frontier livelihoods, both states approach frontier populations as if the latter are devoid of agency and resources.

Yet we have demonstrated that authorities in both countries must ultimately account for the importance that local populations allocate to key factors such as cultural characteristics, current livelihoods, and societal norms to avoid their frontier projects failing altogether. In other words, these frontiers are not fixed entities but rather are a process involving ongoing negotiations, steeped in power relations (cf. Harms et al. 2014). Cultural understandings and priorities significantly impact how local populations in this frontier region perceive and react to frontier formation projects. They use their agency to foster, negotiate, rework, or complicate modernization projects, even when dealing with authoritarian regimes. To better understand—and maybe even accommodate—these reactions, assessing how frontier projects influence access to livelihood assets is not sufficient. We argue that further research must probe the social and

cultural meanings, values, and uses that local populations allocate to individual livelihood assets; we must also strive to better understand what locals deem a meaningful, culturally relevant livelihood outcome (cf. Bebbington 1999).

As also found by Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud (2015, 150), our evidence shows that in this frontier, “to suggest that modernity is occurring seamlessly, unchallenged, and without disagreement, constituting an unquestionable improvement, would be to ignore subtle signs of dissent and digression. At times, conformity is only surface deep, perhaps just a veil.” We have demonstrated the unanticipated directions and diverse means by which ethnic minority populations face frontier development schemes and negotiate change. In so doing, we hope to have helped “alter the patent victimization trope that dominates much of the literature on upland transformations and ethnic minorities, opening up new possibilities of interpretation” (Sowerwine 2011, 184). These local frontier livelihoods are embedded in identity and ethnicity, and the range of reactions to state frontier schemes spans from strategic compliance to resistance. All told, when political ideology meets everyday social life in this frontier, the results are not always what one expects or, indeed, what the state and its corporate allies necessarily hope.

Jean-François Rousseau is assistant professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa, Canada. His current research focuses on waterscape changes and on their influences on ethnic minority livelihoods in Yunnan Province, China. He coauthored *Gambling with the Land: The Contemporary Evolution of Southeast Asian Agriculture* (2012). Rousseau’s work on Yunnan ethnic minority livelihoods has also appeared in *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* and *Regional Environmental Change*, among other journals.

Sarah Turner is professor in the Department of Geography, McGill University, Montréal, Canada. Her current research concerns livelihood diversification approaches of ethnic minorities in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, the impacts of agrarian change and marketization in frontier locales, and the roles of everyday politics and resistance among urban informal economy workers in socialist states. She recently coauthored *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands* with C. Bonnin and J. Michaud (2015) and edited *Red Stamps and Gold Stars: Fieldwork Dilemmas in Upland Socialist Asia* (2013).

■ NOTES

1. Chatichai Choonhavan, prime minister of Thailand from 1988 to 1991, coined this now widely used expression in 1988 when discussing his vision for post-Cold War Indochina (cf. Szalontai 2011).

2. Combat operations took place in the north Vietnamese borderlands during the First Indochina War (1946–54), while China and Vietnam fought a brief border war in 1979. Trade was officially allowed across the border from 1988, while Sino-Vietnamese relations were only normalized again in 1991 (see Rousseau 2014).

3. Ironically, this rhetoric resembles the *mission civilisatrice* (civilizing mission) discourses at the core of the French colonial project in Tonkin, and in Yunnan as well, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (cf. Turner 2010).

4. The most recognized interpretation of modernity is probably societal modernization, encapsulated by the modernization theory of development studies. This linear-trajectory approach has been overwhelmingly followed by the contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese states in their teleological drive for economic growth, the eradication of “backwards customs and superstitions,” and their development of a bureaucratic state (Li 2011).

5. C. Patterson Giersch (2006) has further developed the idea that frontier formation is not a one-way process, noting that frontiers have moved both forward and backward through history in response to economic and political cycles.

6. Because all land remains state property in China and Vietnam, these farmers technically hold long-term usage rights over land parcels. These arrangements are either formalized in contracts or based on informal usufruct regimes. Though fully aware of this, our informants consider the land they farm their own.

7. A total of 106 households were surveyed, using a stratified sampling methodology. The survey questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions and was piloted with five households to ensure relevance.

8. It is expected that 516,000 urban and rural households from Honghe Prefecture alone will participate in the Beautiful Homeland scheme over the 2013–20 period, representing approximately 50 percent of all the households in the prefecture (Chen 2014; HPG 2011; 2014).

9. Kinship relations follow a patrilineal model in Handai societies. Therefore, when the oldest son in a family gets married, his wife moves to her in-laws’ house. Bridewealth is offered to the family of the bride.

10. Xishuangbanna Prefecture is located in Yunnan Province’s south-western border. Along with Dehong Prefecture, it is one of the main Dai settlements in the province.

11. These upland markets remain periodic for the most part, with approximately three-quarters of traders selling once a week on the official market day and the other quarter selling each day. The exceptions in the northern uplands are in the provincial capitals and the tourist town of Sa Pa, where markets operate daily.

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