

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE HIGHLANDS IN THE CHINA-VIETNAM BORDERLANDS ARE A craggy, rough, and unforgiving place. Until the eighteenth century, they contained no roads, only footpaths, and fell largely outside any local administration on either side of the border. Only those with few other options elected to live there. Increasing demographic pressures in the surrounding mid- and lowlands, combined with a near-constant state of civil war in southwest China, then uprooted populations and forced many to migrate. Those who arrived in the higher reaches of this border region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had little choice but to attempt to make their livelihoods work in difficult environs. For a while, these inhabitants existed largely apart from surrounding empires. But soon the adjacent states came to claim these mountains too.

This area is part of the Southeast Asian Massif, a broad expanse of highlands extending southeast of the Himalayan Plateau and shared today among ten countries. James C. Scott (2009) has dramatically argued that these vast highlands represent “the Last Great Enclosure.” Scott has proposed that these uplands, while linked to lowlands via trade relations for generations, have in recent centuries become increasingly claimed by modern states through incorporating processes variously labeled as “development, economic progress, literacy, and social integration” (*ibid.*, 4). For most local residents on the ground, this has meant the replacement of communal property with private land-use rights, the introduction of cash cropping, and a push to turn shifting cultivators into permanent farmers. The aim has been less to make upland individuals more productive than to ensure “that their economic activity was legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that were” (*ibid.*, 5). Today, in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, much of this relationship between state rulers and those living in the upland fringes continues.

Still, endogenous modes of economic behavior in these borderlands

remain understudied and poorly understood, let alone appreciated. For the Chinese and Vietnamese states, knowing more about specific minority upland livelihoods was, and largely still is, an unnecessary burden, slowing down the pace of national economic integration and the desirable modernization of these “little brothers.” The nation has a promising future; the ways of the past have to give in. In these highlands, the result is a distinctive context in which peasants are turned into labor forces, government-sponsored businesses incessantly extract valuable natural resources, and lowland economic migrants arrive looking for new economic opportunities, while state officials enforce national directives and ethnic minorities maintain livelihoods as best they can.

This situation begs numerous fundamental questions. Why, and how, do such “tribal” people consent to modernize? What practices are they willing to let go of, and what practices do they decide to adopt? As ethnic minorities, do they have any power left to alter the course of their fates? And if so, how? These questions have stimulated our longitudinal studies among these highland societies, and this book is an attempt to glean some answers. This social space requires much more scholarly attention than it has yet received.

The segment of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands under study here is home to over two million people officially labeled as ethnic minorities. Many, like the Hmong, belong to kinship-based societies that are geographically dispersed as well as politically divided between countries. These high margins have long been considered by those holding political control over them as a remote frontier inhabited by inconsequential peoples who lag behind in national statistics, lack civilization, and are stuck in a state of chronic poverty. We contend, on the contrary, that these individuals and households have much to teach the rest of the world. Far from selling out and passively accepting the state’s project, they make do with the little they have to construct creative, adaptive, and resilient livelihoods that the state often knows little about. Theirs might be a remote place, but in our view it is far from just another fast-disappearing distant tribal corner of the world.

After two centuries of continuous presence in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, how does this particular, emblematic society, the Hmong, currently cope with the pressing demands to integrate into the Chinese and Vietnamese nations under heavily centralized socialist regimes and to step to the tune of the market economy? It is our contention, after two decades of observation and reflection, that Hmong livelihoods are much more complex and finely adjusted than is generally thought. Hmong individuals, households, and communities creatively blend active engagement, cautious choices, and, at

times, resistance. And by resistance, we do not suggest that Hmong in these uplands refuse change. That would be a simplistic depiction. Rather, they use their agency to indigenize aspects of modernity, and they set in motion forms of adaptation that make sense to them, which sometimes amount to subtle yet perceptible acts of resistance to modernization processes.

We also want to move beyond the confines of prevailing academic research that tends to focus solely on national settings. There is an urgent need to study societies such as the Hmong translocally and transnationally, to get at the ways in which their distinctive historical and cultural features persevere despite the fractures caused by national borders and policies made in distant national centers of gravity. Country-based studies on “national” minorities are abundant and helpful but tell only part of the story. Given the cross-border nature of Hmong livelihoods, translocal and transnational approaches to social space are needed, with observations, ethnographies, and viewpoints from both sides of the border. By placing agency at the center of our discussions, we explore what it means for Hmong individuals and households to share an identity across adjacent countries, to be confined within the restrictive definition of a “minority nationality” (*shaoshu minzu* in China; *các dân tộc thiểu số* in Vietnam), and to differ with the state and the nation on a wide assortment of livelihood choices and concerns—while never being asked about any of them. Our Hmong interviewees have often urged us to “please tell people in your country about us.” With this book, we are intent on giving a voice to these individuals.

This book is enriched not only by generous and tolerant interviewees, ongoing collaborators, and patient research assistants, but also by a range of secondary sources. Written documentation used to place the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands into an historical perspective comes from Vietnamese, French, and English archives, public reports, monographs, and studies, including a number of unpublished French colonial-era documents. Hmong communities in the Southeast Asian Massif historically had no written language; as such, Asian annals, colonial archives, and modern scientific works combine with oral histories, interviews, and observations to enrich our field investigations.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our research in the Southeast Asian Massif began with Jean Michaud working in Thailand since 1991 and in Vietnam since 1995. Sarah Turner then began work in Vietnam in 1998, arriving from her prior research site

in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Since then, Jean and Sarah have completed yearly fieldwork in northern Vietnam. Christine Bonnin, previously working in the Philippines, transferred to Vietnam in 2006, and for the three of us, our research naturally expanded into Yunnan from 2008 onward.

Our expertise, as it were, lies in the margins: the frontier and its peoples. As a rough estimate, collectively we total six years of field time in these uplands. Our yearly visits to the region have facilitated long-standing connections with individuals ranging from official gatekeepers from whom we gain official authorizations to Hmong (Miao), Yao (Dao), Zhuang (Tày, Nùng), Kinh, and Han interviewees and friends. All three of us have conducted fieldwork, together, in pairs, or individually, across the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands, particularly in the segments that are the focus of our study: Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang Provinces in Vietnam, and Honghe and Wenshan Prefectures in Yunnan.

The different positionalities that we bring to this work allow us to undertake something akin to researcher triangulation. In other words, we can reach certain, collective interpretations from different stances and opportunities. We also have differential access to distinct voices. Sarah, a forty-something pakeha (white) New Zealander, and Christine, a thirty-something Canadian-Filipina, have spent the most time with Hmong women of all ages, gaining insight into their daily work and their household livelihood decision-making approaches. Jean, a fifty-something Québécois from Canada, has greater ease of access to Hmong men and to understanding their livelihood priorities, dating back to his doctoral research in a Green Hmong village in northern Thailand. Our interactions with state officials are likewise never the same. While sometimes Christine, as a younger woman, might come across as less threatening and gain unforeseen access to official information, on other occasions Jean, as a white-haired male, elicits easier access to official voices and documents. It is truly team work.

Overall, our long-term engagement with residents in this region has helped nurture trusting relationships that in turn allow us specific insights into local cultures and livelihoods. We have learned from experience that initial meetings with a new informant usually entail being thrown the Party line, a prudent coping strategy that makes sense from the subject's standpoint. It is only with time, a fair dose of humility, and efforts to build rapport (often lubricated with homemade alcohol) that trust is gained. Slowly, through participant observation, informal conversations, shared meals, marketplace gossip, oral histories, and conversational and semi-structured interviews—as well as time spent together blacksmithing a blade, caring for a sick child,

transplanting rice shoots, attending a wedding, or walking to the market—we have heard the stories unfolding in the coming chapters, stories expressing the complex concerns of borderland minorities. We sincerely thank all of the individuals who have placed their trust in us, as well as the numerous Han and Kinh officials who have agreed to help along the way. All of the names of interviewees in this book are pseudonyms, following the American Anthropological Association's code of ethics, for reasons linked to the rigid political contexts in China and Vietnam.

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To carry out officially authorized social science fieldwork in China and Vietnam, one needs to obtain the correct research visas. Red stamps must adorn letters, and authorizations must be delivered by all levels of the state apparatus, from the national down to the provincial, prefecture, county/district, and commune levels. Over the years, we have been very fortunate to be able to secure the collaboration of willing and patient local partners to help us secure these stamps. In Vietnam, our fieldwork has been chiefly carried out in collaboration with the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) and Vietnam National University (VNU). In Yunnan, our host institutions have been Yunnan University of Finance and Economics (YUEF) in Kunming, and Honghe University in Mengzi. In particular we thank Đặng Đức Phương and Professors Phạm Văn Cự and James Chen Gang for their assistance and for their friendship.

Relying on the help of research assistants and, at times, interpreters has placed our work a long way from the myth of “lone ranger research.” Furthermore, as will become apparent in the course of this book, upland-lowland relations are not always devoid of tensions and biases, and discussing culturally sensitive matters is not always easy when accompanied by state-affiliated Han or Kinh research assistants, with their own politically and culturally rooted takes on upland minorities. Over the years, attempting to circumvent this predicament has meant undertaking more and more of our work directly with ethnic minority assistants, or with non-state Han and Kinh research assistants who have long resided in the highlands and who have gained a more sound understanding of life there. We would like to thank them all for their tireless efforts, goodwill, and humor in the face of endless questions and long field days, weeks, or months. We would like in particular to acknowledge Chi, Lang, Lan, Chau, Ly Ta May, Yau, Ly, Juu, Hoai, An Phuong, Tingbin, Chloe, Xiao Feng, Bang, and Dung. In Canada

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During our academic careers to date, Sarah Turner and Jean Michaud have had the opportunity to supervise a number of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who have researched northern Vietnam and southwest China. These include Clara Champalle, Candice Cornet, Sarah Delisle, François Fortin-Deschênes, Caroline Goulet, Bernard Huber, Victoria Kyeune, Li Ya Juan, Lindsay Long, Philippe Messier, Pascale-Marie Milan, Nguyễn An Phuong, Richard Owens, Phạm Thị Thanh Hiền, Mathieu Poulin-Lamarre, Jean-François Rousseau, Laura Schoenberger, Watcharee Srikham, Claire Tugault-Lafleur, and Zhao Yawei. This book is informed by their work, which is cited throughout, and we extend our heartfelt thanks for their groundbreaking work in this little-researched area of the Southeast Asian Massif.

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