

3 ‘Weapons of the week’: Selective resistance and agency among the Hmong in northern Vietnam

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Over centuries, members of the Hmong¹ ethnic minority in the northern highland Vietnam province of Lào Cai, in spite of their relative political weakness in the face of numerous and powerful kingdoms and empires surrounding them, have managed to have their say concerning when and how they accept to engage with the local and regional economy (Figure 3.1). This group has resisted transformations that do not fit with their line of thinking and reasoning, while adapting to others that they found appropriate. In making these choices, they did not necessarily follow the rational norm of liberal economic thought, but instead lived by – just like they still do today – the needs and culturally embedded judgments of their households and lineages. This is a lineage-based, acephalous ethnic group that has dealt with the hegemonic power of dominant civilizations – Han, Siamese, Lao and Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) to name a few – and which has not only survived to this day, but has also learnt ways to deal successfully with these uneasy partners over the long term.

While the Hmong in Vietnam are aware that they do not have the power to significantly alter the larger economic shifts occurring in the country – especially as Vietnam opens up to increasing global forces with the introduction of the economic renovation in the mid-1980s – they are nevertheless anything but the passive, ignorant and powerless actors that many states in the region relentlessly portray them as. The Hmong have worked with an array of economic opportunities that have come their way through time, from opium production in the colonial era, to transforming textiles for tourism as the country opened up to foreign visitors, to cultivating cardamom for a rising Chinese market demand. As such, they are adept at modulating their economic balance and their activities to tap the demands of the moment in order to gain extra cash income to supplement the subsistence side of their livelihoods.

Hmong decisions regarding which choices to implement and which to discard depend on a particular blend of local agents, cultures, history and the opportunities that arise at any precise moment. This flexibility and adaptiveness leads them to short- and mid-term strategies which we have nicknamed their ‘weapons of the week’ in a tongue-in-cheek reference to James Scott’s

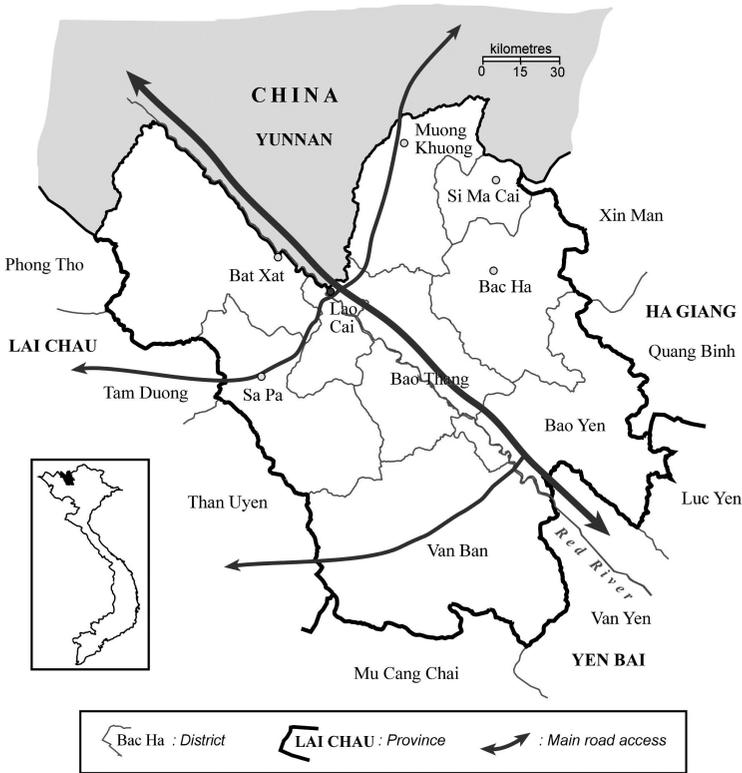


Figure 3.1 Lào Cai province, Northern Vietnam.

Map credit: Jean Michaud

book title (1985). It leads us to ask the following questions. How have Hmong become active in contemporary trade networks in these highlands? How do they utilize their culture and experience to modulate their involvement in these and, by extension, in the local and regional economy? Given these trade opportunities, how do they avoid – perhaps even resist – unwanted levels of dependency on the market? In this chapter we examine the trade of two goods in the province more closely, namely textiles and medicinal cardamom. We argue that the Hmong selectively decide the degree of their market integration, thus resisting in their own, original ways unwanted levels of dependency on the market.²

Hmong in northern Vietnam

About five centuries ago Han Chinese started migrating en masse to the mountain ranges of China's southwest (Giersch 2006). This advance, along with major social turbulence in southern China in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, caused many minorities from the mountains in the Chinese

provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi and Yunnan to migrate further south. Among these, many Hmong settled in the ranges of the Indochina Peninsula to practise subsistence agriculture, often in combination with opium poppy cultivation (Culas and Michaud 2004). Among their new homes was present-day northern Vietnam, where it has been demonstrated that they settled from at least the late 1700s (Michaud and Turner 2003).

In the first half of the 1800s, just before the beginning of the French conquest, northern Vietnam could be broadly schematically divided into three habitat zones (Condominas 1978). First, at the highest levels on the mountain peaks and ridges bordering China, forming the stratum above 1,000 metres, lived members of the Hmong and Yao societies. The political organization of these highlanders, who were partially sedentary, was based on kinship and, to a lesser extent, neighbourhood. Second, there was an intermediary zone of well-irrigated plateaus, foothills and high river valleys. These were inhabited by groups from the Tai linguistic family, linked together in a weakly centralized feudal system, with local chiefs maintaining a great deal of political latitude. Third, in the tier below 500 metres, comprising the Red River delta and its fertile plains, lived the majority of the country's population, namely the Kinh, who defined and formed the imperial Nation. The Kinh lived under a strong, centralized, imperial regime equipped with an extensive administration of Chinese tradition run by an educated elite, the mandarins.

What is interesting for our case here is the fact that the most numerous and most powerful direct neighbours of the Hmong and Yao highlanders were Tai-speaking sedentary peasants living in the intermediary stratum, today's Thái, Tày, Nùng and Giày, plus a few smaller groups. Organized into feudal, *muang*-style chiefdoms, the Tai-speaking lords of the middle region had numerous reasons to let new populations settle in the highlands, and perhaps even invited them to do so (Condominas 1976). In terms of economic complementarity, Hmong and Yao highlanders provided Tai-speaking merchants with highland forest products, which the latter then resold for a profit in the midland markets or sold to wholesalers from the lowlands. In terms of security, the highlanders filled a useful role on the outskirts of the Tai fiefdoms where they served as a first line of defence. These terms of trade show interesting parallels to recent commercial activities, as we will see shortly.

During the colonial period in Tonkin (1883–1954), as the French called the Red River Delta and its periphery, a number of Hmong opted to join the Vietnamese nationalists and the communists, while others tended to side with the French (McAlister 1967). Consequently, after the Việt Minh victory, a number of pro-French Hmong migrated to Laos and South Vietnam, while those remaining had to accept to live under socialist rule. Since 1954, and with renewed enthusiasm since the country was reunified in 1975, the Vietnamese state has been dedicated to incorporating all highland societies into the Việt Nation, the communist state, and the national economy (Michaud 2000). This has been undertaken in part by extending infrastructure, providing

national education in the Vietnamese language, and reorganizing the economy of the highlands, all trends that are perceptible in Lào Cai province.

Today, the northern provinces of Vietnam are home to the largest populations of highland 'minority nationalities' (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) in the country. According to the 1999 national census, in Lào Cai province exactly two-thirds of the population are ethnic minorities, namely 395,000 individuals out of a total provincial population of 594,000 (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999). Of this number, 123,778 Hmong form one of the largest single non-Kinh groups.

Even though the Kinh make up only 15 per cent of the population in Sa Pa district (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999), they far outnumber the highland minorities on the local People's Committees.³ Consequently, local political decisions infrequently convey highlander opinions. This reflects, in part, an ongoing highland/lowland ideological divide characterized by the Kinh generally considering the ethnic minority inhabitants of the highlands to be 'backward' (Hickey 1993; van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Sowerwine 2004). As a consequence, there exists a two-tier local economy in which Kinh traders, supported by the local authorities, dominate a growing commercial scene, while the culturally distinct highlanders, without any real support in the state apparatus, tend to maintain food production to meet their domestic needs, with complementary commercial exchanges.

Indeed, historically, the majority of Hmong in northern Vietnam were horticulturists, practising pioneering and rotational swiddening, with only a residual number taking up wet rice agriculture.⁴ Commerce played a necessary, albeit secondary role in their general livelihoods that focused instead on agriculture, hunting and the gathering of forest products; in addition, from the 1800s, opium production became an important commercial part of Hmong livelihoods. Under pressure from the Vietnamese state, most Hmong have now become sedentarized and are integrating into commercial circuits via selected modern agricultural practices, such as using chemical inputs in their fields and selling some of their produce on the market. The Hmong in Sa Pa district today tend to practise what could be called composite agriculture, a mixture of permanent rice paddy fields, rotating swidden plots and tree gardens (Leisz *et al.* 2004).

Đổi mới, the economic renovation that was decreed in 1986 and implemented over the following years, ended 30 years of collectivization in the north of the country (also discussed in Tran Thi Thu Trang's chapter). Nevertheless, even lowland Vietnamese officials admit that collectivization in the highlands was only ever partially successful due to this area's remoteness. Yet the gradual removal of the cooperative system was accompanied by two other transformations in the region's economic balance that impacted directly on the highland economy in Lào Cai. First, the state introduced a ban on forest cutting to sell wood or to set up new farming areas. Second, there was a nationwide ban introduced on the growing of opium for commercial purposes. Both decisions were formulated in 1992 and decreed in 1993 as part

of a larger debate that led to the implementation of the 1993 Land Act, which gave back a partial right to peasants to own land and its products. In tandem, these events caused a noteworthy decrease in the commercial revenues able to be obtained by Hmong, reducing the vitality of the monetary segment of their livelihoods that had until that time relied for the most part on the sale of opium and wood. Nonetheless, there are now a few new channels that a small but significant number of Hmong have chosen to draw upon to maintain access to cash incomes. These include textile production and medicinal cardamom cultivation, the focus of our chapter.

Two highland trade networks

A variety of examples could have been used here to make our point regarding Hmong market integration dynamics and resistance. Alcohol production from rice and corn, flower growing, forms of wage work and so on, are rich in explanatory potential. Opium production and sale, for instance, although now a thing of the past, was a quasi-universal cash crop – nearly a currency – with far-reaching implications and it could have also supplied enlightening answers. For the purposes of this chapter, however, we have selected the more local, small-scale activities of textile reproduction and cardamom cultivation because both are instructive in illuminating key elements of contemporary Hmong market involvement that we wish to focus upon here. Namely, in their current shape, these evolving commercial endeavours help highlight both a sense of economic opportunism and a capacity among the Hmong to adapt to new trade relationships and rules. They also draw attention to the resistance that Hmong involved in these trades have to becoming further involved in ways that go ‘against the grain’ of their own culturally embedded livelihood practices.

Hmong textile (re)production

As well as the agricultural and household activities that dominate their time, Hmong women in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province customarily produce hemp clothes, shown in Figure 3.2. Dyed dark blue with home-grown indigo and embroidered by themselves, the creation of these clothes for family members is a time and labour intensive activity. After planting and harvesting the hemp, the women process, spin and then weave it. This was historically done on a back-strap loom, while now a portable loom is sometimes used. The final additions to these clothes are intricately embroidered symbolic motifs that often represent traditional activities and daily life (Mai Thanh Son 1999).

Since international tourism has begun to develop again in the Northern highlands after restrictions were removed in 1993 (Lloyd 2003), there has been a growing demand in Lào Cai district – and especially in the market towns of Sa Pa and Bắc Hà – for textiles produced and embroidered by



Figure 3.2 Hmong women, wearing indigo-dyed, hemp clothes, trading goods on the streets of Sa Pa.

Photo credit: Sarah Turner

Hmong women, particularly from overseas tourists. While there are now at least three different textile trade networks incorporating both Hmong and others into their flows to meet these growing tourist demands (see Turner 2007; Turner and Michaud 2008), the one that we concentrate on here is that which brings together Hmong and Kinh traders in the greatest numbers, for the most closely knit interactions. This network has, as its final product, the creation of ‘ethnic’ wall hangings and cushion covers, textile products that include small patches of Hmong – and sometimes Yao – embroidery sewn onto larger pieces of backing fabric, shown in Figure 3.3.⁵ This trade network begins when Kinh and Tày shopkeepers in Sa Pa town recruit Hmong women who are walking to the nearby market, to complete some embroidery for them. The women who take up this offer then embroider small patches of cloth as per their own designs (shown in Figure 3.3) while keeping to the general shape required by the shop owners. The highlander women are provided with the threads and fabric to do this by the shopkeepers, who obtain supplies from central sources in the lowlands. When the patches are complete – it takes about two days for a Hmong woman to finish the embroidery of five



Figure 3.3 Kinh shopkeeper and Hmong negotiating over small embroidery patches, with finished pieces decorating the shop, Sa Pa.

Photo credit: Sarah Turner

patches – these are then returned to the shopkeepers and the Hmong are paid, the rate in 2009 being VND 30,000 (just under US \$2) for five small patches of about five square centimetres each. At times, the Hmong women also ask for an advance from the shopkeepers to buy small goods in the marketplace. These loans are commonly repaid within two to three days with the completion of a set of patches.

The shopkeepers in turn hire female Kinh and sometimes Tày sewers to complete the finished goods, sewing the patches on to cotton backings to make wall hangings or cushion covers. These labourers are located not only in Sa Pa, but also in Hà Nội. The owner of one such wholesaling operation, Anh, a Tày woman from Văn Bàn district to the south of Sa Pa, has three wholesale locations in Sa Pa, and has Tày and Kinh women sewing the goods together in Sa Pa as well as about fifteen more women working in Hà Nội. From Hà Nội these goods are then distributed to shops around the city as well as to other urban locales further afield including Hué and Hồ Chí Minh City. Anh also has customers from overseas, usually tourists, who come to her store about once a year to purchase large amounts of these goods to then resell them in overseas locations including Thailand, the United States and France.

Since no Hmong keep accounting records and their semi-subsistence

livelihoods introduce a range of complex factors, it is virtually impossible to determine the *profits* that they make from this trade, but we can say something about their *income*. As noted above, in 2009 women embroidering these patches were being paid about VND 30,000 for completing five small patches, about two days' work. In contrast, the completed commodities – usually including five or more of these patches sewn on heavy cotton backgrounds – are sold by Kinh and Tày shopkeepers for anywhere between US \$20 and US \$40. While shop rents are considered high in Sa Pa town (US \$200–300 a month) compared to the local standard, this still results in an important difference when we compare the financial rewards obtained by the Hmong embroiderers and those of the shopkeepers selling the final products.

One should note though, that the Kinh and Tày shopkeepers remain reliant on these Hmong women's skills, as the former do not have the talent to embroider the patterns that attract tourists' eyes as carefully or as quickly, nor are they willing to be paid so little. One would therefore think that the Hmong women had the ability to negotiate prices – and indeed they do maintain some leeway – but overall, this is slim as there are usually other Hmong women interested in trying their hand at this trade, albeit not always for long. Consequently, the Tày and Kinh shopkeepers maintain control over prices and, at the end of the day, these shopkeepers add the largest profit margin to the price of the final goods. Thus, while actively involving highlanders, this trade network has been initiated, organized and controlled by Tày and Kinh entrepreneurs who are in an advantageous position regarding easier access to spatially diverse trading networks, infrastructure and financial capital (cf. Long and Villarreal 1998). The involvement of Tày entrepreneurs here – historically powerful direct neighbours and overlords of the Hmong – has interesting historical parallels.

Do the Hmong women embroiderers want to become more involved in these trade network opportunities? Do they wish to increase their production or enter into more regular arrangements with the Kinh and Tày entrepreneurs? Or are they resisting becoming more involved in this economic opportunity; and if so, why? We will return to these questions shortly . . .

Cardamom cultivation

The second trade network we investigate here concerns cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*), an understory, rhizomatous herb used for medicinal purposes, primarily by the Chinese. Increasingly since the mid-1980s – although there is evidence that such trade existed during colonial times between Yao cultivators and the French in Sa Pa (Sowerwine 2004) – Hmong households with the resources to be able to, have begun to cultivate cardamom for not only their own use, but for sale as well. Those who undertake this cultivation tend to live in areas closer to mature forests which provide the cardamom with the shade and other conditions necessary to reach maturity. Hmong are now not only harvesting wild cardamom but are increasingly cultivating it by

maintaining more intensively planted plots in the forest. This cultivated cardamom yields much greater returns than that collected from the wild, with one hectare of cultivated cardamom yielding up to 50 kilograms (kg) of dry fruit (Aubertin 2004).

Cardamom harvesting occurs from September to October each year. It is at this time that many Hmong will be visited by Kinh and a few Giày intermediaries who will ask if they wish to sell their crop to them.⁶ At times, promises of crops to be delivered in the future mean that Hmong households can obtain credit in advance from such intermediaries, a practice that is taken up by poorer households running short on rice just before the cardamom harvest. This, however, does not necessarily work to the Hmong households' advantage in the long term as they tend to receive low prices for their harvests. These intermediaries are sometimes shopkeepers who live in the predominantly Hmong villages, who are therefore in a strong position to gain crops from local Hmong due to their familiarity.⁷ Other intermediaries come from Sa Pa to visit a number of hamlets or, when harvest time occurs, will wait on the access roads close to Sa Pa town to entice Hmong – heading to wholesalers in Sa Pa – to sell to them instead.

These wholesalers form the third node of this trade network, purchasing cardamom either directly from Hmong who come to town, but more commonly from the Giày and Kinh intermediaries. They then transport the cardamom to further wholesalers in Lào Cai City on the Chinese border, with only a small amount of cardamom staying in Sa Pa town to be sold by local shopkeepers in the market, predominantly to lowland Kinh tourists. Kinh wholesalers in Lào Cai city then transport the cardamom across the border to Chinese wholesalers in the border town of Hekou. From there the cardamom commonly travels on to processors in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province. The cardamom is then sold to traders within China, as well as exported to predominantly East Asian consumer countries (see Schoenberger and Turner 2008; Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009).

As with the textile trade networks, it is difficult to unravel the financial rewards gained by different individuals in these cardamom trade networks. Between 2006 and 2009, the market price for cardamom averaged VND 60,000–80,000/kg (US \$4–5/kg).⁸ While some Hmong households reported selling small quantities of cardamom, around 20 kg each year – with one Hmong man stating that he was really only keeping the cardamom plots active for his son to inherit – a few were cultivating up to 150 kg a year. The average yearly crop for those interviewed however, was approximately 70–100 kg, equivalent to about VND 5.6 million (US \$350) per family.

In turn, Kinh and Giày village-based intermediaries reported collecting between 1 and 5 tons of cardamom from Hmong cultivators in one season. They worked to earn a return of VND 5,000 (or US \$0.30) a kilogram, and were therefore earning approximately VND 5 million (or US \$312) per ton of cardamom bought and sold, minus transportation costs.⁹ Kinh cardamom wholesalers based in Sa Pa town, buying cardamom from various

intermediaries, demonstrated even higher financial returns. These wholesalers annually collected between 20 and 35 tons of cardamom. Working with the same returns as the intermediaries of VND 5,000/kg (US \$0.30), they could make up to US \$10,500. From this income, however, the wholesalers deducted costs associated with transportation and other transaction outlays. Nevertheless, some wholesalers have been able to purchase a jeep after a few years in this business, a commodity that Hmong cultivators have yet to think possible from their own returns.

In sum, Kinh cardamom wholesalers derive the greatest returns from this trade, with an average income at least ten to twenty times greater than that earned by Hmong cultivators. Yet do the Hmong want to become further involved in these trade networks? Do they wish to take up the international trade opportunities this commodity offers? We turn to such questions next.

Selective resistance and agency

What do these case studies reveal of the selective resistance and agency of the Hmong individuals and households involved? Focusing on the Hmong women textile embroiderers, what is directly relevant to our argument here is the fact that those women whom we interviewed were *not* keen to become involved further in these operations. They did not wish to embroider more often, nor did they want to have more formalized arrangements with the shopkeepers. The women explained to us that they were sewing these pieces because it gave them something to do as they sat on the side of the road attempting to sell goods to passer-by tourists, or in the Sa Pa town market if they had a stall there. The returns gave them extra funds with which they could make small purchases of household consumption items such as salt, monosodium glutamate, cooking oil, sesame seed cakes and medicine. This type of work was also a welcome change from back-breaking labour in their fields, often in climatic extremes. Nevertheless, these women made it clear that when the periods of more intensive agricultural labour demands came, they would always turn to these first, with work in the rice fields always being given priority. Additionally these women noted that, while they could continue this embroidery in their hamlets, if changing family circumstances such as a child's illness were to occur, then they would forgo these economic returns if necessary. Certainly the Kinh and Tày shopkeepers complained of unreliable supplies, often trying to stockpile embroideries.

Such decisions suggest to us that the Hmong women involved in these textile trade networks are being selective in their decision-making regarding whether to enter this trade or not, and to what degree if they do, often making choices that would seem economically unsound according to Western ideals of commercial success. While this group of Hmong women embroidering patches has become increasingly involved in a commercial activity in the town, theirs is a selective involvement. Many of the women stated that they thought their current levels of involvement in this trade were sufficient, and

they had no desire to get involved in the more complex interactions that were available to them. These women repeatedly explained to us that they believed that any greater involvement would result in the shopkeepers coming to have greater expectations that the Hmong women would work to more specific standards, as well as increasing pressure to complete the goods within specified time periods. The Hmong women, rather strategically, were not interested in these types of negotiations, preferring their current ways.

By the same token, despite the fact that there are important cash returns to be gained from cardamom cultivation for Hmong compared to other cash sources available to them, not all families were interested in becoming involved in such a relatively lucrative trade. Time and again what stood out in interviews was the importance, above all else, of rice production in their livelihood portfolios, followed by having one or more buffalo to plough their rice fields. Cardamom production never outranked or came close to these as a priority (although it could certainly be an asset towards the purchase of a buffalo if cardamom returns were especially good in a certain year). Furthermore, cardamom cultivation is physically demanding work, requiring long periods away from the hamlet during the harvest period, which not all Hmong men were willing or necessarily able to do.¹⁰ In addition, many of the plots where interviewees harvested cardamom were within the boundaries of the Hoàng Liên National Park, established in 2002. This area, patrolled by local park authorities, is legally off-limits for the harvesting of any forest product, as well as the chopping of timber, which Hmong cardamom cultivators do to prepare fires to dry the fruit *in situ* since the dried product is far lighter to transport. As such, the Hmong were well aware of the risks that they faced in this trade, some deciding for the better against it, while others maintained a limited involvement that suited their broader livelihood portfolio needs.

All told, within the Hmong package of livelihood diversification strategies are a multitude of reasons to engage in (or disengage from) specific approaches at one time or another. The perspectives of these Hmong support Long's argument that

producers and agricultural workers sometimes fear that, if they become too heavily committed to outside markets and institutions, then critical interests can be threatened or marginalised. People may show strong allegiance to existing lifestyles, and to the defence of local forms of knowledge.

(Long 2001: 228)

Thus, while a group of Hmong women and men had decided to take up certain trade opportunities, they were also content to 'give it a miss' when responsibilities they judged more fundamental called, when other activities were prioritized, or when the risks seemed too great. They maintained a selective involvement in trades that comprised only a few elements among

the pluriactivity of their livelihoods. They resist in their own, innovative ways, becoming involved in the market beyond an extent that meets their own culturally rooted judgements.

If we place these decisions into an historical perspective, we notice that these trade networks and flexible livelihood approaches have known earlier embodiments. These include the growing of the opium poppy and trading of the raw product to European colonial powers from the late eighteenth century, the selling of rare timber and specific forest products to the Chinese and Vietnamese, and the trade of hemp textiles to French colonial visitors in northern Tonkin from the late nineteenth century. In turn, these reflected a niche strategy based on the particular ecosystem they inhabited and the specialist ‘know-how’ they had developed there.

Opium trading and rare timber extraction are no longer legally possible. Yet we contend – based on evidence from oral histories and interviews – that the same niche strategy at play historically has been remembered and is today taking new forms, among which are the sale of reconstituted textiles and cardamom, as Hmong adapt creatively to the market openings available to them. What is interesting to note here is the iterative nature of these decision-making processes. By putting their customary skills to work in new economic niches, such as embroidery for tourist crafts, and cultivating a non-timber forest product in response to growing overseas demand, we can unveil adapted, short- or mid-term actions and strategies – the so-called ‘weapons of the week’ mentioned in our title – that feed on those of the past and adapt in a creative, reactive way to current opportunities against the backdrop of tradition. As in the past, Hmong are taking up opportunities as they see fit. Yet the point here is that they have also previously coped with such opportunities disappearing again and have remained resilient, moving on to new livelihood strategies. This is a pattern that provides hope for future livelihood diversification, if, for instance, the tourist market for embroidered goods was to decline.

Conclusions

But can we conclude that such strategies constitute a form of active, concerted resistance? There have been lively discussions about the notion of ‘peasant resistance’ in the last three decades. It has been suggested – this time in reaction to the dominant, socio-evolutionary paradigm known as globalization which postulates inexorable economic progress via planetary economic integration – that the reticence of peasants to be caught up in the machine of development could be interpreted not as inertia but rather as a strategy. One of the leading authors of this perspective, Arjun Appadurai, observes that: ‘Those social orders and groupings that were apparently passive victims of larger forces of control and domination were nevertheless capable of subtle forms of resistance and “exit” . . . that seemed to be not primordialist in any way’ (1996: 145). In other words: resistance as a constructed strategy rather than an atavistic rejection. Indeed, despite the

possible economic opportunities, many Hmong in Sa Pa say that they have no desire or need to turn away from largely subsistence-based agricultural activities in order to invest in market-oriented production. As Rigg (1997) has noted, developing on Scott (1976), peasant households of Southeast Asia generally prefer to develop a mixed economy based on agricultural production complemented by a few subsidiary business activities rather than to abandon agricultural production altogether for sudden business opportunities, even if the latter seem promising (Michaud 1994, 1997). In the same vein as Popkin (1979: 9) noted when observing Vietnamese peasants, trade expansion is often considered a last resort for Hmong farmers, deemed to be less reliable than the customary means of reproduction. One conclusion that can be drawn from our discussions with the Hmong in Sa Pa district therefore is that there appears to be a concerted refusal to become too committed to commercial activities.

Clearly, this should not be interpreted as meaning that the Hmong are not interested in taking up innovations that could contribute to improving their livelihoods. Technological novelties for agriculture such as new crops, improved seeds and chemical fertilizers, electricity in the house, better roads, or acquiring motorbikes for easier and faster transportation to the marketplace all have much appeal to them. Our point here is not so rudimentary as to suggest that material improvement is plainly turned down in order to protect cultural integrity; it is rather that the *process of selection* of these novelties seems to be infused with a will to maintain, protect and promote cultural integrity, not merely to improve one's capacity to show wealth and consume goods. Some apparently irrational choices such as persisting in producing one's carefully embroidered hemp clothes, a time-consuming activity when cheap cotton and nylon alternatives are readily available on the market, are not the result of a poor understanding of the market economy. Such actions nicely drive home the point that it is not only profit generation that guides economic strategies and livelihoods.

Wolf (1955), defending the thesis of commerce as a last resort some 50 years ago, observed that production based on market demands was only developed in peasant societies when they could no longer meet their economic and cultural needs through customary institutions. If this affirmation is true, it would seem that the Hmong in Sa Pa district have not yet reached the point of no return. This refusal can be seen as peasant resistance on a micro scale, what Scott (1985) referred to in the title of his book as 'The weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance', a concept that was also suggested by Tapp (2001: 25, 37) in his analysis of modernization among Chinese Hmong.

Likewise, Pile and Keith (1997) contend that

the term resistance draws attention not only to the myriad spaces of political struggles, but also to the politics of everyday spaces, through which political identities constantly flow and fix. These struggles do not

have to be glamorous or heroic, about fighting back and opposition, but *may subsist in enduring, in refusing to be wiped off the map of history.*

(Pile and Keith 1997: xi, emphasis added)

The resistance of the Hmong in Vietnam is based on centuries of proximity, quarrels, political and economic exploitation, rebellion, invasion, war, genocide and flight. It is entirely possible that societies that have been put to the test in these ways have reacted by forging an attitude of resistance to assimilation and domination, a form of collective self-defence rooted in their knowledge of their comparative political weakness. Their resistance is not one of force, since this has demonstrated its futility when faced with opponents who are much stronger, but rather is one of a more or less explicit refusal to cooperate. As Scott describes for the village of ‘Sedaka’ in Malaysia, here too in Lào Cai province we find ‘forms of resistance that reflect the conditions and constraints under which they are generated’ (Scott 1985: 242).

As is so often the case, however, local wisdom can expertly shrink complex equations into remarkably lucid statements. Bee, a young Hmong woman, explained to us in Sa Pa: ‘Hmong People are concerned with having a good number of rice fields, a nice house and lots of animals rather than money. That’s what’s important to us. And money can bring you trouble anyway’ (30 March 2007). Reflecting upon Bee’s comment, we would suggest that the ‘failure’ of the Hmong to become even more involved in the trades explored here should be interpreted as confirmation of a devotion to a selective livelihood model driven more by cultural and social imperatives than by ‘the fetishism of the market and the commodity’ (Harvey 1990: 423).

Notes

- 1 Ethnonyms used in this text follow the most widely accepted international usage, based on ethnolinguistic divisions. In Vietnam, however, the Hmong are officially named ‘H’mông’; while the Yao are named Dao.
- 2 This study into the market integration processes and resistances of Hmong individuals and households in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province, builds upon information gathered from a diverse range of sources over the past 11 years. Informants include traders of Hmong, Yao (Dao), Giày and Vietnamese ethnicities; People’s Committee representatives at a range of hierarchical levels and with different ethnic backgrounds, both in Sa Pa district and in the provincial capital, Lào Cai city; and a number of long-term residents in and around Sa Pa including male and female Hmong and Vietnamese. This chapter describes the state of the trade networks as of May 2009.
- 3 The People’s Committee is the local state administration and operates at the province, district and commune levels in rural areas (a different hierarchical structure operates in urban areas). It is responsible for implementing the Constitution, the law, the formal written orders of superior state organizations and the resolutions of the People’s Council (see Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1992).
- 4 For further information on Hmong economic organization and its historical rooting in and around Vietnam, see the collective *Hmong/Miao in Asia* (Tapp *et al.* 2004).

- 5 While we will focus on Hmong women here, the trade networks for Yao women who do similar embroidery in the same commercial relationship mirror this one.
- 6 Again here, we see interesting historical parallels with Giày, a group of Tai-speaking sedentary peasants, maintaining a powerful intermediary role.
- 7 This parallels Scott's (1985) description of seasonal credit practices of shopkeepers in the Malay village of 'Sedaka' before the rice harvest.
- 8 These prices relate to dried cardamom.
- 9 The main transportation cost was fuel for their motorbikes, sold at approximately US \$0.75 a litre, with about 3 litres to fill up a Honda Dream, a commonly used motorbike in the highlands, alongside Minsk or Chinese copies thereof.
- 10 This is in part due to cultivators being concerned about the possible theft of their cardamom crops, a factor that results in some sleeping in their fields near harvest time, while others harvest their crops earlier than the optimum growing time (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009).

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