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Infrastructure Meets Infrapolitics: Emic Negotiation of State and Market Inputs in Upland Northern Vietnam

Jean Michaud and Simon Bilodeau

In the northern uplands of Vietnam, the socialist state is building infrastructures of many kinds to harness the once-remote peoples living there to the nation's economic, political, and cultural core. As embodiments of uneven power forces, these new infrastructures have major impacts on local livelihoods and have triggered an array of responses to the modernist design of the state. This study examines how the Hmong, a kinship-based ethnic group of the Southeast Asian Massif, use, cope with, adjust to, and contest these infrastructures and related changes. In an emic perspective, we offer an ethnographic account of social change of a marginal people at the crossroad of infrastructures and infrapolitics.

Keywords: Infrastructure; Infrapolitics; Hmong; Tourism; Infrastructural Violence; Resilience

Introduction

Highland northern Vietnam may share more similarities with the mountainous fringes of northwestern India than one might initially think. As the Introduction to this special issue highlights, remote locations distant from the nation's core often entail telling commonalities.

In this article, we examine the Vietnamese provinces of Lào Cai and Hà Giang, focusing on the districts of Sa Pa and Đòng Vần respectively. These areas are at the heart of the historical domain of the Hmong, a kinship-based ethnic minority of the Sino–Vietnamese borderlands. Once sleepy locales, these districts have experienced, since the free circulation of people and capital was extended beyond the

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lowlands, a surge of unprecedented economic activity, driven by central government-led infrastructure development and the tourist industry.

However, the process of harnessing these margins began centuries ago under imperial rule, before picking up steam during the French colonial period and strengthening under the Socialist regime. Now, the diverse communities in these increasingly accessible uplands are navigating the challenges of state and market interventionism. This involves new infrastructure as part of a masterplan for national economic growth. This plan bears similarities to China's Belt and Road Initiative to reach remote markets and more firmly tie internal peripheries to its cultural, economic, and political core (Oakes 2021).

In Vietnam, these developments have built upon a principle of 'selective cultural preservation', a policy designed to normalise along national standards the so-called 'backwards' minority ethnicities. This came with an increasing state monitoring of their economic, religious, and cultural lives under the muscle-bound leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Michaud 2009). In the face of coerced socio-cultural modernisation underpinned by infrastructural expansion, it is relevant to ask: What vectors of modernity, among those brought to their doorstep by growing infrastructure, do the Hmong like and retain? And how do they make this selection, and why?

Sarah Turner (2022, 196) emphasises that 'The spatial dynamics underway when infrastructural violence occurs across large and oft-isolated regions is of critical importance'. These dynamics too often reproduce the invisibility and the marginality of those spaces and their inhabitants. In order to focus on local answers that differ, contradict, or at least complexify the dominant discourse of social evolution and progress of the Vietnamese state, left mostly unchallenged—and many times reproduced—by the development industry (Gilman 2018), we build on James C. Scott's notion of *infrapolitics* (1990), a hidden space where dominated peasants outline covert agendas to maintain themselves and to keep at bay unwanted effects. Although our use of *infrapolitics* somewhat departs from Scott's initial conceptualisation, it helps us focus on undercover yet meaningful manifestations of indigenisation of modernity and agency, and thus to form a legible picture of social change and resilience by a people on the geographic and political fringes of a heavily centralised nation.

Simon Bilodeau completed his master's dissertation on Hmong engagement with tourism in Hà Giang Province in 2022, and Jean Michaud has been publishing on these uplands for three decades, both of them building on wide-ranging ethnographic fieldwork. Together, they explore whether following the trail of state and tourist infrastructural expansion could bring to light local agency directed at altering the course of modernisation, and shed light on locally relevant life projects (Gaonkar 1999; Robins 2003; Sahlins 2005).

What we Mean by Infrastructure

In its common sense, the term calls up tangible images firmly sitting in the material realm: roads, railways, bridges, and so on. Ideologically, all are routinely presented by

their sponsors as necessary elements of growth and progress meant to allow smooth collective living while ensuring the profitable running of state and market for the benefit of all. In the mind frame of international development, infrastructural expansion and improvement are unquestionably desirable and universally beneficial.

Brian Larkin (2013) noted a surge of interest in infrastructure and shifts in how anthropologists now address this notion. From prominently physical realities ‘that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space’ (2013, 328), infrastructures are now analysed as ‘the entangled impacts and relationships with ecological, spatial, socio-political, and cultural processes and practices’ (Turner 2022, 186). For instance, there is now a fair amount of work done on new roads that unravels the complex interrelations between scales, actors, political asymmetries, contexts, visions of the future and modernity, and levels of social engagement in the building of infrastructure (for example, Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2012; Harvey, Jensen, and Morita 2016; Masquelier 2002). These studies underline how such projects can succeed or fail expectations from below, often providing people with increased connectivity ‘that elicit new temporal and spatial practices’ (Reeves 2017) to different avail, but not always (Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012).

Although the outcomes for locals living with such infrastructure encompass a complex mixture of both benefits and losses, from a critical viewpoint, infrastructures are inevitably a materialisation of uneven power forces where stronger players can impose, sometimes violently, their vision of modernity. In Marco Di Nunzio’s words (2018, 1), ‘as ethnographers and geographers have pointed out, building infrastructure is not a neutral endeavour. While continuing to embody visions of progress, pipelines, highways and electric lines serve vested interests, enforce regimes of control, and create geographies of abjection and segregation’.

Turner has recently applied such critical thinking to the uplands of northern Vietnam. She draws attention to the continuous ‘processes of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion’ (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012, 401) triggered by infrastructure expansion, be it passively or intentionally (Ferguson 2012; Lemanski 2018), currently unfolding there. This infrastructural violence is most salient in the cases of large-scale projects such as dams, (air)ports, railways, etc., which are the most immediately disruptive and destructive ones. This can be referred to as ‘fast violence’: a violence that affects people through the immediate loss of land and livelihoods and often forced displacement, for instance. However, violence may also be more subtle and diffuse when it takes forms of marginalisation and exclusion that, like in upland northern Vietnam, ‘have not necessarily been immediate nor obvious, often occurring gradually over months or even years’ (Turner 2022, 194).

In the uplands of northern Vietnam, the resulting blend of marginalisation and exclusion of ethnic minorities always results from imbalanced power distribution: in the case at hand, between a domineering national culture, represented by the Kinh ethnicity forming nearly 90 per cent of Vietnam’s population, and the uplanders who account for most of the rest. Ten percent may seem like a sizeable chunk with

potential political clout, but such is not the case here. While the Kinh nation has a centrally integrated voice (the state's), ideology (the Communist Party's), and language (Vietnamese), northern upland groups are profoundly divided along geographic, ethnolinguistic, religious, political, and economic fault lines, and, thus, never speak with a unified voice. In this way, the door is open for centrally designed infrastructural violence to be committed with impunity (Rodgers and O'Neill 2012).

Turner (2022, 186) further states:

While there has been important work in the Southeast Asian Massif with regards to the socio-economic and political implications of hydro-electric dam infrastructure on local communities (e.g. Dao 2016; Middleton and Lamb 2019; Ribó and Calzolari 2020), and likewise of roads (e.g. Boyle and Shneiderman 2020), far less is known about how rural upland residents in this region live with and contest *less obvious* forms of infrastructure that impact their everyday lives. [emphasis in original]

In the case of Socialist Vietnam, freedom of speech is highly constricted, particularly so at the geographical and cultural fringes where historical patterns of cultural cancellation have been extensive. Attaining ethnographic depth thus requires an enquiry into the hidden transcript and the 'infrapolitical' world (Scott 1985; 1990) of those marginalised populations. This further calls for applying critical and multilayered approaches, and welcoming particularisms instead of relying on generalisation, especially as 'infrastructure also provokes claims and demands from below [...], showing how dissent and conflict can coexist within a shared appreciation of infrastructure as the necessary material foundation of society' (Di Nunzio 2018, 2).

This article presents one such analysis of dissent and conflict, though one of a rather muted and strategic character.

Vietnam's Northern Uplands and its Infrastructure Through Time

We consider the cases of communities in the two provinces of Lào Cai and Hà Giang in the northern highlands. In Lào Cai Province, the Hmong, an official 'minority nationality' (*các dân tộc thiểu số*), totals 25 per cent of the province's population of 898 000, and in Hà Giang, 34 per cent of 910 000. In high-altitude districts, these numbers double to 52 per cent for Sa Pa District and, dramatically, 90 per cent for Đồng Văn District, as published in the 2019 national census for Vietnam (Figure 1).

Yet, through time, Hmong highlanders realised that their more powerful neighbours were leaving them with few options: to be ignored, displaced, eradicated, or absorbed into more forceful nations. The first option has long been a favourite for uplanders, but, generally, several of them have been in play at once depending on the time, the area, and the group (Koh 2004; McElwee 2004; Michaud 2016). Let us detail this briefly.

Prior to European colonisation starting in the north in the late nineteenth century, highland northern Vietnam was largely left to its own devices by the pre-colonial

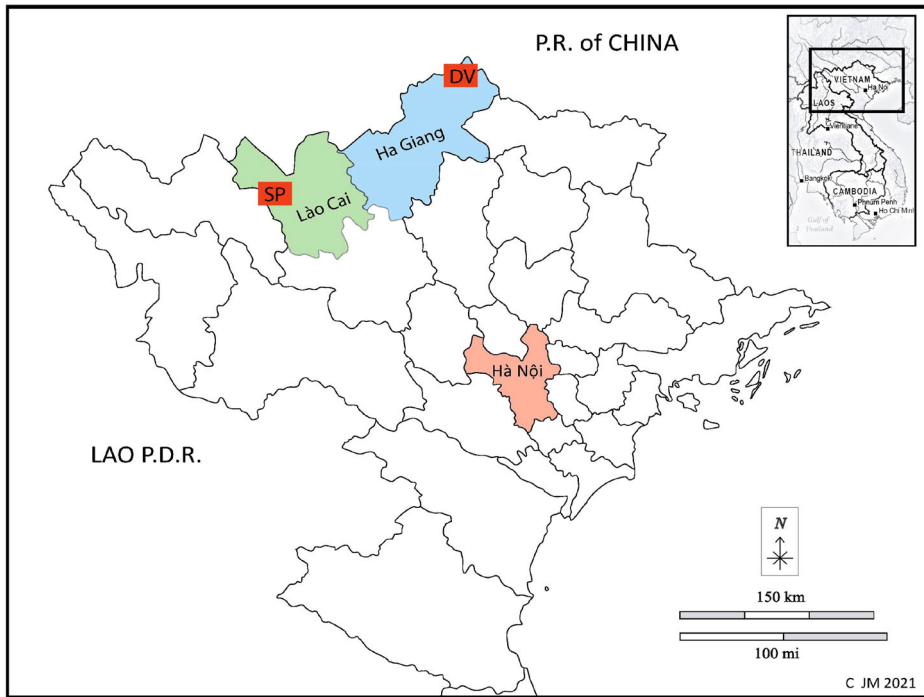


Figure 1. Map of Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces with the location of Sa Pa and Đông Văn districts. © Jean Michaud.

state (Davis 2017; Lentz 2019a, 2019b). The imperial understanding of remote uplands was that of flexible buffer zones by which distance from the civilisational core was the main factor of state involvement, not borders in the modern sense (Michaud 2000). At the time, these highlands could schematically be divided into a few altitude strata, with transport infrastructures being deployed with decreasing density as one moved up and away from the lowland core. In the highest region incorporating inhospitable ridges, only upriver streams, many not navigable, and rare fragmented mule- and foot-paths existed. The political organisation of the remote societies dwelling there, the partly sedentarised agriculturalists, including the Hmong, had largely escaped feudal state influence (Scott 2009) and had remained based primarily on egalitarian models, structured by proximity and kinship (Michaud 2017).

French colonial occupation of the northern uplands led to the transformation of buffer zones into borderlands (Davis 2017; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). This intense push of territorial occupation triggered an expansion of trails, roads, and railroads. Route Nationale 4 running along the northern crown of the uplands was built to disenclave these borderlands along with a permanent penetration of the military (Michaud 2013).

This period of intense spatial interventionism paused when the French departed in 1954, but with the advent of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1954–1976), the communist regime picked up the baton with an ambitious programme of scientific socialism and proletarianisation of the peasantry through wage work in mining, road expansion, electrification, dam construction, and the full monetisation of the economy (De Hartingh 1996). As summarised in an official 2010 reiteration of the state’s project (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010, Turner’s translation in Turner 2022, 188),

‘Decision No. 800/QĐ-TTĐ of the Prime Minister: Approving the National Target Programme on New Rural Construction 2010–2020’ specifically notes that the Programme’s objective is: ‘To build a new countryside with a gradual modernisation of socio-economic infrastructure; a rational and structured economic and production organization, to link agriculture with rapid industrial and service development; to associate rural development with urban planning; to ensure a democratic, stable rural society, rich in national cultural identity; to protect the ecological environment; maintain security and order; and to increasingly improve people’s material and spiritual life following a socialist orientation’.

But soon, this plan was challenged by a bigger issue: the short but violent 1979–1980 Vietnam–China border war that scarred both Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces and virtually sealed off the whole northern borderlands for a decade. As one consequence, it is the threat of seeing Chinese troops march over the border again that put the brakes on the regime’s infrastructural investments in the borderlands.

Concurrently, the 1990s saw a ban put on growing and selling opium and on uncontrolled tree felling, combined with the cautious opening up of the north to free circulation once the political state of affairs with China had time to cool off. Along with improved hygiene conditions and a massive influx of lowland settlers via new road networks and long-term state-led colonisation schemes (Hardy 2005), such factors weighed down a growing rural population less able than ever to keep going with its livelihoods based on a blend of fixed and rotational, wet and dry agriculture.

As the World Bank (2009) puts it, the Hmong are still for the Vietnamese regime today little more than a poor backward mountain tribe that the socialist state—the Big Brother in Confucian moral philosophy—has a duty to assist in its progress towards economic, political, and cultural maturity. On the ground, most exchanges still go unrecorded and move along customary trail networks, often across the Chinese border, yielding no verifiable statistics (Bonnin 2011; Bonnin and Turner 2014; Delisle and Turner 2016; Michaud 2012, 1860–1861). Almost perversely, this unaccounted-for concealment of a thriving local economy contributes to lowering the certified performance figures calculated in cash income, comforting the official picture of a population living in misery (World Bank 2009; M. C. Lâm 2020; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), providing fuel to the Kinh’s entrenched evolutionism and perceived legitimacy. Recently, for the state, increased infrastructural development along with tourist expansion has become the latest appealing answer to this blot on the national record.

In effect, tourism is one of the most versatile and cost-effective economic activities when it comes to integrating remote internal peripheries to the core of just about any country (Hall 2017; Harrison 2001; Streimikiene and Bilan 2015; Telfer 2002). Vietnam has boarded that train with enthusiasm. Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces offer a compelling demonstration of the economic power of tourism for, it is alleged, developing marginal areas. The sparse local population and its general low level of industrial training hold only modest potential as a skilled workforce (Choo-wonglert 2012). Instead, these societies' business potential is seen to stand in their marketable cultural uniqueness and landscape, a magnet for lowland and international visitors alike (Nyíri 2011). State officials have been reconstructing older and creating new festivals, cultural events, and monuments to fit the national imaginary in well-known novels, films, and songs in the lowlands (Bilodeau 2022; Michaud and Turner 2006; O' Briain 2018). Private actors capitalise on these opportunities, enhancing such fantasies for the profitability of their businesses. These actors range wildly in terms of power, from single lowland settlers looking for employment to corporations like Sun Group and FLC Group bringing hundreds of millions of dollars to build Disney-like facilities (Bilodeau 2022; Michaud and Turner 2017).

Meanwhile, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative mega scheme, China has busied itself leading the heads of spacious highways and fast train infrastructures to their side of the border, now waiting for the right moment to pressure Vietnam into connecting to these fully. On the ground as much as in official documents in Vietnam, the 'China scare' narrative is still palpable and has deep and lasting effects on the decision-making process concerning infrastructures in the northern borderlands, of which China's unilateral move of erecting a high fence/wall along the border during the Covid pandemic was only the most recent episode (Qi, Zhai, and Le 2022).

In her critical study, Turner (2022, 188) shifted the focus from major and visible types of infrastructures to three more mundane types that nevertheless play a major role among highland societies: hybrid seeds for rice and corn crops, fixed marketplaces, and tourism. We put the emphasis here on the third type, tourism-driven economic expansion. For the Vietnamese state, security concerns still exist, but this compromise seems to satisfy the authorities, especially as it brings loyal Kinh lowlanders to the borderlands. In this controlled context, the rural Sa Pa and Đòng Văn districts offer a telling vision of a very particular type of infrastructural violence.

Etic vs Emic Views

In Vietnam, a large proportion of initiatives led by the state, and even academic studies, routinely adopt a top-down posture in discussing the benefits of development among upland groups. A powerful synergy is thus taking place at the highest political and economic levels between a global view of these populations being 'underdeveloped' and needing 'aid', and a communist state's vision of upland non-Kinh groups being less civilised and incapable, in essence, of taking their lives into their own hands (Chu 1960; Đặng, Sơn, and Hùng 1986; Hồ 2000; Michaud 2009;

2022). On this front, Vietnam's state rhetoric is analogous to China's (Itō 2013; McElwee 2004; 2022; Oakes and Zuo 2022; Sikor et al. 2011).

On closer examination, however, there are signs that the success of this one-way evolutionary programme among Lào Cai and Hà Giang uplanders is less than conclusive. Reversing the usual top-down view, we provide evidence from those directly concerned, putting forward a more emic perspective.

Sa Pa District

The tourist business has had a major infrastructural impact in the Sa Pa District (Chan 2005; Dương 2005; Michaud and Turner 2000; 2006; 2017; T. T. T. Nguyễn 2008; V. H. Nguyễn 2021; Roberge 2021; Sowerwine 2004; Truong 2014). Hmong uplanders had seized early on some of the opportunities tourism brought. In their isolated hamlets, subsistence economy had been the norm until the 1910s when French agents started building leisure infrastructures to escape the Red River Delta heat. For upland farmers, this triggered an increase in local demand for food they produced and collected, for tourist artifacts, and for a small but steadily growing bushwalk guiding business.

A drastic lull befell when the French abandoned Sa Pa in the late 1940s with the Independence War hotting up. Following that, the New Economic Zones scheme of the 1960s and 70s (Hardy 2005) brought to the district an influx of lowland Kinh migrants. The next step was when the Vietnamese state allowed the free circulation of goods and people to the uplands in the early 1990s. The district was soon marketed as a must-see 'authentic' jewel, and both national and international tourists flocked in. The former accounted for 85 per cent of the 1.65 million visitors in 2019 (Turner 2022, 192). With the road infrastructure tying Sa Pa to Hanoi greatly improved in the mid-2010s, urban nationals are now driving their cars in droves to this formerly hard-to-reach beauty spot.

This infrastructural push has culminated in the proliferation of luxury hotels and resorts and an impressive cable car system linking the town to Fansipan summit, the highest peak in Vietnam. Tourism has emerged as a leading economic driver in the district, highlighted by activities such as sightseeing, mountaineering, cultural experiences, and traditional celebrations (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2008). This strategic focus on tourism is further solidified in the 'Master Plan for Socio-Economic Development of Lào Cai Province up to 2020, extending to 2030' (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2015). The plan includes ambitions to develop massive attractions and entertainment complexes (VOV.Vn 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic paused much of this, however, with hosting, food, and guiding tourist businesses coming to a near-complete halt for three years.

Through the ups and downs of the tourist industry in Sa Pa District, the Hmong are kept in a passive, or at best reactive, position. Rare success is achieved when working at the interstices of the system, for instance in the freelance trekking guiding business. Otherwise, save for exceptional cases when an outside partner

has stepped in with social and financial capital, Hmong do not own or even manage tourist agencies, shops, hotels, or restaurants. They have, however, been employed for wages in these, or as suppliers of tourist-oriented textiles. Yet, in interviews with Kinh and foreign owners and managers of tourist businesses in 2023, they revealed that although willing to hire Hmong workers—much of the Kinh workforce left during the pandemic and has yet to return—it is extremely difficult to retain them. More than any other group, Hmong seem prone to move on to better-paying competitors or quit without warning to go back home. None of these employers see a clear explanation for such ‘illogical’ economic behaviour: as one of them candidly put it, ‘they don’t seem to understand that good regular cash sent back home would help their rural folks more than simply going back to provide an extra pair of hands in the fields’.

Hmong Voices from Sa Pa District

The voices put forward here are just a small sample of hundreds of interviews held over the last three decades. Their function in this section is to provide telling illustrations of larger processes as experienced from the ground up.

Pao,¹ a male farmer interviewed in 2019 from a hamlet long established inside Hoang Lien Son park, cultivated black cardamom inside the park. He derived a good income from this illegal crop by selling it via phone to wholesalers, who would collect it from his village thanks to a new road. However, he explained that, over the past five years, the improved road access had also allowed rangers easier access within the park, leading to Pao being caught and fined a few times, and his crops cut down or seized. As a result, he has retreated deeper into the forest to continue this lucrative yet risky cash crop. This shift has considerably increased the time taken to walk to the crop site, and even sleeping at the crop site, and reduced the quantities he can carry home. Additionally, selling prices have dropped lately. Pao is contemplating abandoning cardamom cultivation in favour of returning to subsistence farming, supplemented by the occasional orchid and bamboo shoot trade.

Another Hmong, Mai, a woman of about 65 years living in a hamlet away from Sa Pa town, distils alcohol on a regular basis. She explained: ‘Before I only sold to other people in the village who had a funeral or a wedding, but then with the better road and phones, I could find new buyers, take my alcohol to Sa Pa town and sell there [to Kinh tourists or restaurant owners] for a higher price. But it’s a lot of trouble and I only sell what isn’t needed in my village. If I haven’t produced enough, then I only sell in the village’.

Amidst the tourism boom, 85-year-old widow Zoua, living in a hamlet near Sa Pa town, has been vending souvenirs to tourists for decades, either on the streets when the police allow it, or at the marketplace. With the 2017 relocation of the Sa Pa marketplace—her mainstay—to the town’s outskirts, visited by fewer Western customers, she observed: ‘We don’t sell much anymore. Tourists aren’t coming to the

new market. Only Kinh people, and they don't buy from us'. Considering this decline in sales, Zoua contemplates staying home.

Also linked to tourism but more proactively, Sho, a woman in her early forties from a valley hamlet, is the wife of a subsistence farmer. She was a pioneer in joining a foreign-owned enterprise for local Hmong women to guide trekking tours and to host them in their homes. She noted: 'The renovated road coming down the valley, the electricity in our house, the new toilet and shower, and the internet have helped a lot to attract foreigners. This is very good. We could renovate the whole house and buy a little bit of extra land'. Yet she also voiced reservations, adding: 'But at the same time, the cost of land in our hamlet has increased too much, many Hmong needing cash decide to sell, and all buyers are Kinh people who only want to re-sell at higher prices or open their own homestays. They're stronger than us, the government is with them, there's nothing we can do'.

Sho's cousin Paj, a woman in her early thirties, was another founding Hmong woman in the trekking tour enterprise. Living a few houses away and married into a large and prosperous clan, Paj acknowledged the benefits of a decade of tourism income, which had enabled purchases like motorcycles, rototillers, phones, extra land, and appealing bridewealth and sacrificial buffaloes. However, she noted the impact of increased tourism competition and the decline in Western tourists, who have grown disillusioned with Sa Pa town, resulting in her family needing to fall back on farming and distilling alcohol for village trade.

Then there is the case of Yee, a young man who previously guided Kinh and Western tourists on three-day treks up Mount Fansipan for a specialised Kinh tour operator, while his wife managed their farm. However, the construction of the cable car to the Fansipan summit in 2015 significantly diminished the demand for climbing expeditions. He explained: 'Nobody wants to climb Fansipan only to find a crowd of tourists at the top with many new temples, restaurants, and shops. Now I live with my wife and children in my village, I farm my family's land, we make less money, but life is much cheaper than in town'.

Yia, in her thirties and employed by a trekking agency for several years, comes from a family that started breeding salmon for resale, a thriving opportunity linked to a booming restaurant demand in Sa Pa town. Competition is stiff though, with the prime upstream locations secured by Kinh entrepreneurs who can afford the land, leaving the Hmong downstream with poorer water quality water to fill their fish tanks, affecting fish quality. Yia also noted a disparity in wages between Hmong and Kinh workers in the hospitality industry, leading to a lack of loyalty among Hmong towards their employers.

Strikingly, most Hmong men and women we spoke to, when encountering difficulties, often revert to farming and reduce their previously higher living expenses, a typical form of infrapolitical resistance, as described by Scott. Most say this is achievable as they, or their family members, had kept active in farming. The inconsistency in tourism-derived income primarily used for expanding homes, livestock, or agricultural land prompts a collective pause in growth, pushing everyone to fall back on safe

and age-old subsistence farm work. So it is fair to say that this capacity to adjust livelihoods, which has been observed and documented for over one hundred years in this valley, constitutes a template for an emic definition of what is important and desirable. This reflects a preference for a versatile and inventive integration of traditional practices with the ability to capitalise on new opportunities, maintaining a readiness to revert to old methods if newer ones falter. Far from portraying passive and disempowered actors in a larger story, these narratives highlight the proactive roles of individuals in navigating complexities.

Without claiming statistical value, these narratives are representative of the Sa Pa Hmong basic trends of adaptation to changing fates linked to tourism infrastructure and, more recently, to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most commented that they liked the material improvements to their lives brought about by new roads, electricity, and an increased number of schools and dispensaries, and not forgetting easier access to their hamlets for tourists. Here, as much as in the lowlands of Vietnam (Harms 2016) or elsewhere in Southeast Asia (Barker, Harms, and Lindquist 2013), peasants are not in any way denying the value of these benefits. But most Hmong in the district also lamented the invasion of Kinh competitors taking over much of the land even in the remotest hamlets, driving up prices significantly for locals who might want to extend their current agricultural surface or buy some for their offspring. Tung, a 45-year-old former head of hamlet in a commune popular with Kinh day-trippers, said he is worried that the Hmong, with less easy access to capital than those visitors, might eventually be pushed out by buyers who also enjoy the support of the district's People's Committee (the local council in the Vietnamese communist system).

The issue of youth leaving the villages to work or study in town is also a sore point. Yet, nearly all informants report that after maybe two or three years, most return to marry and live in their villages of origin; it appears that this is their preferred place of residence, where they can lead the kind of life that they desire. From there, they are still able to relate to the outside world via the road and cellphone networks. A fine example of this is Gar, a 36-year-old Hmong man in a remote hamlet who returned with borrowed money to open a tourist homestay. He had studied in Sa Pa town, then in Hanoi, became an engineer, and went on to work for the Sa Pa District Residential Architecture Bureau. But he chose to leave all that behind and return to his village, live closer to his relatives, and be his own boss.

Đông Văn District

In neighbouring Hà Giang Province by contrast, financial and infrastructural inputs from the outside took much longer to materialise. The military-type governance maintained, until very recently, a separation between the province and the rest of the country through administrative surveillance such as visa requirements for outsiders lasting well into the 2010s. These were especially strict for foreigners, who had to obtain short-term permits just to drive through the province. This resulted in Hà Giang long remaining one of the most isolated provinces in the country (Bilodeau

2022; Kyeyune and Turner 2016; Nguyen, Oosterhoff and White 2011; Novellino 2000; Turner et al. 2016).

In the high plateau of the eastern fringes of the province, where the predominantly Hmong district of *Đông Văn* is located, the rugged karstic and severely water-deprived terrain did not offer many attractive options for either the state or the market. For years, in rustic hamlets, only uplanders with very few options could make an often-miserable living from such inhospitable terrain. Change started coming in the early 2000s with a boom in the mining industry, followed 10 years later by a centrally planned tourist mega-scheme, the '*Đông Văn Karst Plateau Geopark initiative*'. Meant to disenclave the province, the Geopark benefitted from massive public and private investments to improve the road network, relocate marketplaces, and stimulate private investment in hotel and food business, all along creating from scratch an image of exotic wilderness. This was supported by the upgrade of the main route, nicknamed Happy Road (QL4C), originally built between 1959 and 1965. The take-off of tourism followed the opening up that enabled freer movement of people around 2016.

As in Sa Pa District, national tourists make up around 80 per cent of registered visitors while the total yearly number in the province has rapidly reached one million (interview in 2020 with the Provincial Department of Tourism Management). Although in its early days, this development is decisively shaped on capital-intensive infrastructure for mass tourism and a form of Disneyfication favoured by the provincial authorities (Bilodeau 2022; Hà Giang Province Government 2021).

For local Hmong, these developments are unprecedented and take place at the speed of light. Of particular interest, the last two decades of infrastructural push brought two main economic opportunities: wage work, and a higher demand for food and services triggered by the flow of outside consumers. But most of these opportunities were swiftly grabbed by outside actors, chiefly Kinh businesspeople (and sometimes *Tày* or *Nùng*) migrating in their droves to get a bite in this feeding frenzy while tapping into their lowland networks. Bilodeau states that for the whole of *Đông Văn* District at the time of his fieldwork in 2019, he counted a modest total of 49 Hmong individuals engaged economically with tourism, three-quarters of whom just occasionally sold cheap food or handcrafted hemp garments as a sideline to their agricultural livelihoods.

The rugged karstic landscape of eastern Hà Giang has been a challenging place to farm at the best of times. Now, the government grabs the rare good and flat land to build government infrastructure (office buildings, schools, parks, playgrounds, waterworks, parking lots, etc.) and reserves some more for tourist-related initiatives. Investors expand further to nearby hamlets. Consequently, with the availability of wage work and trading opportunities, some uplanders opt for reduced farming—dropping it entirely in rare cases only—and turn to wage work. As a significant compounding factor, much of this half-uprooted Hmong workforce is crossing the border to work in China, most of the time illegally, for much better wages. As a way of expanding their networks, this dovetails well with Hmong pursuing a long tradition

of undercover cross-border trading with China for food, spices, timber, buffalo, and more (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). But for those left behind, or unable to engage in this expansion northward, the sheer lack of local alternatives confers a quasi-miraculous status to tourism, though this far, they find themselves relegated to the back seats.

The COVID-19 pandemic slowdown forced a swift readjustment to pre-tourist years, while the fact that so few Hmong had actively engaged with the tourist industry ensured they avoided sizeable crises caused by this setback.

Hmong voices from Đông Văn District

A much smaller number of Hmong have engaged with tourism in Đông Văn District than in Sa Pa, and for a significantly shorter period. Thus, to preserve the anonymity of these Hmong, we elect to give even less precise information as to the identity and particulars for each.

Teng, a Hmong homestay owner in his fifties, explained that many locals lost their land around Đông Văn town when the government designated it as public land, offering minimal compensation. The loss of fields and farms has caused widespread discontent. Now, much of this land is occupied by private tourism ventures owned by outsiders who rarely employ Hmong workers. According to Teng, Hmong farmers in remote villages gain no direct benefits from tourism, and still rely on raising animals just to meet subsistence needs. Their market prices cannot compete with cheaper cattle, pigs, and chicken brought from the lowlands (or China), leading to minimal business with hotels and restaurants.

Chi, a young Hmong woman and one of the few employed in Đông Văn District's tourism sector, works as a cook. Supporting her family financially after her father's death, she had been providing the cash for her mother to hire an additional worker for the harvest season. Prior to the pandemic, Chi worked in the high tourist season, coming home only for farming and ritual duties. She hoped that working in a tourist establishment would help improve her English and enable her to open her own food stall in the future. However, the pandemic halted her wage earning, and she returned home to agricultural life, her savings gradually eroding.

Kao, an English teacher in her late twenties, lived with her extended family not far from Đông Văn town. Her connection to a cousin who was a Party official had aided in updating their old house for homestay guests. However, she noted that they had few customers, mainly Westerners curious about Hmong traditions and farming, unlike national tourists who, she said, seemed indifferent to local cultures and customs. If tourism had increased, Kao and her family had planned for her brother to manage the homestay while she taught and shouldered the farming and livestock activities. Yet, without a rise in international tourists due to the pandemic, that source of income had dried up, reverting their focus to farming.

Lang, who worked for one of the district's top tourist attractions, took the job for the extra income and to meet people. While she noted that the pay was bad and the

working hours far too long, she enjoyed interacting with tourists. However, she criticised tourism's impacts, stating that *Đông Văn* town is losing its small mountain town charm due to architectural changes. She also observed that profits generated from tourism largely benefit outside companies, with little benefit for Hmong people because there are too many barriers for them to engage sufficiently with tourists for the effort to be worth it. With the pandemic, the attraction she worked at shut down and reopened intermittently, adding insecurity to what used to be a modest but regular income.

Xai, the ex-husband of one of the handful of Hmong tourist homestay owners of the region, had advocated for his birthplace to be officially designated a 'cultural' site before the Covid-19 pandemic. He hoped that tourists could experience authentic Hmong traditions and, in the process, local Hmong could improve their economic situation. This 'cultural' status, when granted, often leads to road improvements, housing subsidies, plus a dramatic increase in tourism numbers, enhancing economic opportunities. Echoing Kao's concerns above, Xai criticised the superficial nature of tourism when visitors only arrive for dinner, sleep, and hit the road again the following morning, without meaningfully engaging with locals. Xai explained that 'both tourists and local Hmong would gain much from a more meaningful encounter, and this way, tourism infrastructure should be built for the development of local people', which he thinks is currently overlooked.

Kou, a Hmong farmer in his forties, was among those who were poorly compensated for their land. He thus lacked the financial capital to open a trade business or to sponsor someone in his family to learn languages to work with tourists, saying without such opportunities, 'my family will starve'. Kou feels that few livelihood options other than tourism remain for local Hmong due to the government grabbing land and focusing so strongly on tourism. Resentful of this situation, he prefers to pass tourism involvement to the next generation, choosing instead to work sporadically and unlawfully in China, where he has family ties. He thus earns the cash needed to fulfil modern requirements like sending his children to school, where he hopes they can learn to navigate the tourism sector.

Nou is one of twenty women weaving handicrafts for a textile cooperative in *Đông Văn* District, a state-led initiative from the district's Women's Union. Located near a major tourist attraction, the cooperative's store offers handmade hemp garments and accessories, although national tourists do not buy much. With her fellow workers, Nou has thus been putting her customary weaving and stitching skills to use, crafting trade-oriented items like pillow and cushion covers to earn extra money for her family's costs. She weaves whenever she can between farming and livestock-rearing activities and, thus, only irregularly produces items for sale. In 2019, she remarked 'it wouldn't be too much of a problem if tourism was to stop because weaving for trade is just an add-on to my household's main livelihood, farming', a comment that proved prophetic when COVID-19 struck.

These narratives do not paint the whole picture but, in our observation over several years, reflect truthfully the Hmong's most frequent reactions to infrastructure and tourism expansion. On the positive side stand the convenience of the new set-ups, the material improvements, and the relative seamlessness of being able to activate their agency and fall back on farming when tourist income slows down or dries out. On the other hand, most experience anger and powerlessness on a scale even greater than in Sa Pa District, in particular relating to the seizure of their land. Xee, a young Hmong woman owning a homestay with a social enterprise component, angrily exclaimed. 'There's nothing we can do!' While conflicting thoughts and feelings stem from the disruptions and economic fluctuations that are profoundly altering the rules of the game, feelings of relief, anger, hope, and dejection can often coexist within the same individual.

Discussion

Calculating the tourism windfall reaching the hands of upland non-Kinh actors has yet to be made. There may be a good reason for that: while state and development rhetoric boldly profess that such projects are conceived and implemented with the wellbeing of 'local people' in mind,² observation suggests that in Northern Vietnam, uplanders only see the tail end of the benefits. The lion's share is raked in by government bodies, entrepreneurs, and Kinh middlepersons strategically located along the tourist food chain.

Adding insult to injury, as Scott theorised (1998, 2009), infrastructural development in Vietnam works hand in hand with increased state monitoring and policing of local people's daily lives. These interferences are often unasked for, poorly adjusted to local realities (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015), and have triggered in both Sa Pa and *Đông Văn* reactions to increased levels of disempowerment and legibility. Why this has not resulted in Hmong actively opposing new infrastructures is simple: the extreme power imbalance renders their voices unheard, even unuttered, keeping their thoughts and strategies in the hidden transcript. Yet, pragmatic Hmong peasants have managed to engage with some of the novelties, experiment with unfamiliar forms of livelihoods, and make up their own minds about what is worth keeping, pursuing, and maintaining within the margins inherited from a long history as underdogs.

Scholars (McElwee 2004; Michaud 2012; 2020; Sowerwine 2004; Turner 2022; Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015) have also observed cultural obstacles in Hmong society to the straightforward course of their economic and social modernisation: cultural values at odds with the ideal of economic rationalisation, a customary power structure that does not overlap well with the state's one, and a locally rooted decision-making process ill-fitting modern Vietnamese politics. These vernacular ways have informed the alteration of agricultural practices, the selective adoption of new transport and communication technologies, reactions to national education, attitude towards adoption/non-adoption of writing systems, and, now, reactions to tourist infrastructures and their consequences.

Due to the state's monitoring of culture, these vernacular ways thrive in infrapolitics and inform, for instance, the Hmong's political struggle (against the will of the police) to improve incomes from illegal street vending to tourists. Here, the varied speeds at which Hmong traverse certain sections of land via small alleys and paths, in comparison with the ways in which they move via new roads/highways, is significant. In such a view, the varied set of speeds, and the capacity to adjust one's speed to familiar terrains, can become ways to 'indigenise' recently installed infrastructures, such as roads—not so much by changing their destinations or their objectives but by modulating and concealing specific forms of usage through familiarity with known space. Yet, oblivious to such understated reaction, the Vietnamese state ignores them and relentlessly pursues its agenda of swift economic modernisation of the highlands.

Nonetheless, as much as these behaviours and values may slow down the steady march of the modernist agenda, they have not neutralised the capacity of the state to keep enforcing sociocultural changes nor nullified the infrastructural violence imposed on upland groups. We concur with Turner (2022, 194–195; see also Nixon 2011) when she qualifies infrastructural development—here tourism infrastructure—as slow violence and as a war of attrition which coerces marginal peoples into embedding themselves within what the state considers modern, appropriate, and 'scientific' forms of livelihoods and cash-generating activities. Our research shows that these expectations are contradicted by the resulting livelihood strategies deployed by the Hmong of Sa Pa and *Đông Văn* in three key ways.

First, this research supports Michaud's observations of 2012 on Hmong's careful engagement with change and market inputs. Even when new opportunities appear to promise quick gains, long-term considerations curb the Hmong's degree of engagement with such new cash-earning activities. A hasty appraisal of this strategy might propose that the switch to the market economy is simply not done with enough skill or conviction. But the facts suggest that it is second thoughts about the future that convince most Hmong of this region to keep in close contact with their subsistence-based farming economy and their lineages, either as a backup plan or out of solidarity, or likely both.

Second, the cash income is not automatically used for purposes foreseen or endorsed by the state and development pundits. Yes, a share of it is used for modernist ends such as sending children to school, using fertilisers, and buying consumer goods. But a fair chunk also goes into frowned-upon cultural 'bad habits' like bartering and trading across the border to avoid taxation, acquiring buffaloes for the sole purpose of sacrifice, dabbling in illegal crops and collection inside state forests, or planting traditional non-hybrid rice to perpetuate traditions based on preferences rather than profitability (Bonnin and Turner 2012; Messier and Michaud 2012; Roberge 2021). Moreover, in times of crises, the consumption side of the local economy shrinks while the informal, traditional side picks up the slack. Overall, little of the new cash income is actually used in full accordance with the rationality of economics promoted by the Vietnamese state. Newer and older forms of

livelihoods are enmeshed through vernacular strategies and patterns of reciprocity based on kinship and proximity, making it harder for the state to grasp and monitor, let alone fully tax, what is actually going on. Indeed, the Hmong are continually playing in the grey zones of law enforcement. They have entangled their livelihoods with new infrastructures in both legal and illegal ways, overtly and secretly, thus quietly challenging their legitimacy.

And third, infrastructural and tourism development have allowed the Hmong to connect directly to parts of the world well beyond Vietnam's gaze, either in person with foreign visitors or virtually through cyberspace. Some of these new connections are considered positive vectors of modernisation by the state (e-trade, broader business partnerships, faster movement of capital, sending youth to study or work in the lowlands). But beyond purely economic aspects, the Kinh-centred state also tries hard to impose itself as the most prized cultural standard and sees infrastructural and tourism development as cost-effective ways to bring highlanders into the nation's fold. Against that, Western tourists, including representatives from the highly active international Hmong diaspora, offer alternative ideals, even subversive ones (indigenous rights, democracy, gender awareness) that can be used to potentially antagonise a lowland standpoint. As a tangible example, thanks to the prevalence of English on the international tourist scene, the efforts and resourcefulness deployed by Hmong in both Sa Pa and *Đông Văn* to learn that language and teach it to their peers and offspring bypasses the primacy of the Vietnamese language as the sole *lingua franca*, denting the absolute power of Kinh brokerage in the tourist industry. This outside inspiration enables Hmong, through new infrastructures, to rise and meet their increasingly modern world under terms more of their choosing (Ortner 2006, Gaonkar 1999, 17).

Thus, culturally rooted uses of tourism and its infrastructure brew in the infrapolitical sphere, and the Hmong of Sa Pa and *Đông Văn* maintain a prudent balance between appearances of compliance, adoption, and indigenisation of tourism and infrastructure, and unacceptable behaviour and activities. From there, we say that when infrastructure meets infrapolitics in upland northern Vietnam, there is little visible clash and appearances of harmony are safeguarded.

In sum

Within the framework of this special issue, the case of the Hmong of northern Vietnam relates directly to the situation of the Ladakhi in northern India. Both groups stand as minor and extreme marginal societies on the internal peripheries of centralised states. In both cases, survival spans the fields of economic, ideological, and social development against a backdrop of cultural distinction from a centrally promoted model acting as the spearhead of a massive modernisation push initiated in these nations' heartlands.

We would like to bring this discussion to a close by linking the northern Vietnamese Hmong's infrapolitical dealings to efforts towards not becoming too legible.

Because the Hmong are told what to do and what not to do, backed with the latent threat of violence, they are not allowed a political life of their own choosing. With virtually no voice on the matter except through their ‘representatives’ on government boards vetted by the Communist Party (Michaud 2022), what choice is left but to retreat at least partly under the radar?

The constant expansion of infrastructure via ubiquitous ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ (Scott 2009) has the fateful effect of bringing formerly isolated populations closer than ever—geographically, virtually, and ideologically—to a core ruled by the state and determined by the market economy. And thanks to the reduced ‘friction of terrain’, this expansion also allows agents from the core to reach these formerly less-accessible areas and turn them into business opportunities, transforming their inhabitants’ cultures and the landscape into commodities. This growth further diminishes potential local actions by increasing the state’s capacity to read and control its territory, its populations, and their actions—but what does it really know of their intentions?

From the interviewees’ viewpoints, infrastructures are above all facilitating communication with kin and business partners across distance and borders, making life easier (Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015). But they also bring in a plethora of people—economic migrants, government officials, entrepreneurs, national and international tourists, ethnographers, etc.—who are mainly perceived by Hmong as potential sources of trouble, unfair competitors, or as the prying eyes of the state, and towards whom distrust is warranted (Bilodeau 2022). Infrastructures and tourism weaken traditional livelihoods and force local people into an uneven match with more powerful players, increasing insecurity. These changes do not utilise local people’s vernacular knowledge and tend to devalue local cultures and assets—except for the most visible, exotic, and marketable aspects of their material culture. Infrastructural development both in Sa Pa and Đồng Văn districts does bring occasional gratefulness, pride, and hope, but the resulting violence also uncomfortably spreads overwhelming feelings of resentment, shame, bitterness, and despair.

In this lopsided contest, it is the owners of financial and social capital plus expert knowledge who win out, as ‘the economic and ecological benefits and burdens of large [infrastructure] projects are often inequitably distributed amongst communities, with money and resources flowing towards those with economic, social and/or political power’ (Nolan, Goodman, and Menga 2020, 780). People located at the other end of the spectrum have extremely limited means to stand their ground. Turner (2022, 194) even commented that: ‘In the case of large-scale tourism infrastructure initiatives, ethnic minority communities [in Sa Pa district] appear fairly resigned to many of the actions of the state and state-friendly private enterprises’, underscoring a process of slow violence, i.e., ‘violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (Nixon 2011, 2; Rodgers and O’Neill 2012).

Long-term consideration of the situation in the northern Vietnamese mountains suggests that Hmong individuals in Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces respond to

infrastructural violence with their own quiet strategy of selective adoption of the modernist agenda. They do want their material life to improve, all peasants do, but not at any cost. They demonstrate a resilience founded on an understanding of what Scott (1990, 183) called ‘a prudent awareness of the balance of power’.

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Notes

- [1] All names are gender-appropriate pseudonyms.
- [2] See for instance the ‘Master Plan on Socio-Economic Development of Lào Cai Province to 2020, with a Vision to 2030’ (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2015).

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