

Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands by Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. 223 pages.

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Abstract

This article consists of a book review of *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands*, a scholarly work focused on the socioeconomic experiences of the Hmong residing in Northern Vietnam.

Keywords: Hmong, Vietnam, Borderlands

Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud acknowledge the difficulties in obtaining access to minority groups in Communist Vietnam and China (xi). When official permission is granted, researchers are shadowed in the field by a state chaperone that hinders the ability to obtain accurate information from highland subjects who endure lowland prejudice and fear official prosecution. One can imagine that researchers also would have to watch the kinds of questions posed to subjects lest they unintentionally cause problems for them. Finally, the types of information from the field that is revealed via publication afterwards may also determine future permission to go back to local areas. Access is perhaps even more of an issue when it involves the Hmong who had played a critical role in the Communist victory during the Vietnamese revolution against the French (1946-54), but who have since been shoved aside by state policies. For these reasons, *Frontier Livelihoods* is a cautious but welcome addition to the accumulating

body of knowledge about the Hmong who straddle the borderlands of Vietnam and China. This work of scholarship applies an “actor-oriented approach” to examine Hmong relations with two Communist states and eschews neoliberal, (neo)Marxist metanarratives in the process of investigating the complex ways that this ethnic minority group indigenize modernity and globalization (169). The authors analyze how the Hmong navigate state policies while negotiating for cultural and economic survival.

The authors deftly reveal how highland Hmong society copes with socialist conservationist policies by examining the production and distribution of four highly demanded commodities: the buffalo (Chapter 4), alcohol (Chapter 5), cardamom (Chapter 6), and textiles (Chapter 7). They trace the origins of these products from the Hmong highlands to the lowlands, across state borders from Vietnam to China and, to a limited extent (especially, textiles), across the globe into the upscale boutiques of New York. Along with the flow of these goods, the authors unveil how the manufacture and exchange of these items are intricately entangled with Hmong social networks, as well as how they give indications of Hmong relations with lowlanders, the state, and the larger global community. Although constrained by socialist and developmental policies, the Hmong did their best to be agents of change; they selectively accepted state initiatives, hence, retaining some autonomy. Agency was possible because in highland Hmong society, social capital took precedence over considerations for global profit. The Hmong overwhelmingly exploited clan and exogamous marital ties to carry out business activities. The Hmong cultural system, in other words, contains a barrier mechanism that guards against outsiders penetrating and monopolizing the terms of barter and exchange in the society.

The first several chapters lay the theoretical context for the research on highland minorities, and provide the historical background on trade networks in the highland zone from ancient times to the modern period under the Communist state of Vietnam and China. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on the recent conditions of the Hmong and on their relations with these two states from the period of collectivization to the time of economic liberalization (Doi Moi) in the mid 1980s. Collectivization was abandoned early on in the highlands, but state development policies in the 1990s, which were unevenly and inefficiently applied, have led to gender rights and wealth disparities among the Hmong. Women's access to land use, for example, hinges on their relations to men because sons inherit land (39-41).

Since liberalization, the states of Vietnam and China have banned opium and hemp production and placed a restriction on swidden cultivation and the harvest and sale of timber. In an attempt to alleviate the economic hardships caused by these restrictions, replacement crops and hybrid rice and corn seeds were introduced into the highlands. The state also actively promotes tourism as an alternative means of boosting living standards. These efforts, which were received with ambivalence, have had limited success, however, because indigenous knowledge and local circumstances were often ignored. Hybrid seeds in Vietnam, for example, required the use of expensive fertilizers that the government did not subsidize and they were inefficiently distributed too late for planting in specific locales. Ultimately, the losses and gains cancelled one another so few Hmong saw drastic improvements in their livelihood.

Chapter 4 discusses the economic and cultural importance of the buffalo (*twm*)¹ in the Hmong highlands where the draft animal is a measure of wealth. The buffalo is required for funeral sacrifices and, as the “magic engine of the family” (64), for plowing terraced paddy fields on steep hillsides that are inaccessible to modern machinery, and for hauling heavy objects. As a commodity, the buffalo becomes a means for the authors to analyze the multifaceted ways that the Hmong indigenize globalization and state imposition of rules and systems of control. Because of its import, the state required that all buffaloes be registered, but the authors demonstrate why and how the Hmong evaded state laws. The expensive registry system was supposed to bring a measure of protection against thieves, but in reality it did little to hinder thieves from stealing and passing buffalos off as legal. Moreover, the state provided no safety net for buyers when they acquired buffalos from illegal traders. Individuals who bought a nonworking buffalo have no recourse to recoup their money. Even worse, families who became victims of thieves simply had their animal confiscated. For many reasons, the Hmong preferred to obtain buffalos via kinship networks. Personal connections allowed some measure of protection. A buyer, for example, could be certain of the true owner of the animal, and he could pay for the buffalo in installments. Despite state control, the buffalo as a commodity passed easily between kinship groups across the borders of Vietnam and China. The national borders of the highland zone are porous to minorities who have relatives on both sides.

A “family tradition,” alcohol distillation and distribution also provide windows into Hmong entanglements with globalization. Alcohol is required in Hmong rituals. It is also exchanged as bride price payments between families. For these reasons, alcohol

¹ Whereas “*twm*” means “buffalo”, Turner et. al. uses the combined terms *nyuj twm* (63), which actually means “cattle.” It becomes clear, however, that they mean “buffalo” in their publication.

production was included in the Vietnamese state's development initiatives. In Yunnan, China, on the other hand, the Hmong no longer produced alcohol. They preferred to buy it from Chinese distillers. Even in Vietnam, only Hmong families with bountiful land expended effort in making alcohol. Those with small plots could not afford to waste the precious land needed for growing subsistence rice. Those who could afford it grew the hybrid rice from the government for the expressed purpose of distilling while planting their own heritage rice seeds for consumption. Hybrid maize, however, is considered too low quality for marketable beverages and used mostly as stock feed (90). Although the sale of alcohol generated cash, the income was often reinvested back into subsistence rice or maize production. Moreover, state efforts to brand certain local drinks to attract lowland Kinh and Western tourists have increased demand and sales in these regions, but Hmong producers easily exploited the loopholes by purchasing alcohol from other areas and passing them off as the local, popularized brand. Overall, the distribution of alcohol, much like the buffalo, predominantly took place along personal lines. While there is increasing demand for the taste of highland alcohol, the Hmong producers were often short changed. The Kinh lowlanders who engaged in wholesaling distributions reaped the most profit from these exchanges.

Cardamom, a more lucrative product than alcohol, has emerged as the replacement crop for opium. The growth and global distribution of cardamom, a high in demand spice that is also believed to have medicinal properties, sheds a unique and insightful light on the Hmong's situation as a stateless minority in Vietnam and China. Cardamom grows under the canopy of forests. Traditionally, the Hmong gathered these seedpods for use from forested areas surrounding their village hamlets. Conservationist

policies in Yunnan and Vietnam since the 1990s have outlawed Hmong foraging rights, however. Much like Thailand in the 1970s, Vietnam has recently taken the drastic step of consolidating territories in the Sa Pa District that have been historically under Hmong and other ethnic minority use into a national park. The creation of national parks has the devastating effect of manufacturing Hmong persons whose traditional use of these areas preceded the existence of the state itself into outlaws. The Hmong way of life—swidden cultivation, cutting dead wood for fuel and trees for building houses, harvesting edible plants or fruits, and hunting and gathering—is illegalized.

While the Hmong in China paid park agents to cultivate cardamom inside national parks, those in the Sa Pa District of Vietnam circumvented state conservationist policies by illegally growing cardamom inside Hoang Lien Son Park (114). They endured the risk of having their product confiscated by government agents or stolen by competitors. As in the distribution of alcohol, the Hmong growers reaped some benefit from the sale of cardamom but, again, it was the lowland intermediaries and wholesalers who distributed this spice globally who reaped the largest financial returns. Still, Hmong cardamom cultivators applied their funds creatively to improve their livelihood; some acquired modern gadgets such as televisions, telephones, and motorbikes. The income generated by cardamom sale, so the authors argue, was not reinvested in ways that drastically altered the Hmong's living pattern. In other words, rather than being overwhelmed by globalization, the Hmong have “indigenized” modernity on their own terms.

Textiles and clothing, traditionally produced from the hemp plant by women, are markers of identity for the Hmong. In the *Qhuab Ke* (The Teachings of the Way), the sacred song of instructions to the dead that tells him or her how to get to and how to

identify the ancestors, it is stated that the ancestors would be wearing hemp rather than silk clothes. For this reason, even if the Hmong did not wear hemp anymore, bolts of hemp cloth are placed in the coffin with the deceased because they are required for a successful journey to the ancestors (128). Hmong women in Vietnam produced hemp cloth and they sewed embroidery and clothing pieces that were distributed for resale in China, Thailand, Laos, and even in the United States. Hemp cultivation has been outlawed in China so the importation of hemp cloth across the border from Vietnam fulfilled the need on that side of the national divide.

Hmong women's hemp textiles and fine embroideries have also found a lucrative market among tourists and lowland fashion designers who seek to incorporate ethnic designs into their clothing lines. This global demand has shifted the kinds of handicraft produced by Hmong women. Whereas before, women used to produce whole sets of clothes, now they invested in small pieces of elaborate embroideries that wholesalers refashioned into pillows, blankets, shirts, pants, and other items sold around the world. On a weekly basis, lowlanders canvassed the highland market stalls for Hmong women's embroideries. The authors argue, however, that language and trust make it hard for outsiders to penetrate Hmong society. Embroideries are small-scale pursuits and so lowlanders were often forced to befriend Hmong women who could lead them to more goods. Moreover, although outsiders have attempted to duplicate Hmong designs, the closed nature of the exchanges and the time-consuming aspect of embroidery work created an environment where Hmong women remained in control. Only Hmong women willingly devoted time to making these products and they often changed their designs and color schemes so that the market was forced to buy from them. Cheap reproductions of

synthetic Hmong batik prints have become popular, however. The Hmong are the main consumers of these Hmong patterned textiles from China (141). Ironically, while Hmong women would sew for global consumption, they acknowledged that their intricate needlework was too time consuming to do and so they no longer embroidered for their own wear.

Frontier Livelihoods is a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge about the Hmong of Vietnam and southern China. The authors have cleverly negotiated the barriers of obtaining access to the Hmong in these states without compromising the safety of their informants. The deceptively simple framing of this work, using four main commodities to examine Hmong interactions with the state and global market systems, deftly interrogates oppressive state policies and their devastating impact on the Hmong. The authors portray the Hmong with sensitivity and empathy throughout, but even as a strong proponent of Hmong agency, at times, I question the overall argument that the Hmong were holding out on their own against intrusive state policies and the processes of globalization. To be sure, the echoes of the resiliency of the Hmong spirit resounded loudly from the mountains in this book. There were instances, however, when we could literally see the weight of the state and global systems pressing down upon Hmong backs, such as when Hmong women stated that they wear synthetic print reproductions from lowland China because they no longer have time to make their own clothes. Another occasion that is revealing of the stress and lack of freedom the Hmong of China and Vietnam endured is how they stood voiceless as these states manufactured them into outlaws by revoking their traditional rights to eke out a living from the land. They

became thieves who plant and harvest cardamom on their own land at night, under the cover of darkness.

Finally, in these highland-lowland exchanges, the authors admit over and over again that the Hmong always came away with the short end of the stick, so to speak. Hmong lack of physical access to lowland markets due to the “friction of height” and their lack of knowledge about global and lowland market systems prevent direct entry into these markets even if they should desire it. Controlling the wholesale distribution of these products would generate the most dramatic incomes to individual or groups of Hmong, empowering other political aspects of their lives. As it currently remains, individual Hmong producers reaped the smallest reward in proportion to the effort expended to manufacture these products. Although the authors pinpoint Hmong social structure—relying on personal ties for business transactions—as the source of their agency, I think we have to also acknowledge it as a weakness that others exploit. There is a definite need for the Hmong to think beyond clan, religious, or national boundaries. Given the status of things in the highlands, the question remains as to just how much longer Hmong ingenuity and social structure can withstand the weight of intrusive conservationist policies that manufacture them into outlaws. Also, how long before the Hmong cave into the temptations of global economic changes brought on by tourism? The Hmong back has already begun to show signs of wear and tear as evident in the mass conversion to Christianity in the late 1990s, resulting in an even closer state scrutiny.²

² See for example, Tam T.T. Ngo, “Protestant conversion and social conflict: The case of the Hmong in contemporary Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 46(2): 274–292, June 2015.