



ROUTLEDGE
HANDBOOKS



Routledge Handbook of Highland Asia

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ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE NORTHERN VIETNAMESE HIGHLANDS

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Introduction

There are no definite boundaries to the Vietnamese high northern borderlands. In terms of geomorphology, these are a succession of limestone highlands with continuously rising elevation as one proceeds from the Sông Hồng (Red River) Delta at sea level towards the northern hinterland, where these highlands gradually fan out.

These northern borderlands also contain a small proportion of relative lowlands concentrated along the main valleys of, from west to east, the Mã, Đà (Black), Hồng (Red, *Hồng Hê* in China), and Lô (Clear) rivers, all part of the Red River network, plus the Bằng River further east, part of the Xi River system running mainly in China.

The lowest altitudes of what are customarily acknowledged as these highlands are around 300 metres elevation around the perimeter of the delta, while past the border into China, the Yunnan Plateau reaches about 2,000 metres. In between, only a few peaks rise to 3,000 metres. Everywhere else, the dominant landscape is that of a rugged jumble of limestone massifs.

In current administrative terms, this area covers most of six border provinces in Vietnam – Điện Biên, Lai Châu, Lào Cai, Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, and Lạng Sơn – plus upland segments of the adjacent provinces of Sơn La, Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang, Bắc Kạn, Thái Nguyên, and Bắc Giang. This makes a total surface area of roughly 200,000 square kilometres.

On the China side, the administrative structure includes five adjacent prefectures belonging to the two provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi. From west to east, the border prefectures within Yunnan Province are Puer, Honghe and Weishan, and within Guangxi are Baise and Chongzuo.

Historically, a large part of the Northern Vietnamese highlands' ethnic minority inhabitants have been migrants from further north or west in Asia, chiefly from today's Northeast India, Highland Burma, and Southwest China. These migrations took place over millennia, though for many ethnicities, only over the last few centuries (Tarling 1999; Blench 2017). With such a geographic and historical mixture, many of these highlanders cannot easily claim to fit the UN definition of 'indigenous peoples', a label that Vietnam (like China) shuns. Officially, Vietnam is said to be a "multiethnic and multicultural country" (*nước đa dân tộc, đa văn hóa*) where everyone is equal under the law. Accordingly ... no one is supposed to get special rights for being more indigenous than others' (McElwee 2023:forthcoming).



Map 32.1 Vietnam: Northern Highland provinces along the China border, 2020. Credit: Pham H. and J. Michaud.

Once inside Vietnam, most of these populations at the margins of the imperial state's gaze and administration were largely left to themselves; this is in contrast with the massive installation of Han settlers in Yunnan Province over the last five centuries (Yang 2009a). Ethnic Kinh (Việt) kings and emperors in the lowlands preferred either to ignore those remote non-Kinh cultures or, if action was needed, to set up ad hoc tributary relationships with upland feudal middle-polities, such as the *Sip Song Chau Tai*, and commission these to use their upland networks to police the borders and benefit the empire economically. Thus, a loose network of intermediaries was put in place to connect, even if indirectly, the remotest highland groups to the imperial core (Lentz 2019; Davis 2017; Le Failler 2014; Michaud 2000).

The imperial philosophy of administration in these highlands answered to the historical mandala model, with sharply decreasing interest and involvement of the state as distance, real or perceived, grew from the core towards the fringes (Bruneau 2006: chapter 3). It was only when France, as a European colonial power, negotiated the permanent positioning of the border between their new Tonkin protectorate and the Chinese Empire in the 1890s that a border in the modern sense was agreed upon, with all territories and populations south of that line becoming officially part of Tonkin and fully-fledged subjects to the colonial state.

It is worth noting that unlike the border between Vietnam and Laos along the ridges of the Annam Range, the Sino-Vietnamese border practically never sits on a natural watershed divide; in geomorphological terms as much as in terms of cutting through the existing cultural fabric, it was and remains nearly entirely arbitrary.

The predicament of naming

As a consequence, members of the vast majority of non-Kinh groups in highland Northern Vietnam are present on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border. This constitutes a defining feature of this area, of particular importance due to the disproportionate demographic and political weight that China represents compared to its modest southern neighbour. As a direct consequence of this imbalance, a major ethnographic problem is ethnic identification. Inconsistent exonyms have been enforced by the central government in the two countries without a lot of attention being paid to autonyms or to preferences on the other side of the border. Two examples among so many: the group called *Yao* in China is called *Đao*, *Dao*, *Zao*, *Đzao*, or *Dzao* in Vietnam's official literature, while the minority individuals concerned prefer the autonyms *Kim Mun* and *Iu Mien*, all a major source of confusion. In Guangxi and Southeastern Yunnan dwell the most numerous *shaoshu minzu* (minority nationality) in China, the *Zhuang*. At 18 million, this enormous assemblage is not officially allowed to subdivide. Yet, just across the border in Vietnam, where 2.8 million *Zhuang*-related individuals have overspilled and multiplied over centuries, that name is unused as these Tai-speakers are clustered in three official groups: *Nùng*, *Tây*, and *Sán Chay*.

Demography informed by ideology is key. For purely political reasons, China and Vietnam recognise 56 and 54 national ethnicities, respectively, leading to Vietnam, with 8 per cent of the population of its northern neighbour, allowing for a far more fine-grained picture.

Demography

The official ethnic breakdown of the population in the highland provinces of Northern Vietnam in 2019 was as follows.

The highest concentrations of ethnic minority populations (though not necessarily the highest absolute numbers) are chiefly found dwelling along the Chinese border. Demographic dif-

Table 32.1 Ethnicity per province.

Provinces	Total	Kinh	%	Non-Kinh	%
China border					
Điện Biên	598856	104061	17.4	494795	82.6
Lai Châu	460196	73233	15.9	386963	84.1
Lào Cai	730420	246756	33.8	483664	66.2
Hà Giang	854679	105311	12.3	749368	87.7
Cao Bằng	530341	27143	5.1	503198	94.9
Lạng Sơn	781655	125739	16.1	655916	83.9
Total/Average	3956147	682243	17.2	3273904	82.8
More inland					
Sơn La	1248415	203008	16.3	1045407	83.7
Yên Bái	821030	350668	42.7	470362	57.3
Tuyên Quang	784811	339307	43.2	445504	56.8
Bắc Kạn	313905	37615	12.0	276290	88.0
Thái Nguyên	1286751	902372	70.1	384379	29.9
Bắc Giang	1803950	1546677	85.7	257273	14.3
Total/Average	6258862	3379647	54.0	2879215	46.0

Source: Government Statistical Office, 2019 census.

ferences between the borderland provinces and the upland provinces one removed from the border show that concentrations of non-Kinh individuals recede while the concentration of Kinh increases as one climbs down towards the Red River Delta. In Northern Vietnam, this reveals a high degree of correlation between physical geography, ethnicity, and distance from the seats of national power.

The label 'non-Kinh', however, if left unspecified, is not entirely satisfactory. More precisely, of the official 54 'nationalities' (*dân tộc*) recognised by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,¹ one being the Kinh majority, 53 are minority groups (minority nationalities, *các dân tộc thiểu số*). However, 4 among these 53 actually stem from national majorities in neighbouring countries (Hoa, Lao, Khmer, Chăms), yielding 49 genuine minority societies (Khổng 2002). Of these 49, 27 are indigenous to the northern highlands and account for 78 per cent of all 'minority nationalities' population in upland Vietnam (Table 32.2).

Vietnam officially recognises five indigenous language families within its borders. The Austroasiatic family has two main subgroups: the Việt-Mường (four groups including the Kinh) and Môn-Khmer or Mon-Khmer (21 groups). The Nam Đảo or Austronesian family has five groups, all located in the south of the country. The Tày-Thái and Kadai family, or Tai-Kadai,

Table 32.2 Vietnam's 'minority nationalities' population in the north, 2019.

<i>Ethnic groups</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Tày	1,845,492	19.9
Thái	1,820,950	19.6
Mường*	1,452,095	15.7
Hmông	1,393,547	15.0
Nùng	1,083,298	11.7
Dao	891,151	9.6
Sán Chay	201,398	2.2
Sán Diu	183,004	2.0
Thổ	91,430	1.0
Khơ Mú	90,612	1.0
Giáy	67,858	0.7
Xinh Mun	29,503	0.3
Hà Nhì	25,539	0.3
Kháng	16,180	0.2
La Chí	15,126	0.2
Phù Lá	12,471	0.1
La Hủ	12,113	0.1
La Ha	10,157	0.1
Pà Thên	8,248	0.1
Lự	6,757	0.1
Others**	14,941	0.2
Northern Highland Minorities	9,271,870	100

* Though being an ethnic minority in the north, the Mường are not properly speaking a highland group, given that they live in close proximity, physically as much as linguistically, to the Kinh, chiefly in Hòa Bình Province.

** Less than 5000 each : Lô Lô, Cờ Lao, Bô Y, Si La, Pu Páo, Rơ Măm, Ô Đu.
Source: Government Statistical Office, 2019 census

includes 12 groups. The Sino-Tibetan family, with the Han (Sinitic) and the Tạng-Miến or Tibeto-Burman, includes six groups. Finally, the H'Mông-Đao or Miao-Yao family, also called Hmong-Mien, has three groups. The total population of official minority nationality individuals living in the northern highlands of Vietnam thus is approximately 9.3 million, or 10 per cent of the nation. Of the 49 minority groups nationwide, the six largest at the time of the 2019 census were all in the northern highlands: the Tày, Thái, Mường, Hmông, Nùng, and Đao, forming together 72 per cent of the country's total minority population. The largest minority linguistic family represented in the country as a whole is also located in the north: the Tai-Kadai (Tày, Thái, Nùng, Sán Chay, Giáy, Lự, Bó Y, La Chí, Cờ Lao, La Ha, Pu Péo, plus the Lào) comprising 45 per cent of all minority speakers nationally, with the Hmông-Đao, also from the north, coming second at 18 per cent.

Ethnography before 1993

A brief overview of the Imperial Era

Historians Bradley C. Davis (2011; 2017) and Philippe Le Failler (2014), and geographer Christian Lentz (2019), all working on the northwestern borderlands, have recently shown that little reliable ethnographic material has emerged from the highland societies in Vietnam's portion of the Southeast Asian Massif. Apart from the Tai-speaking groups like the Thái, Tày, and Nùng, who have all lived in close enough proximity to core Kinh areas to develop proto-feudal societies with hybrid scripts in which to record portions of their own history, most other upland societies have not produced written archives. And without indigenous records, what is left of their early history on Vietnamese soil is scarce. The Vietnamese and Chinese archives located so far, except perhaps when addressing ad hoc administrative, trade, or military issues, also reveal little dependable traces of these politically less significant peoples. As a consequence, modern historians of Imperial Vietnam, such as Lê Thành Khôi (1981 [1971]: 40–47) or Ngo Gia Van Phai (1996), barely touch on them.

What is known through other sources is that by the 19th century, some groups had already been in or around these highlands for at least one millennium, while others had just started to arrive from China (Bonifacy 1919; Blench 2017). A form of political hierarchy had sprouted up across these uplands: more ancient and formally organised Tai-speaking groups feuding across the fertile and more populous high valleys took the upper hand over lesser numbers of egalitarian groups living uphill and who, for the most part, had arrived significantly later (Le Failler 2014: 32–36; Michaud 2016: 12–16). But as far as the imperial powers were concerned, most of the highland groups were too distant from the lowland core of the Lê, Mạc, and Nguyễn dynasties to really matter beyond providing forest produce and occasionally, the provision of bodies to man the fringes in times of war (Lunet de Lajonquière 1904: 133). In some cases, local administrators (*thổ ty*, similar to *tusi* in China) were recruited and given favours in exchange for a commitment to levy taxes on behalf of the imperial state, but beyond this light presence, until the Nguyễn took power in early 19th century, only lowland emissaries or occasional military parties were ever dispatched to the mountains.

This changed dramatically in the second half of the 19th century when wandering looters appeared en masse, set in motion in the wake of massive upheavals in Southwest China such as the Taiping, Panthai, and Miao Rebellions (1854–1873) (McAleavy 1968; Davis 2017). Clearly, these turbulent and life-threatening times did not foster the calm and systematic observation of highland societies and very little reliable ethnographic material has surfaced from this early yet sporadic presence of outside agents in the high borderlands (Davis 2017).

Colonial witnesses: the initial phase of modern ethnography

At the time of the French colonial takeover of the north in the 1880s, permanent Catholic missions and military posts were established in the mountains, laying the foundations for the production and dissemination of new information on local societies. Scholars first learned about these highland populations through early testimonies from Catholic missionaries from the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* (Michaud 2004) and then from administrative and military reports (Pavie 1898–1903; Lefèvre-Pontalis 1892; Lunet de Lajonquière 1906).

A colonial divide-and-rule policy was applied to the highlands, aiming to protect colonial economic interests and keep the borderlands under steady control. Of particular interest to the colonial administration was setting up favourable conditions for commerce with China's deep hinterland, including the lucrative production and trade of opium. To ensure stability, the highlands of Tonkin, as Northern Vietnam was then called, were put under military administration in 1891, and border provinces were framed as military territories, an arrangement lasting roughly until the 1920s.

My 2007 book *'Incidental' Ethnographers: French Catholic Missions on the Tonkin-Yunnan Frontier, 1880–1930*, presents details of the early ethnography conducted by colonial agents in these military territories. I show there how significant figures such as missionaries Girod (1899), Brisson (1904), but above all François-Marie Savina (1916; 1924) in Tonkin, with Aloys Schotter (1908), Alfred Liétard (1912; 1913a; 1913b), and Paul Vial (1898) in and around nearby Yunnan just over the border, produced a wealth of grammars, dictionaries, lexicons, reports, and ethnographic articles and books based on decades of residence in the highlands.

Before long, the military joined missionaries in producing highland ethnography. A major effort in the years 1897–1904 generated Lunet de Lajonquière's ground-breaking *Ethnographie du Tonkin Septentrional* (1906) (Michaud 2013). A few officers also went on to produce their own works, such as Auguste Bonifacy (1902; 1904; 1919), Edouard Diguët (1908), and Maurice Abadie (1924). Together, they made substantial contributions to the construction of highland ethnology in the north.

The *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO), founded in Hanoi in 1901, took highland ethnology into the civilian domain, bringing new levels of academic rigour to the early ethnography process with a string of texts in its in-house publications, such as *Ethnographie Indochinoise* (Collective 1921). Occasional contributions came from particular colonial bodies and journals (Direction Générale 1931; Teston and Percheron 1931; Service Géographique 1949). The last important works from the colonial period, besides contributions by a few lowland Kinh-focused ethnologists (Nguyễn 2012), include Jeanne Cuisinier's 1946 *Les Mùong*, and the two volumes of Charles Robequain's 1929 *Le Thanh Hoa*, the work of a human geographer with a flair for ethnographic description.

Then it all came to a standstill. First with World War II and the Japanese occupation, then with the First Indochina War (1946–1954), a nine-year all-out independence war led by the Nationalists against the French occupier, which ended with the latter's ousting in July 1954. In such uncertain times, priorities had shifted to more vital matters, and by necessity, what the West liked to call 'classical ethnology' in spite of strong colonialist overtones (Stocking 1991; Pels and Saleminck 1999), ground to a halt.

After 1946: the emergence of communist ethnology

It is not possible to grasp the project of communist Vietnamese ethnology of the northern highlands fully without considering first its history. Historians Priscilla Koh (2006) and Masako

Itō (2013) have shown, as Tapp (2002), Yang (2009b), and Mullaney (2011) did for China, that ethnology in communist Vietnam was established as a state affair. Ethnological knowledge was instrumental to the state's master plan for the borderlands' final integration into the country's political and economic project and helped reinforce the state's grip over this region. As de Harting (1996: 410) put it:

[In the 1950s] most plans of action implemented in the High Region by the regime were double-sided. They contributed to the development of these remote areas and their inhabitants and to attaching these diverse societies to Kinh society, and thus making the Marxist revolution a triumph across the whole of the Vietnamese territory.

He adds:

The formation of a 'proletariat' remained the best guarantee of the anchoring of the Revolution in these distant regions. Attracting minority groups to the dam, the mine, or to the factory was in fact to give them a class consciousness, it was to detach them economically and psychologically from their 'feudal' society.

(de Harting 1996: 414)

This project was spelled out unequivocally when state ethnologist Viet Chung (1968: 18; see also Hồ 2000) described its goal as

helping the uplands catch up with the lowlands, the border regions with the central regions, the minority peoples with the Kinh (majority) people, and urging all the nationalities to further develop their revolutionary spirit and great capacities and to unite closely so as to advance towards socialism.

(Viet Chung 1968: 18)

In the newly independent country, little room was left for the ways of the past embodied by 'primitive' societies within. Strict Marxist rhetoric had it that highlanders in Vietnam stood at the lowest stage of economic development and were in dire need of assistance, while the enlightened Kinh majority was entering the highest possible stage, socialism. The least 'Socialist Man' (or big brother in the Confucian view) could do for 'Traditional Man' (his little brother), in the words of Vietnamese ethnologists of the time, was to help him relinquish his simplicity and quickly reach the superior level of civilisation of the lowlands (Chu 1960; Evans 1985; 1999).

Vietnamese state ethnologists, whatever their personal views, were given very little room for manoeuvre and all ethnological studies of minority nationalities fell in line with this project. At first, these plans gravitated around questions of classification and naming (Đặng 1972). An exhaustive list of *dân tộc* in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, 1954–1975) was first proposed in 1959 (Lã et al. 1959) and included 64 groups, each with its official ethnonym. A second list followed in 1973, down to 59 groups (Lã 1973). By 1979, the current tally was finally established officially, under the particular impetus of famous Nùng state ethnologist and director of the Institute of Ethnology of Vietnam, Bế Việt Đăng (1975). All the efforts of the Institute, founded in 1968 to serve the state's mission, culminated in Decree 121, which set the authoritative number of 'nationalities' at 54 in reunified Vietnam, including the Kinh nationality (Institute of Ethnology 1978) – just appropriately shy of China's official number of 56. This number has been enshrined in the Vietnamese Constitution and, much as is the case in China, this figure has not changed since despite being steadily challenged by evidence on the ground.

A key state strategy to spread economic development and civilisation to the highlands was euphemistically called 'selective cultural preservation', by which the state decided unilaterally which aspects of a non-Kinh culture were sufficiently valuable and politically tolerable to be retained and which ones were to be actively discouraged. This was explained in 1978 by state ethnologist Nông Quốc Chấn, an ethnic Tày, in his article 'Selective preservation of ethnic minorities cultural tradition'. As stated in the Constitution of Vietnam, 'minority nationalities' have a right to maintain their traditions, but only as long as they do not pose a threat to the socialist progress of the country. Consequently, Nông writes, 'counter-productive' and 'superstitious' practices such as Shamanism (branded sorcery), animal sacrifice, lavish funerals, bride-price or even swiddening, to say nothing of political resistance or outright rebellions (except 'to protect the Fatherland, i.e., Vietnam'; Koh 2002: 4), were targeted for eradication. Politically reprehensible 'bad habits' such as dodging taxes, crossing borders unchecked or owning prohibited firearms were also banned. Conversely, benign and aesthetic cultural activities were encouraged, including folklore, vernacular architecture (Đoàn 2013), handicrafts, wearing colourful attire, singing, dancing, and playing so-called traditional music (Ó Briain 2012). Smiling, docile, and politically impotent minority groups were thus relentlessly presented in the state rhetoric and media as the example to follow (Messier and Michaud 2012).

This selective cultural preservation policy has never been revoked in Vietnam and has had a considerable impact, as in Hà Giang province lately (McElwee 2023). Conveniently, it has kept most highland societies out of political activism – in sharp contrast with highland groups in Burma or Northeast India, where opposition to the state has been buoyant for decades – while allowing the survival of what was needed to ensure that highland 'cultures' will be attractive to growing and hugely lucrative national and international mass tourism (Michaud 2009: 32).

After 1968: the dominance of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences through its Institute of Ethnology

In a clear case of robust systemic pressure placed on individual agents, the communist state's potent evolutionist and integrationist agenda remained pervasive among Vietnam's state ethnologists, strongly impacting what they were allowed to publish on the northern highlands (Itō 2013: Conclusion). This is readily visible over decades in the works of state scholars like anthropologists Vương (1987; 2005), Trần (1996), Phạm (2001), Vương (2002), Thảo (2009), Nguyễn (2014), or Bùi (2019) among many others². Most have in common their link to the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS).

VASS was founded in 1953 as a state organ to supervise all official research and outputs. Within VASS, the body commissioned to oversee research on 'minority nationalities' was the *Viện Dân Tộc Học*,³ literally the 'Institute for the Study of Nationalities' but officially called in English 'The Institute of Ethnology'. Since its inception in 1968, the Institute has had a long history of running state research projects on highland non-Kinh societies with its *raison d'être*, in Koh's (2004: 1) words, to

foster and maintain national unity. ...The focus of ethnographic endeavours was to incorporate the different ethnic groups into the national whole, so as to develop and promote an ethnicity, history and culture which emphasised the 'national' and 'unified' nature of Vietnam's diverse ethnic components.

(Koh's 2004: 1)

Thus, the Institute has been keeping a vigilant eye on anthropological knowledge produced on the minorities of Vietnam.

All researchers at the Institute of Ethnology were appointed by the state, and up to the 1990s, most were sent for academic training in friendly countries of the communist sphere. In this way, thanks to numerous translations of Soviet ethnology manuals, the intellectual influence the USSR (but also China) held over Vietnamese ethnology was prevailing (Gellner 1980; Michaud 2009; Itō 2013; Nguyễn 2019). The Institute then mainly published its research in the Vietnamese language in state outlets difficult to access for foreign researchers, such as VASS journals *Tạp chí Văn hóa dân gian* (*Folklore Review*) and *Tạp chí dân tộc học* (officially *Ethnology Review*, later renamed *Anthropology Review*, while the unchanged Vietnamese name reads 'Review for the Study of Nationalities'). In parallel, the state journal *Vietnamese Studies/Études Vietnamiennes* was initiated in 1964 and directed strategically translated pieces at the English and French readerships.

Another significant undertaking was the publication by the Institute, in 1986, of the handbook *Các dân tộc ở Việt Nam* (Đặng et al. 1986), also released in English as *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*. In this catalogue of the 54 official nationalities based on ethnography conducted by the Institute, each came with a short précis on location, select customs, and revolutionary credentials. A bland descriptive listing with pictures of invariably content subjects, the book carefully left untouched any sensitive political questions.

The economic renovation (*đổi mới*) that Vietnam undertook in 1986 has contributed to somewhat alleviating state authoritarianism and over-simplification of highland cultures (Keyes 2002; Itō 2013: chapter 2). Even though, for Koh (2004: 2),

the main topics of the earlier years, such as ethnic classification, minority history and culture, continue to dominate much of the official/public discourse on ethnic minorities ... the works of Soviet thinkers (Marx, Lenin and Stalin) and those of the pioneering Vietnamese ethnologists (the 'old guard' of the discipline) continue to be the standard reference texts.

(Koh 2004: 2)

In keeping with the spirit of *đổi mới*, the *Bảo tàng Dân tộc học* (literally 'Museum for the Study of Nationalities'), known in English as the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, decreed in 1987 but opened only in 1997, showcases cultural elements from all 54 nationalities in a three-dimensional version of the 1986 *Ethnic Groups of Vietnam* handbook, complete with outdoors replicas of traditional dwellings (Nguyễn 1997; Bodemer 2010).

Simultaneously, following the country's opening to the market economy and with the push of major international institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, the narrative of 'sustainable development' (Chu 1995) and 'poverty alleviation' (Nguyễn Việt Cường et al. 2015) has opportunely replaced that of 'modernisation of the primitives' (McElwee 2004; Jørgensen 2006; Sikor et al. 2011). Nonetheless, government suspicions remain high, notably regarding highland security issues such as Christian-based 'unrest', said to be fostered by hostile outside agents (Salemink 2013; Ngô 2011, 2016).

After the border war with China in 1979 and the collapse of the USSR soon after, Vietnamese ethnologists attached to VASS and branches of the communist state were still hand-picked by the state and sent to pursue higher education abroad, this time with state scholarships to travel to the noncommunist Global North (chiefly North America, Southeast Asia, Australasia, and Europe), to pursue degrees in anthropology and adjacent social sciences. This novelty had the potential of fostering a paradigmatic shift as candidates had for the first time the opportunity of taking into account not only non-Vietnamese but also noncommunist research to write their

dissertations. Slowly, though inevitably, a gap started to develop between their outputs in foreign languages, trying to fit their host universities' research standards, and the Vietnamese state's blanket policy of top-down, centrally planned development for all in the socialist republic. This became a delicate balancing act for the newer generation of state ethnologists caught between conflicting worldviews. Dissertations produced abroad on the northern borderland⁴ did take liberties with the official guidelines (Dương Bích Hạnh 2006; To Xuan Phuc 2007; Nguyễn Thụy Thi Thu 2008; Hoàng Cẩm 2009; Trần Hồng Hạnh 2009; Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm's 2011; Dao Nga Thi Viet 2012; Trương V. Dao 2014; Lê Thị Đan Dung 2015; Hoang Thi Thu Huong 2015; Hà Việt Quân 2016; Trần Hồng Thu 2020; Nguyễn Văn Huy 2021). Nonetheless, due either to self-censorship, caution, or still perhaps unawareness, very few Vietnamese scholars show consistently a level of critical reflexivity considered indispensable in the Global North, and even fewer go as far as openly questioning the principles of absolute state authority over minorities and the irrefutable benefits of the centralised integrationist agenda. A fault that often dampens their ever more frequent attempts at publishing in leading English-speaking outlets internationally.

In defence of Vietnamese state researchers, their political position is extremely delicate. It is not superfluous to remember that, like their elders in the discipline, this latest generation of graduates are still carrying their families' hopes on their shoulders. They are acutely aware of the privilege they were granted to leave the country for their degrees, with, upon their return, doors being opened to join state research bodies, keep quiet, and enjoy the lifelong benefits of secure public sector employment, known locally as *biên chế*. Like their elders, they are also conscious of the surveillance state they live in and self-preservation, for themselves as much as for their kin, must logically come ahead of the 'bourgeois' ideal of so-called independent Western scholarship.

Simultaneously, into the early 2000s, departments of anthropology and sociology started to flourish at certain Vietnamese universities. These do also send young lecturers to study abroad. Through them and via growing international networks, a somewhat more politically free type of academic research on highland societies has become thinkable even in state-led universities (for instance, Nguyễn 2019). However, this liberty remains exceptional due mainly to VASS' predominance, where many established anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, linguists, and religion specialists working on the highlands are members of the Party and continue to explicitly support and promote state policies directed at bringing highland societies ever closer to the ideal Kinh standard.⁵ Even today, ideological dissent, if it occurs among state ethnologists, must remain in the infra-political sphere; one must instead keep up appearances (Hoàng & Đặng 2021; one recent particularly skilful exception being Lâm Minh Châu 2020). Concurrently, as a possible option, new and attractive employment routes have emerged for young graduates with international anthropology degrees in the private sector, in nongovernmental organisations, multinational development banks, and overseas-supported or overseas-run think tanks (King et al. 2008).

Nevertheless, official state discourse does not relent (McElwee 2023). In 2013, the mission of the Institute of Ethnology, by then tactically rebranded in English as the 'Institute of Anthropology' with its Vietnamese name unchanged, was reformulated to display a better harmony with international standards in the discipline. However, its declaration of principles still includes statements such as: 'to contribute scientific substantiations for the formation and execution of the ethnic policy of Vietnamese government; attends[sic] to Vietnam's industrialization, modernization, and international integration'.⁶ And at the highest level, in the 2019 'Master plan of socio-economic development of ethnic minorities and mountainous areas' adopted by the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the aim remains to 'foster ethnic minority groups' cultural identities and traditions but, at the same time, eradicate superstitious and outdated practices and consolidate the national great unity and enhance the trust of the people in the Party and the State' (*Việt Nam News*, Monday, 19 November 2019: 6). Such is the forceful ideological structure with

which Vietnamese state ethnologists still have to navigate when gathering ethnographic material and writing anthropological analyses of highland societies in Vietnam.

Anthropology of self in the northern mountains

This overview should also address the anthropology of self in the northern mountains, that is, anthropological knowledge produced endogenously by representatives of minority societies themselves, a very modest movement still.

For one, the numbers of minority individuals attending university or other higher education options are very low, principally because of their lack of habitus feeding little academic desire amongst its youth and a lack of access to higher education. The few to succeed so far in this highly politicised field have had to accept leaving their communities to study under the national (Kinh) curriculum taught only in the national language. A select few were then allowed to climb the degree ladder, but solely when the state approved of their character. And as is also the case with ethnic-minority-educated elites in China and state employment anywhere in Vietnam, their progress entailed nonwritten rules such as having to alter one's name to fit the national style to the point where it becomes difficult to identify non-Kinh authors by name only, changing dress codes and manners to match the Kinh standards, moving permanently to urban centres, and of course, channelling the ubiquitous gifts up the hierarchy. If China is to serve as an example of what lies ahead, it may also mean having to distance one's self from one's linguistic heritage and abstain from passing it on to the next generation.

The logic of this process lies mainly with the fact that scholars from minority groups were (and still are) primarily recruited by the Vietnamese state to be formed into middle people entrusted with transmitting the message of national unity to the non-Kinh.⁷ Accordingly, the texts penned by state-vetted indigenous ethnographers in any language (though most publish in Vietnamese only with occasional ventures into vernacular scripts) are not allowed liberty from the official narrative of underdeveloped societies in need of guidance from above. Their publications on the anthropology of the northern societies bear few distinguishing features from those produced by Kinh researchers. For anthropologists with minority backgrounds, the ordeal is double: in addition to strictly toeing the line of state policy, they also have to refrain from publicly questioning their subordinate position as non-Kinh.

As Koh noted (2004: 16), 'Therein also lies the fundamental limitation of [Vietnamese] ethnology. In its effort to create a unified and homogenised masterpiece, it has effectively blotted out the minorities themselves, or at least muffled their voices'. And arguably, their human dignity too. Should outside anthropologists claim neutrality and refrain from commenting on this state of affairs? As Oscar Saleminck (2013: 253) pointedly remarked about ethnography in Vietnam's Central Highlands: 'self-censorship and the ensuing anthropological absence from public debates can at times be harmful as well, as it may lead to keeping quiet about, and hence complicit with, certain repressive or exploitative situations and practices' (see also Thunø 2006; McElwee 2023; Adler and Adler 1993).

Since 1993: an expanding prospect

Vietnam's northern uplands on the China border have been out of access for anthropologists from outside of the communist sphere from World War II until the relaxation, in 1993, of movements beyond main cities for foreigners.

Over this half-century, all published ethnography was done in Vietnamese and channelled through in-house outlets largely out of reach for outsiders. Yet, even without access, a handful of

Western social scientists still managed to write about the northern highlands (see Hickey 1958; Lebar et al. 1964; McAllister 1967; McAleavy 1968; Condominas 1976). Links with the US war effort, however, underlined the instrumental nature of many such publications. Schrock et al. (1966: v), in the south of Vietnam, provides a case in point: 'This study was prepared in response to a request from the Directorate of Special Operations, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Military Operations, Department of the Army'. This highlighted how equally biased ethnographic research could turn when conducted by colonial agents, clearly, but also by agents from so-called free countries with an aggressive geopolitical agenda (Salemink 2013; Gusterson 2007; Price 2005; Wakin 1992). Otherwise, between 1945 and 1993, the northern highland groups were virtually forgotten by the noncommunist world.⁸

Then everything changed, or nearly. The decree ending isolation in 1993 did not automatically mean that the field was wide open for 'standard' anthropological research in the northern highlands, far from it. From the early 1990s, VASS, through the institutes of Sociology, Geography, and Ethnology, was made the mandatory partner for outside field researchers wishing to work in the mountains. Speaking from experience, in the 1990s, surveillance was high on the agenda, and the production of unchecked ethnography based on long residence in remote highlands or rural settings was impossible. Anthropological research by outsiders had to adapt to a politically constrained environment under a gatekeepers' regime (Michaud 2010; Turner 2010). In the face of state-appointed colleagues reporting daily to their superiors, hidden agendas and white lies – and sometimes less than white ones – became part of the toolkit of field anthropology for outsiders, much as was the case in China at the same time (Turner 2013).

The reopening initially yielded some general publications delineating the field at the national level. Some were of high standards, like Salemink (2001), but some were also opportunistic pieces with scarce credentials, such as Schliesinger's clumsily titled *Hill Tribes of Vietnam* (1997).

By the 2000s, more classic forms of ethnographic work started emerging from longer fieldwork in less politically sensitive areas of the north. Unexpectedly, access to the field was made easier in touristic locales where the presence of foreigners was less conspicuous. This helps explain a surge in international social science research in the districts of Sa Pa and Bac Ha in Lào Cai Province, which became early fieldwork hotspots thanks to a rail link with Hanoi and a constant flow of foreign visitors. Concurrently, settlements in proximity to northern provincial capitals also became targets for international anthropological fieldworkers. But beyond these exceptions, fieldwork in more remote or less tourist-popular areas still remained a matter of numerous 'red stamps' and energetic state surveillance at national, provincial, district, and commune levels (Bonnin 2010).

In spite of such obstacles, the number of ethnographically supported studies by international scholars is on the rise in the northern highlands, and the number of recent doctoral dissertations produced there has reached two dozen by authors from over 20 countries. Scholarly articles in reputable international journals published since 1993 are well above 100. If these figures remain small by world standards, they are nevertheless encouraging in the taxing context of the northern highlands in communist Vietnam.

Thematic focus: livelihoods and resilience

With such a turbulent past and a present subject to political imperatives, it should not come as a surprise that currently, in spite of a sizeable population of nearly 10 million highlanders, there are no salient anthropological theories stemming from research conducted in the northern uplands of Vietnam – if one excludes James C. Scott's (2009) broader Zomia paradigm. The performance of classically anthropological fieldwork thought in the West to be required for the

in-depth study of myths, rituals, Shamanism, or ethnohistory is not blooming yet (see Tishkov 1992 for the same in post-socialist Russia).

This said, close examination shows that a few common themes in ethnographically based research in the high north are taking shape. Regarding anthropological investigations by Vietnamese ethnologists, after tiptoeing for decades around the matter of China borderland security and anticommunist sympathies, the most hotly debated topic regarding the highlands is now linked to environmental degradation (McElwee 2016; Nguyễn Văn Chính 2008). The non-Kinh highlanders of Vietnam are blamed by the government for rampant upland deforestation, though the actual picture is murkier. The massive migration of Kinh settlers from the plains since the early 1960s, launched under the New Economic Zones scheme, put immense additional pressure on the natural resources of this vital ecosystem (Hardy 2005; Trần 2004). Economic migration from the delta further increased at the end of the 1980s thanks to *đổi mới*, with strong encouragement for crop substitution and extensive plantation schemes (Sowerwine 2004a; Turner et al. 2020). Combining with accrued urbanisation by Kinh settlers in northern provinces (Mellac 2011; Saleminck 2011; Sikor et al. 2011), such additional stress on resources has caused social tensions as well as extra environmental decline, most dramatically visible in the form of rapid deforestation, the reduction of biodiversity, the lowering of ground water tables, and downstream, the increasing severity of annual flooding in the rainy season.

In search of sustainable solutions, realising that Kinh dominance in economic trade in highland areas keeps minorities indebted and poor (Nguyễn et al. 2017; McElwee 2008), some Vietnamese scholars, mainly attached to Vietnamese universities, are conducting research on topics such as customary law in relation to natural resource management as well as indigenous knowledge, community-based forest management institutions, and local strategies for improved fallow managing or coping with extreme weather events. The same can be said of a growing mass of dissertations in social sciences and adjacent disciplines, putting to use a mounting body of ethnographic material. It makes sense that here as in China, the most common themes for anthropological research are primarily material life and reproduction, revolving around the notions of livelihoods and economic modernization, pursued by both state and international anthropologists alike, though for different reasons. For the former, it is the key to meeting national development targets in 'poverty reduction/alleviation' among non-Kinh 'poor' societies (Nguyễn Việt Cường et al. 2017). For the latter, however, it is predominantly about documenting resilience and agency from the bottom up, including a critique of the state.

Indeed, international social scientists active in the northern highlands, in studying livelihoods, agriculture, and land tenure systems under communism, have helped shed light on the resilience of highland societies, their ways of maintaining food security with or in spite of state backing, and the growing effects climate change has on daily life, adding a further layer of hardship. Yet, most Vietnamese officials still have a hard time accepting the view that there might be something to learn for the Kinh in listening to minorities (McElwee 2016, 2023). Against that resistance, in addition to masters theses too numerous to detail here, of note are ethnography-based doctoral dissertations by Thomas Sikor (1994), Bernard Henin (1999), Marie Mellac (2000), Steffanie Scott (2001), Jennifer Sowerwine (2004b), Chan Yuk Wah (2005), Bent D. Jørgensen (2006), Cécile Berthouly (2008), Christine Bonnin (2011), Christian Lentz (2011), Dao Nga (2012), Richard Owens (2013), Mustafa Bayrak (2015), Peter Chaudhry (2016), and Sebastian Rumsby (2020). Possibly the most prolific single body of international academic research on the northern highland societies over the last 15 years, reaching over the border into Southwest China, has been the Canada-based 'Minorities in the Southeast Asian Massif Lab'⁹ established and co-directed by Sarah Turner (McGill) and myself (Laval). Since its inception, graduate students

and postdoctoral researchers from social anthropology and human geography have produced 17 masters theses, 5 doctoral dissertations, and 4 postdoctoral studies, with 5 MAs and 5 PhDs currently underway, leading to over 50 scholarly publications based on continuous ethnographic fieldwork documenting and studying creative approaches to strategic livelihoods.

Tourism directed at the northern highland minorities is vigorously promoted in Vietnam in the wake of the Chinese state's harnessing of this industry as one of the most rapid channels to boost investments from the lowlands into the highlands and thus, better attach highlanders to the nation (Oakes 1998; Sofield et al. 1998; Donaldson 2007; Cornet 2015; Bott 2018). Some anthropological doctoral dissertations in Vietnam's northern region have taken this path, including Dương Bích Hạnh (2006), Achariya Choowonglert (2012), and Lê Thị Đan Dung (2015).

Stand-alone research also appears, such as Yukti Mukdawijitra's dissertation on Tai traditional orthographies and literature (2007) or Lonán Ó Briain's ethnomusicology dissertation on the practicalities and political twists of Hmong music-making (2012). Historians Philippe Le Failler (1993) and Bradley C. Davis (2008), mentioned earlier, also produced their doctoral work on location, and though not focusing on ethnography as such, they contributed richly to setting the social context in which local societies have resided there over the last two centuries.

The body of published anthropological works in any language founded on ethnography in Vietnam's northern highlands is growing steadily. The best of these generally stem from scholars publishing from their masters and doctoral work, producing rigorous scholarly publications. However, fully-fledged, ethnographically based monographs on upland minorities are still rare outside a few – and debatable – state booklets in Vietnamese. In English, the ones so far are Ngô Thị Thanh Tâm's (2016) *The New Way: Protestantism and the Hmong in Vietnam*; Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and my (2015) *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands*; and Lonán Ó Briain's (2018) *Musical Minorities: The Sounds of Hmong Ethnicity in Northern Vietnam*.

Meanwhile, in 2016, the Institute of Anthropology of Vietnam re-published a significantly expanded version of its 1986 compendium: *Các dân tộc ở Việt Nam (Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam)*, although the title translates more accurately into 'Nationalities of Vietnam'. It now spreads over four volumes (Vietnamese – Muong language group; The Tay – Thái Ka language group-belt; Mon-Khmer language group; and volume 4, book 1, *Hmong – Dao and Tibetan-Burmese Language Groups* and book 2 *Han and Malay Language Groups – Da Dao*). Edited by one of the Institute's former director, Vương Xuân Tình, this official publication remains faithful to the state's agenda directed at minority nationalities. In 2018, it was heralded in Vietnam as 'a useful tool for studying and researching on ethnic minorities, and building a scientific basis for implementing ethnic policies in Vietnam'.¹⁰

Moving forward

What should the next steps be? There is certainly a need to consolidate what has been achieved so far while keeping the momentum going. The most pressing task in my opinion would be to continue gathering oral histories among elders in the highlands (see the 'Hmong Voices Project'¹¹ for example) and to locate and explore the rare indigenous records that exist, written mainly in Brahmi-based scripts for the Tai-speaking groups, but also in ideograms (Yao codices), pictograms (Lô Lô/Yi records), or Latin-based transcriptions such as the Romanised Popular Alphabet (Hmong). In 2016, Lào Cai Province, a Hmong elder and retired official showed me a draft of a book manuscript on the history of Hmong culture in Vietnam he had just completed

using *ntour hmôngz*, the Vietnam state-endorsed Romanised script for the Hmong language – though he was unsuccessful in securing a public outlet. Bringing into the open such initiatives from outside academic circles would hold great interest.

Moreover, French colonial archives still contain original material yet to be located, extracted, and mined thoroughly (Michaud 2007; 2013). Ethnography from the collective period published in various languages in USSR-friendly regimes, as well as in sympathetic noncommunist countries such as Sweden, Japan, or South Korea, could also shed light on less-known northern highland ethnology.

And to my knowledge, no thorough survey of the dissertations and articles on upland ethnography and history published in Vietnamese state outlets since their inception has ever been produced. It would be of tremendous interest to locate, catalogue, and make this material available for broader research.

The task ahead, therefore, is to increase the production of original ethnographies speaking of today's world and combine these with the systematic identification and indexation of existing material expressing the past.

Notes

- 1 Unlike several other Asian countries, neither Vietnam nor China use the notion of 'tribes' or similar terminology to talk about their minority groups. The notion officially favoured instead is that of 'nationalities' as I explain below.
- 2 Only works written in English are listed here. In these cases as for all Vietnamese authors obviously, works published in Vietnamese language also exist but have been left out of this chapter due to their inaccessibility to most readers.
- 3 <http://en.vass.gov.vn/noidung/gioithieu/cocautochuc/Pages/thong-tin-don-vi.aspx?ItemID=109&PostID=54>
- 4 Dissertations produced within Vietnamese institutions in the Vietnamese language have been left out of this listing.
- 5 Worth a mention here is the creation in 2011 of the *Journal of Ethnic Minorities Research* (still retaining the notion of 'nationalities' in its Vietnamese title *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu dân tộc*), a state initiative under the Vietnam Academy for Ethnic Minorities (a 2016 reorganisation of the former Institute for Ethnic Minorities and the Cadre School of Ethnic Affairs), part of the central Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs. In addition to disseminating in English research conducted in Vietnamese, a widespread strategy nowadays, its focus is on problem solving in a multidisciplinary perspective. Its first aim: to provide 'information on scientific research results in service of the formulation and implementation of policies for socio-economic development of ethnic minority areas'. <http://ncdt.hvdt.edu.vn/index.php/NCDT>, 6 December 2020.
- 6 <http://en.vass.gov.vn/noidung/gioithieu/cocautochuc/Pages/thong-tin-don-vi.aspx?ItemID=109&PostID=54>.
- 7 For instance,

The work of cadres in mountainous and ethnic minority areas is still an essential matter that our Party and State pay special attention. Training cadres for mountainous and ethnic minority areas is the number one task of Vietnam Academy for Ethnic Minorities.

(Trần and Lê 2020: 78)

- 8 A thorough investigation of Russian, German, Polish, Hungarian, Chinese, Spanish (Cuba), and other language sources from the Eastern Block could certainly reveal undetected, potentially fascinating ethnographic material from that period.
- 9 <http://seamassif.geog.mcgill.ca/>.
- 10 <https://tiasang.com.vn/khoa-hoc-cong-nghe/Cong-cu-huu-ich-cho-nghien-cuu-toc-nguoi-va-thuc-hien-chinh-sach-dan-toc-12552>.
- 11 <http://sapaochau.org/sapa-trekking-and-homestay/hmong-voices/>.

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