

THE CHALLENGES OF THE AGRARIAN TRANSITION  
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**Of Rice and Spice: Hmong Livelihoods  
and Diversification  
in the Northern Vietnam Uplands**

by

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# ChATSEA

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# OF RICE AND SPICE: HMONG LIVELIHOODS AND DIVERSIFICATION IN THE NORTHERN UPLANDS

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## Abstract

Highland ethnic minority Hmong livelihoods in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam resonate with adaptability, having flexed to accommodate and respond to diverse macro level political and economic circumstances through time. This paper focuses on this flexibility during the socialist and post-socialist periods. We illustrate the decisions of the State that have directly affected Hmong households in the Northern Highlands during this transition, and then, using ethnographic fieldwork data, turn to concentrate on Hmong reactions and their survival and coping strategies during these two contrasting periods. We then focus on current day Hmong livelihood portfolios, unravelling the specific features that allow Hmong households to adapt to local level political and economic transformations, including the creation of a National Park and limits to forest resource access as well as emerging market opportunities.

## Keywords

Vietnam uplands, market integration, Hmong livelihoods, actor-oriented approach,

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## Introduction

Since re-unification in 1975 the Vietnamese State has been committed to integrating highland minority societies into the Viet Nation, the Communist State and the national economy. This has been undertaken by extending infrastructure into the highland regions, supplying local education in Vietnamese, and by economic reorganisation reaching the margins of the country. Despite such attempts, the highland minority Hmong<sup>1</sup> in Vietnam, since their settlement in the highlands of Lào Cai province around the 1820s, have remained relatively autonomous in both their socio-political organisation and economic production (Michaud and Turner 2000). These ethnic minorities continue to be poorly understood among the lowland Vietnamese majority, often crudely pictured as 'backward' (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001; Sowerwine 2004a). A lowland/highland, superior/inferior dualism has remained since pre-colonial times, a dualism rendered more obvious during the French colonial period when "the people and landscapes of the highlands became concomitant subjects of the classificatory and scientific management schema of the colonial state to be labelled, settled, and systematically 'developed'" (Sowerwine 2004a: 127-128). This labelling, settling, and 'development' has continued since Independence. In part, this dualism is due to the fact that highlanders are considered as 'peoples without history' by lowland Vietnamese (Kinh) because few groups have indigenous written archives, yet are living in a country where remembering and celebrating the past is of the utmost importance.

While traditionally horticulturalists practicing swidden based subsistence agriculture, ethnic minority Hmong livelihoods in the northern Vietnam highlands are now increas-

ingly those of sedentarized peasants, focusing for the most part on rice production as their staple crop (Corlin 2004; Turner and Michaud 2006). These livelihoods are supported by the collection of forest products such as fuel wood, herbal medicines, game and honey. Commerce has also always played a part in their economy and these highlanders have frequently been in contact with inhabitants of neighbouring valleys and beyond to exchange goods. From the 1800s, this took the form of opium production for a number of them, until cultivation was banned by the Vietnamese State in the early 1990s via Decree 327. Felling timber was an additional commercial opportunity, until the State also prohibited such practices during the same period (Di Gregorio *et al.* 1996). Constantly flexible and adaptive to such changing contexts, more recently some Hmong have entered the small-scale trade of highlander textiles, engaged in local tourism activities, and expanded their trade in forest products, most notably cardamom (Turner 2007).

In this chapter we draw on livelihood and actor-orientated approaches to gain a nuanced understanding of Hmong livelihoods in the Northern Vietnam highlands. We ask: How has *Đổi Mới* – the series of country-wide economic reforms that begun in 1986 – impacted upon Hmong livelihoods? And are there now new forms of livelihood diversification occurring in these highland Hmong communities? This study focuses upon Hmong livelihoods in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province.<sup>2</sup> The chapter builds upon a concentrated field research study into Hmong livelihoods and their use of non-timber forest products in Sa Pa district in 2006 by Tugault-Lafleur (2007), and information gathered there over the past ten years by Turner. Semi-structured and conversational interviews were completed with Hmong, Yao (Dao), Giay, and Vietnamese individuals; People's Committee

<sup>1</sup> 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' or Hmông, while the Yao are called the 'Dao' (pronounced Zao) (see Condominas 1978; Dang *et al.* 2000).

<sup>2</sup> We are very aware that every household and individual may have different livelihood strategies, and by no means do we try to cover them all. Our point here is to explore a range of these, while also focusing on particular diversification processes.

representatives 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.

Next, we introduce the concepts that provide our research framework, namely livelihood studies and actor-orientated approaches. Then we present the people and places at the heart of this study, while also providing a brief historical background of present livelihoods. We subsequently focus on current day Hmong livelihood portfolios, unravelling the specific features that allow Hmong households to adapt to political and economic transformations including the creation of a National Park in the district and consequent restrictions on forest use; and new market integration opportunities. We find that the livelihoods of these upland ethnic minority Hmong in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, resonate with adaptability, flexing to accommodate and respond to diverse macro level political and economic circumstances.

## Actor-oriented livelihood studies

As a framework of analysis, the livelihood approach helps us unravel the multi-faceted and fluid nature of rural livelihoods in developing countries. While recent years have seen a growing number of livelihood approaches being promoted, there is now a common recognition of the need to understand assets and vulnerabilities (the presence or absence of forms of capital: human, physical, natural, financial, and social)<sup>3</sup>, strategies (how people deploy or ex-

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes referred to as the 'asset pentagon', these five capitals shape the foundation of livelihood analyses (Carney 1998; Bebbington 1999). Natural capital, or environmental resources, constitute non-renewable resources such as minerals and soils as well as renewable resources such as nutrient cycling and ecosystem services (Bury 2004). Physical capital refers to human-produced infrastructure, including buildings, transportation, and electrical services. Financial capital includes accessible supplies of cash, such as earned income, pensions, remittances and transfers from the State. Human capital concerns capabilities such as skills, education, ability to labour, and health

exploit existing assets), and access or barriers to resources (defined by social relations, ideologies, and institutions) (see Chambers and Conway 1991; de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Ellis 2000). Specifically, individual and household livelihoods are shaped by "local and distinct institutions (e.g. local customs regarding access to common property resources, local and national land tenure rules), and by social relations (gender, caste, kinship and so on), as well as by economic opportunities" (Ellis 2000: 6). Given that such factors change frequently, both individual and household livelihoods are continuously being reshaped in an ongoing process "in which the various elements may change from season to season or from year to year, as assets are built up and eroded and as access to resources and opportunities change" (Hapke and Ayyankaril 2004: 232).

If households are to overcome these uncertainties and fluctuations, their livelihoods must be both responsive and adaptive. The concept of 'sustainable livelihoods', captures this flexibility, defined by Chambers and Conway (1991: 6) as a livelihood that can "cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term". Such a framework is useful since it emphasises the need to examine "long-term flexibility" (de Haan and Zoomers 2005: 31) in livelihoods, and how access to different types of capital can change over time.

Critics of the livelihood approach are concerned that the approach is often limited by its tendency to focus primarily on aspects of material access and ability (Kanji, MacGregor and Tacoli 2005). Calls have thus been made for approaches that are more inclusive and actor-orientated, and that recognise the context-

(Ellis 1998). Social capital refers to the linkages, trust and social networks utilised by individuals or groups to 'get by' or 'get ahead' (Portes 1998; Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Turner and Nguyen 2005). For critiques of the 'asset pentagon' see Conway et al. (2002) and Toner (2003).

specific cultural, historical, gendered and spatial dynamics of livelihoods (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 1999, 2000; Long 2001). As such, an actor-orientated approach is useful as it focuses attention on the interactions and social relations among individuals embedded within local socio-economic, political and cultural systems. In so doing, actor-oriented analyses give more prominence to the voices and experiences of individual actors, as well as focusing upon their own knowledge of 'development' and modernity (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 1999).

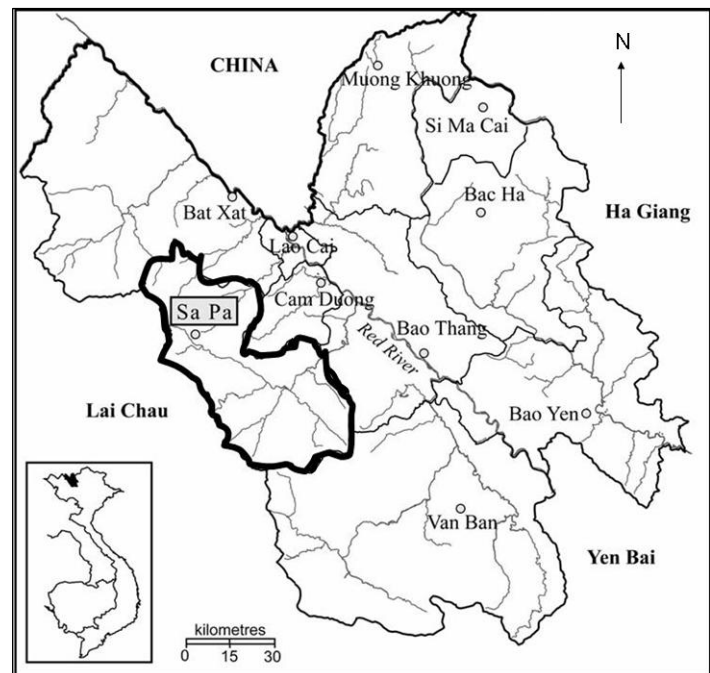
In this chapter we borrow from the livelihoods literature to gain a greater understanding of the access people have to specific resources, and why they decide to undertake certain livelihood opportunities and not others. Concurrently, an actor-orientated approach impels a consideration of human agency, while also situating individuals within complex systems of political, economic, social and cultural structures. Taken together, these approaches make it possible for us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the everyday livelihoods of Hmong in Sa Pa district.

### Context: People, places and policies

The Hmong are the only highland minority group found today in all six countries sharing the mainland Southeast Asian massif, namely Vietnam, Thailand, China, Burma, Cambodia and Laos. Of the many highland groups who emigrated south from China into the Vietnamese portion of this massif, the Hmong are probably among the most recent migrant group (Culas and Michaud 2004; Michaud 2006). Belonging to the Miao-Yao linguistic group, they tend to inhabit the highest landscapes over 1,000 meters, with highly fragmented dwelling patterns. With 54 officially recognised ethnic groups in Vietnam including the lowland Vietnamese (Kinh), the Hmong are one of the 53 ethnic 'minorities' (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) comprising 13.8 per cent of the country's population of around 83 million (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999). Given their migration

history, the Hmong are predominantly members of highland transnational ethnicities, and in Vietnam they have maintained and/or developed economic practices, political approaches and cosmologies that reflect their distinctiveness from the majority Kinh (lowland Vietnamese) (Michaud and Turner 2003).

**Figure 1.** Sa Pa district in Lào Cai province, Northern Vietnam



Lào Cai province, one of the most northern upland provinces in Vietnam, shares a border with Yunnan province, China (Figure 1). It comprises ten districts, including Sa Pa, where this study is situated. At the time of the 1999 census, within Sa Pa district alone, nine different ethnic groups were officially recorded – namely, the Hmong, Yao, Tay, Giay, Muong, Thai, Hoa, Xa Pho and Kinh (Vietnamese lowlanders) – with the Hmong totalling 37,905 individuals, or about half of the district's total population (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 1999).

### Historical context: Hmong livelihoods during socialist times

In 1946, the First Indochina War between the Viet Minh and Indochina's French colonial rulers catalysed a series of reforms within the country's political economy (Hardy and Turner 2000).

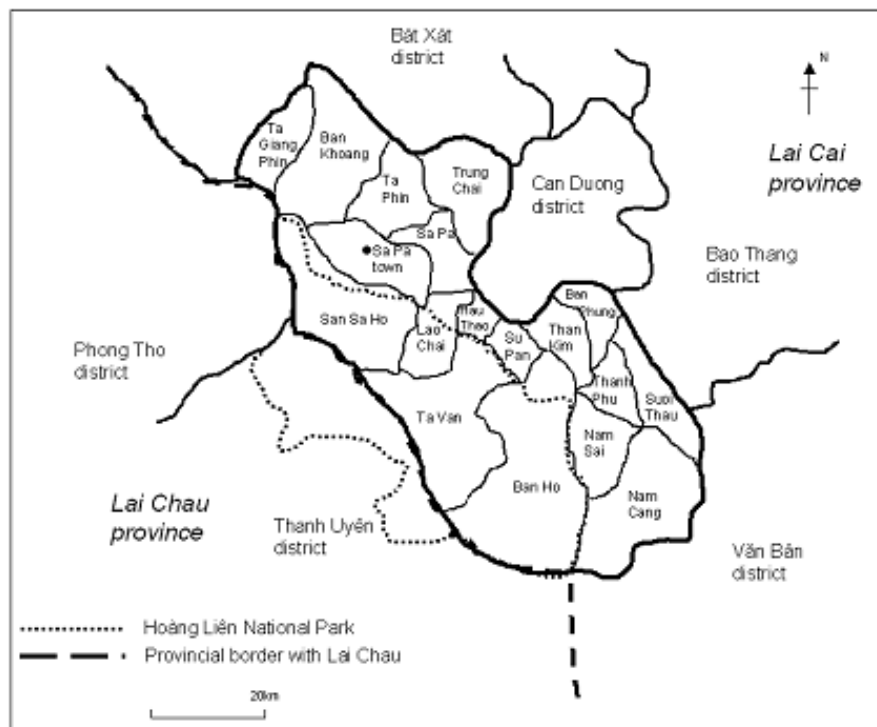
In the 1950s the collectivisation process – with all land owned and managed by the State – began in the northern region. Officially, only a small residential land plot and family garden could be privately operated, with all remaining lands managed by cooperatives or run as State enterprises (Corlin 2004). Collectivisation efforts were never efficiently implemented in mountainous areas however, partly due to the persistence of cultural prejudice, superstitions, and fear among some Kinh lowlanders of highland minority cultures (Corlin 2004). In fact, few Kinh were willing to settle permanently in the highlands and police new collectives. Numerous initiatives and projects were thus abandoned, leaving highland minorities more or less free to engage in small-scale trade with local and regional markets (Michaud 1997).

Hmong elders explained that they had continued their traditional farming practices during this period, chiefly swiddening agriculture from which they derived a variety of foods including tubers, dry rice and several varieties of corn (Phuc An<sup>4</sup> 21/6/06). The opium poppy remained an important source of cash along with the trade of some precious woods such as *Fokienia hodginsii* with lowland Kinh (Lam 10/7/06; Kao 23/6/06; Cham 13/6/06).<sup>5</sup> Hmong elders also recalled trading forest products and vegetables in village markets (Lam, Chu 10/7/06). Mai Yia (14/6/06) explained how in the 1970s, her parents travelled several days, on horse or by foot to the Lào Cai city market to sell chillies and root crops, while in Lao Chải commune (shown in Figure 2) Lia (3/6/06) re-

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>5</sup> *Fokienia hodginsii* is a valuable timber used in construction and furniture in Vietnam, also containing valuable essential oils (Tordoff et al. 1999).

**Figure 2.** Sa Pa District and Hoàng Liên National Park



Sources: adapted from photo from National Park headquarters, Sa Pa town, 2007; some diacritics removed

ported that her parents sold wood to Kinh traders on a regular basis.

The socialist period was punctuated by border conflicts, including the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war, which marked a period of intense poverty and hunger for ethnic minorities in the region.<sup>6</sup> An elderly Hmong woman, Cham (13/6/06) recalled that during the war many Hmong, herself included, collected various wild forest foods such as roots, mushrooms, insects and frogs. She explained, “sometimes we did not have any rice to eat for three or four days, so we had to go to the forest to get wild tubers”. Another elderly Hmong woman, Lam (10/7/06)

<sup>6</sup> In 1979 Chinese forces invaded Vietnam’s northern highland border provinces in protest against Vietnam’s incursions into Cambodia, as well as treatment of overseas Chinese in Vietnam. As people fled the invasion, many livelihoods were disrupted by the widespread damage to infrastructure including bridges, roads, electricity, schools and hospitals (Donnell 1980; Chau 2000). In 1988 the Vietnamese state officially reopened the border, followed shortly after by the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1991.

added her perceptions of the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war: “People were very hungry and my family and I went hiding in the forest because there were a lot of soldiers with guns in Sa Pa. Everybody were very scared. We stayed in the forest a long time and ate only leaves, mice and frogs”. Indeed, forests played a key role in terms of livelihood security, providing protection and subsistence foods in difficult times during the socialist period.

### Political context: Recent restructuring

*Đổi Mới*, the Vietnam State’s economic renovation that instigated a number of reforms from the mid-1980s onwards, as well as more recent government policies and programs have altered how access to resources is mediated, impacting directly on Hmong livelihoods. While we do not have space to review all such policies here, we comment briefly on those that Hmong interviewees raised themselves in discussions, in an attempt to present their own concerns. Interviewees generally felt that while State forest and land allocation policies from this period have often been discriminatory, and development projects sometimes ill-conceived, changing market conditions have offered new livelihood opportunities (c.f. Tran Duc Vien *et al.* 2006).

New property arrangements, forest classification systems, as well as recent reforestation initiatives have impacted upon Hmong in terms of access to different livelihood opportunities. One idiosyncrasy that makes these options even more complex for those living in Sa Pa district is the fact that about three-quarters of the district is located within Hoàng Liên National Park (see Figure 2). Designated a protected forest since 2002, this status has affected the traditional land management systems of the Hmong, notably impacting upon household rights over forest resources. All households living within the Park are now prohibited to collect plants and animals from the forest, light fires, or bring livestock to the forest to graze (Hoàng Liên National Park director 26/5/06; Le Van Lanh 2004). Households living

within the Park do not own legal title to their land and cannot participate in reforestation compensation schemes such as the Five Million Ha programme.<sup>7</sup>

Hmong interviewees in Sa Pa district frequently voiced their disapproval of the bans on logging, opium cultivation, and forest product gathering that had reduced their access to historically important sources of cash income, as well as to products used in their everyday lives. Members of the poorest Hmong households - those unable to grow or purchase enough rice to see them through the year - continue to illegally trade wood with private Kinh traders (Lu 6/6/06; Noua 7/6/06; Lim 28/6/06). For instance, Lim, an elderly Hmong woman, reported that one of her sons occasionally cuts forest trees for wood, but only “very far away in the forest, close to Seo Mi Ty [a hamlet with no road access, located deeper in the National Park]”. Lim is afraid that her sons will be caught by the authorities, but noted that they have little choice to make ends meet.

Rural development programmes in these highlands have generally shifted away from agricultural extensification to intensification (with the introduction of hybridised rice and maize seeds), in addition to diversification initiatives. To take one example, in the late 1990s Hmong households in Sả Pa, Tả Phìn and Trung Chai communes, Sa Pa district, were provided with fruit seedlings (mostly plums) for additional income generation (Pham, Tuan 20/6/06).<sup>8</sup> When the seedlings were initially distributed, competition was low and prices high. However, as the trees all began to bear fruit a few years later, the local Sa Pa town market was soon flooded with

<sup>7</sup> The ambitious Five-Million-Ha reforestation programme (also known as ‘Program 661’), launched in its first phase in 1998 by the Forestry Department, aimed at reforesting Vietnam’s so-called ‘barren lands’, covering an estimated area of 12 or 13 million hectares (Poffenberger *et al.* 1998). The vast majority of these reforestation activities have taken place in the north and central highlands – precisely the regions with higher numbers of ethnic minorities (McElwee 2001; Neef 2001; Sowerwine 2004b).

<sup>8</sup> Similar projects were also carried out in different north upland provinces such as Bac Kan province (Alther *et al.* 2002).

plums leading to a number of Hmong abandoning this commercial production fairly quickly (*ibid.*). With no infrastructure for fruit processing, and strong competition not only among themselves but from plum growers in Bac Ha district to the east, the Hmong faced a limited market. It was not long before most of those involved in Sa Pa district decided that the low prices gained did not warrant the time and labour spent.<sup>9</sup>

Infrastructural development programmes in the highlands have improved road access for numerous highland hamlets, connecting them more easily to other hamlets and larger towns (c.f. Rambo 1997; Vu 2003; World Bank n.d.). In addition, the re-opening of the border with China in 1988 and easier legal means for local residents to cross at a variety of different border posts, has facilitated greater cross-border trade (see Schoenberger and Turner 2008). Market access has therefore become increasingly feasible. In Sa Pa town, a group of Hmong women have taken advantage of increased road and market access to participate in the trade of their old and refashioned embroidered textiles to foreign tourists, or to Kinh traders who run 'ethnic craft shops' in the town (Turner 2007). Similarly, the sale of small quantities of forest products such as wild orchids, honey, mushrooms and other wild forest products helps some households to earn sufficient cash to buy additional rice, maize, and other goods. All these transformations add to the complexities of current day Hmong livelihoods, detailed next.

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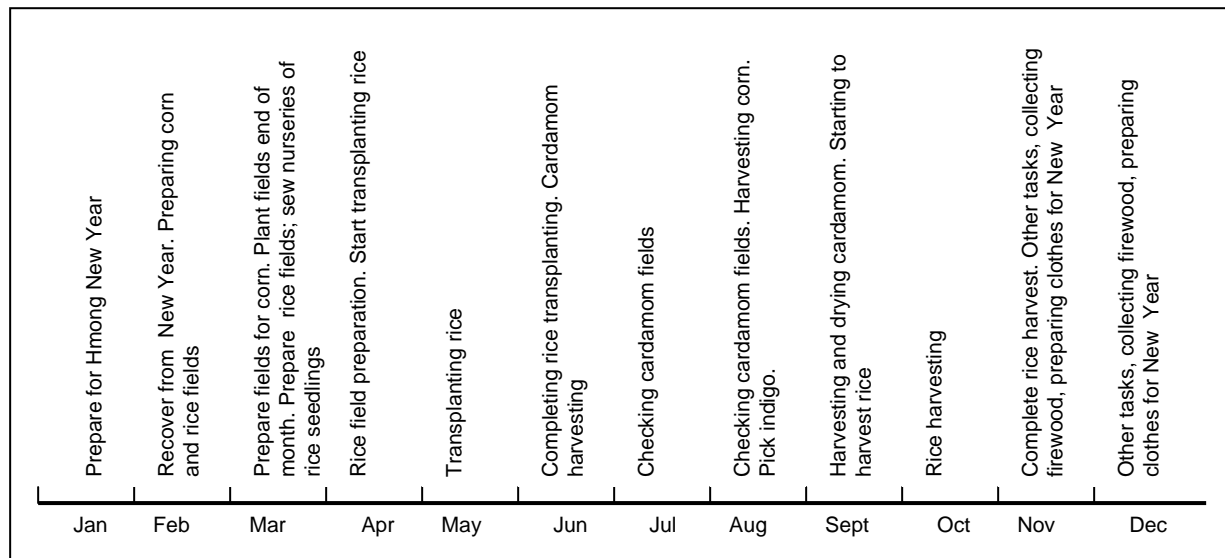
<sup>9</sup> A parallel could be made here with the notable collapse in the worldwide price for coffee from 2000 following a massive surge in the numbers of lowland Vietnamese growing coffee in the central highlands, strongly promoted by the State and international development organisations. A number of these farmers are now opting to grow other crops (Ha and Shively 2007).

## Current day Hmong livelihood portfolios

Bearing in mind this political and economic context, we delve here into the repertoires of agricultural and economic activities that make up current day Hmong livelihood portfolios in Sa Pa district. We find that terraced rice production is often at the heart of these livelihoods, constituting the staple food (if soil conditions and topography allow), complemented by upland fields for corn, cassava and other crops, livestock, horticultural gardens, and forest products (c.f. Vuong Xuan Tinh 1997a, 1997b). A typical annual labour calendar for Hmong households in Sa Pa district involved in such production is depicted in Figure 3.

Because of the high elevations and cool temperatures in the district, only one rice crop is produced per year. From April to May, rice paddy fields are ploughed and fertilized with manure, forest leaves, and sometimes also chemical fertilizers. Ploughing is considered the most physically demanding task, usually completed by men. Mothers and daughters sow the seeds as the first rains begin, typically in March or April. Young rice seedlings are left to grow until May, before being transplanted. The transplanted seedlings then grow throughout the rainy season, from May until the end of September, which is harvest time.

Villagers explained that they grow several varieties of rice, constantly experimenting and selecting seeds that best maximise yields and taste. While households vary in the proportions of different seeds they sow, these tend to be stored from year to year, received or exchanged from traders, family, friends, or simply bought at a fixed price from the government. In Lao Chải commune, Chi (15/7/06) described how people in her village grow newly improved 'short' rice seeds from China alongside 'long' traditional varieties. She explained that villagers like the new Chinese rice because of its higher productivity and shorter maturing time, but that most also keep growing old local varieties because they "prefer the taste of the local varieties better" (*ibid.*). These individuals thus take ad-

**Figure 3.** Hmong seasonal labour timeline for Tavan and Lao Chai communes

Sources: interviews with Hmong, 2006 and 2007

vantage of new rice breeds selectively, balancing the ecological limits of the land they cultivate and their taste preferences.

Dry rice has historically been an important crop in Sa Pa district, but our interviewees noted that it was less abundant nowadays. The age of different Hmong hamlets appears to play a role in the quantity of dry rice being planted, with Lu (6/6/06) from San Sả Hô commune explaining that households in her village continue to plant dry rice on mountain slopes because they have more land available than in older village settlements.<sup>10</sup> Lu explained how her family plants dry rice along with wet rice, so they can consume the dry rice from June to September, when wet rice supplies from the preceding year diminish. Highlighting the heterogeneity of local livelihood decision making, Lu added that families in Cat Cat or Lao Chải hamlets – older settlements – do not have suitable land left for dry rice because the population densities there are considered too high for this type of land-use.

Along with rice, corn is a subsidiary crop in the Hmong food system and is part of the daily diet for those living in steeper and/or rockier

<sup>10</sup> Dry mountain rice requires more land than wet rice per quantity harvested (Sowerwine 2004a).

terrain such as Bàn Khoang and Ta Giang Phin communes. Corn is planted on steeper slopes, where wet rice cultivation is difficult or impossible. Corn also plays a role as feed for livestock and as food insurance in case of other crop failures (Chi 15/7/06). Like rice, households usually cultivate several corn varieties with seeds kept from the year before, as well as receiving seeds from extended family, friends or neighbours, or sometimes buying new hybridised seeds from the government (Cho 6/7/06).

In addition to rice and corn, Hmong may have swidden fields in which they grow tubers or other root vegetables such as cassava. However, since swiddening is frowned upon by government officials, especially within the National Park, some Hmong households are abandoning these fields and turning to focus on cardamom production (detailed below), raising cattle, or collecting wild forest products to sell in Sa Pa market. Many Hmong now view rice paddy farming as a more secure guarantee of food production than dry rice and swiddens. Yet at the same time, dry rice and corn are used as 'food safety nets' in case of other crop failures.

Small gardens provide another supplementary source of food in Sa Pa district. Hmong women cultivate a variety of mustard greens, string beans, taro, pumpkins, cucumber and

ginger, all used for cooking, as well as hemp and indigo used in the production of traditional clothes (Chee 23/6/06). Women are usually in charge of these gardens, as well as the fabrication of clothes from hemp. In addition to meeting Hmong food and clothing needs, a few households sometimes have a medicinal plant garden too, discussed in more detail below (Ly 5/6/06; Mai Yia 23/6/06).

Finally, livestock represents an important asset for Hmong households and act as a form of monetary insurance, in addition to being a symbol of social status and wealth. Buffalos are raised primarily for ploughing fields while chickens, pigs, ducks and goats are used for household consumption and rituals (Mai Yia 14/6/06). Horses are also occasionally owned for transportation and ploughing. When a household needs cash quickly, chickens and ducks can be sold to the (usually) Kinh or Giay village shop keeper (Cho 6/7/06; Foua, 27/5/06). Additionally, chickens are often used to pay a healer or shaman when a family member gets sick (Mai Yia 14/6/06). More recently, a small group of Hmong households have also started fish rearing in small artificial ponds. However, when interviewed, none were being sold commercially (Shio 13/7/06).

### *Forest products*

Despite restrictions regarding harvesting in the Hoàng Liên National Park noted earlier, Hmong household members make trips to forests (both inside and outside the Park) to gather firewood (Plate 1) and a broad range of forest products to complement their subsistence needs. Firewood collection is a year-round activity performed by all able-bodied Hmong family members, including young children (Nia 28/5/06). Women and children typically collect firewood from nearby forests around their homes, or in swidden fields, whereas men transport wood from forest areas

further away (Hoa 4/6/06). Interestingly, the collection of dead wood in the Hoàng Liên National Park is tolerated by park authorities although householders can receive a hefty fine if caught cutting live wood there (Lim 28/6/06). As a result, some families now plant small bamboo trees near their homes for fuel wood (Chee 28/6/06; Cho 6/7/06).

Construction materials are harvested (illegally) directly from the National Park as well as from other forests nearby to build houses and other infrastructure such as fences, irrigation canals, pigsties, and house furniture. In Hau Thao commune, Shio (13/7/06) explained how Hmong families have been told by district officials that they are forbidden to cut trees, used in the past for constructing homes. Shio noted that regardless, many families – especially those living close to the forest – continue to cut wood for building their houses, as no alternatives have been proposed to them.

Like many other highland minority groups in Vietnam, and indeed throughout the South-east Asian massif, ethnic minority Hmong in Sa Pa district have an extensive body of knowledge of edible forest products. These are commonly harvested opportunistically, mostly by Hmong men, during periods of low labour demand in the rice fields (Mao 23/6/06). Some products fol-

**Plate 1.** A Hmong household's fuel wood collection in San Sả Hồ commune



low seasonal patterns, whereas others are collected throughout the year. Thus, while bamboo shoots are collected during the rainy season, from early March until June; mushrooms are generally more abundant after a few days of heavy rainfall regardless of the season. Wild honey combs and game are also harvested throughout the year (Lu 6/6/06). Hmong interviewees commented that since the 1980s these wild foods have become increasingly difficult to access, especially because of the Hoàng Liên National Park, adding stress on poorer Hmong households often relying on these goods as a means of complementing their diet or as a source of cash income. Many families reported going less often to the forest for such items because of the perceived low return to their labour. As one elderly woman, Lam (10/7/06) explained, “now, you need to walk for a very long time [before you can find anything]. Before, the forest was much closer, we did not have to walk very far... Now, very few people go to the forest because it is dangerous [as you might get caught]”. In Tả Van commune, Mai Yia (14/6/06) reported that only a small number of village members spend time collecting forest products, commenting that these harvesters are usually members of the poorest households needing extra cash to supplement their rice production.<sup>11</sup> In Sin Chai village, Lu (6/6/06), a young mother, makes regular trips to the forest to harvest mushrooms and bamboo shoots and then sells them to a Kinh vegetable trader in Sa Pa market. She explained how the trade is risky, but she needs the money to buy rice for her family during the ‘lean’ months (June to September). Lu highlighted the problems regarding the illegal nature of her work:

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<sup>11</sup> Our informants commonly defined the poorest families in their hamlets as those that did not have enough rice from wet rice harvests to meet household consumption needs for a year.

One day I went to Sa Pa with my friend to sell bamboo shoots. Just before entering town, the police stopped us and got very angry when they saw what was in our baskets. I had a basket full of fresh bamboo shoots to sell and they took everything away! This happened two times already to my friend. So now when we go to sell, we have to leave very early in the morning, when it is still dark and the government is asleep.

As well as an in-depth knowledge of edible forest plants, a number of Hmong households have also secured a small market niche for wild orchids. Demand for these has developed in nearby Sa Pa town among Kinh tourists from lowland cities who visit Sa Pa town for brief weekend, get-away trips (Phuong 12/6/06; see also Michaud and Turner 2006). Collecting orchids is considered highly laborious work, and only a few young Hmong men engage in it (Lan 13/7/06). On Sundays, such men – usually from Sa Pa and Hau Thao communes, both fairly close to Sa Pa town – carry orchid plants on long wood sticks into the town. Interestingly, these Hmong rarely sell the orchids direct to consumers, but instead sell them to Kinh private traders (Van Phuong 20/6/06; author observations).<sup>12</sup>

Facing constraints of resource scarcity, poor market prices and legal enforcement from Park officials, many Hmong interviewed now view the trade of these wild foods and plants as an unprofitable and risky activity. While wild foods have played a more important role in the past during times of famine and insecurity, the trade of these foods today is important only for the poorest households lacking access to sufficient rice paddy land, and/or for those with important emergency needs, such as hospital treatment.

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<sup>12</sup> In 2006 we counted approximately 20 orchid traders (all Kinh) based in Sa Pa town. These orchid traders also sometimes deal with traders based in larger lowland cities such as Hải Phòng, Hà Nội, and Hồ Chí Minh City (Phuong 6/12/06).

**Plate 2.** A Hmong healer in her medicinal plant garden



Fulfilling a quite different role however, are medicinal plants. With both practical and symbolic functions for Hmong households, wild medicinal plants provide individuals with readily available access to traditional health care products. Hmong medicinal practices include both shamanism and botanical medicine, depending on the source of the disease, and are distinct from traditional Vietnamese medicinal practices – often considered by Hmong to be barbarian and similar to western medicine (Nao 6/3/06; Pham 6/4/06; Noua 6/7/06; Cham 6/13/06; see also Cooper 1998; Fadiman 1998; Corlin 2004). While some forest plants are collected by each household for medicinal purposes, others are collected by specialised local healers. Thus while an everyday part of most Hmong livelihoods at a modest scale, such plants are more central to the livelihoods of Hmong healers (see Plate 2). Hmong healer Zhia (15/7/06) uses medicinal plants to cure a wide range of health troubles including post-partum problems, head-aches, injuries from work in the fields or forest, and being inhabited by an evil spirit. In Hau Thao commune, another healer, Lan (13/7/06), reported using up to 200 different plant species from the for-

est. Additionally, in Lao Chải commune, Chau (5/6/06) explained how the Hmong are often afraid of Vietnamese medicine, because they often think that Kinh doctors will simply amputate the leg or arm of a sick patient without listening to them. She specified that Hmong medicine is very different as “we believe that a person’s illness is caused by a *dab qus* [wild spirit] which needs to be chased away. One way is to give the offering of a chicken or a pig to the

hungry spirit so that he will leave the soul of the person”. Herbal medicines thus sustain Hmong health cosmologies, which stand in contrast with the dominant Vietnamese health care paradigm.

### *Cardamom*

For an increasing number of Hmong, black cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*) represents an important source of cash income which requires relatively little labour input in comparison to staple crops such as rice and corn, and does not compete with other seasonal labour requirements (see Figure 3). Cardamom grows wild in the Hoàng Liên National Park and surrounding forest, but has more recently been intensively cultivated under the shade of trees by ethnic minorities (chiefly Hmong and Yao) in Lào Cai province and other northwest provinces (Phan Văn Thang 22/5/06). Because of its high value-weight ratio, and increasing market demand, as well as government policies banning opium production and logging, many Hmong individuals have been planting and harvesting cardamom more intensively since the 1990s under the forest canopy (*ibid.*). In Lao Chải and Tả Van communes in Sa Pa district, families reported

producing, on average, between 70 to 100 kilograms in 2005, roughly equivalent to 5.6 million Vietnamese *đồng* (US\$350)<sup>13</sup> per family. While some informants reported yields as low as 20 kg, other households in San Sả Hồ and Bản Khoang communes reported sometimes harvesting and processing up to 150 kg per year, the highest yield reported being 200 kg for one household in San Sả Hồ commune.<sup>14</sup>

Cardamom plays a strategic role in helping households cover seasonal food deficits. In June and July, when some households begin to rely more on corn or dry rice, those with access to cardamom can use cash from advance credit sales to buy extra rice.<sup>15</sup> In Sin Chai hamlet, Moua (28/5/06) explained how she uses all her money from selling cardamom to buy extra rice as well as other food items such as vegetables and fruit, meat, salt, cooking fat, monosodium glutamate, and occasionally small treats for her children. The income from cardamom is also sometimes used to buy other household items such as ready-made clothes, blankets, cooking pots, light bulbs, and oil. In the same hamlet, another informant, Cho (7/6/6), was using the cash earned from cardamom occasionally for larger expenses, such as for building materials for the construction of a new home, the purchase of fertilizers, and/or new seeds. His fe-

<sup>13</sup> The exchange rate used here is 16,000 Vietnamese *đồng* (VND) for US\$1. Cardamom market prices are for the dried fruit.

<sup>14</sup> Sa Pa district's unpredictable weather makes cardamom yields fluctuate widely from year to year. As cardamom fruit usually mature at the end of the rainy season, the fruit may be damaged by both torrential rain and cold. In Tả Van commune, cultivator Kao (23/6/06) reported losing almost half of his production in 2005 due to long-term cold, drizzling rain which destroyed most of the plants. In Giang Ta Chai commune, another Hmong elder, Foua (27/5/06), described how his family had only been able to harvest 80 kilograms he previous season because of a strong storm.

<sup>15</sup> From June to August, Hmong will often promise part of their production to local store owners, who extend them credit. These forms of informal credit arrangements are described more in-depth in Tugault-Lafleur and Turner (in press).

male cousin Lu (6/6/06) noted other goods sometimes purchased with cardamom returns:

When the cardamom comes, we bring a lot of it to give back to the Kinh people because we get food from them before the cardamom is ready. If you have some money left, people use it for buying animals like pigs and chicken... Some also use that money to make their houses stronger because we're not allowed to cut trees in the forest anymore. Many use it to buy some clothes for the New Year for children. If you are wealthy, some are able to buy things like televisions and radios.

In sum, the income derived from cardamom cultivation provides those Hmong able to harvest it with a flow of income for every day needs at an opportune period of their seasonal food calendars. Additional returns are also sometimes used for ritual and ceremonial purchases which help strengthen kin as well as community relations, while this income can also be used to buy a bride<sup>16</sup> and new clothes for the Hmong New Year (Lam 6/6/06).

## Discussion: Comparing Hmong livelihood portfolios

By placing this study within a livelihood framework attention is drawn to the assets, activities, and access to these which shape people's abilities to make a living (Ellis 2000). Comparing two Hmong households allows us to further grasp the heterogeneity of these livelihood portfolios, delving further into their complexity. Here we compare the livelihood portfolios for Hoa (4/6/06) and Tao (16/6/06), interviewed in Lao Chải and Bản Khoang communes respectively. Figures 4 and 5 portray two pie charts representing the different sources of income for

<sup>16</sup> It is a Hmong custom to pay a bridal price, with the husband-to-be traditionally required to pay a certain amount of cash or goods (traditionally silver) to the family of the bride (Culas and Michaud 2004).

these families, including both cash and in-kind.<sup>17</sup> To construct these, we draw upon Ellis' (1998: 4) definition of income as

the cash earnings of the household plus the payment in kind of the household that can be valued in market prices. The cash earnings refer to items like crop or livestock sales, wages, rents and remittances. The in-kind component of household income refers to consumption of on-farm produce, payments in kind (for example, in food), and transfers or exchanges of consumption items that occur between households in rural communities.

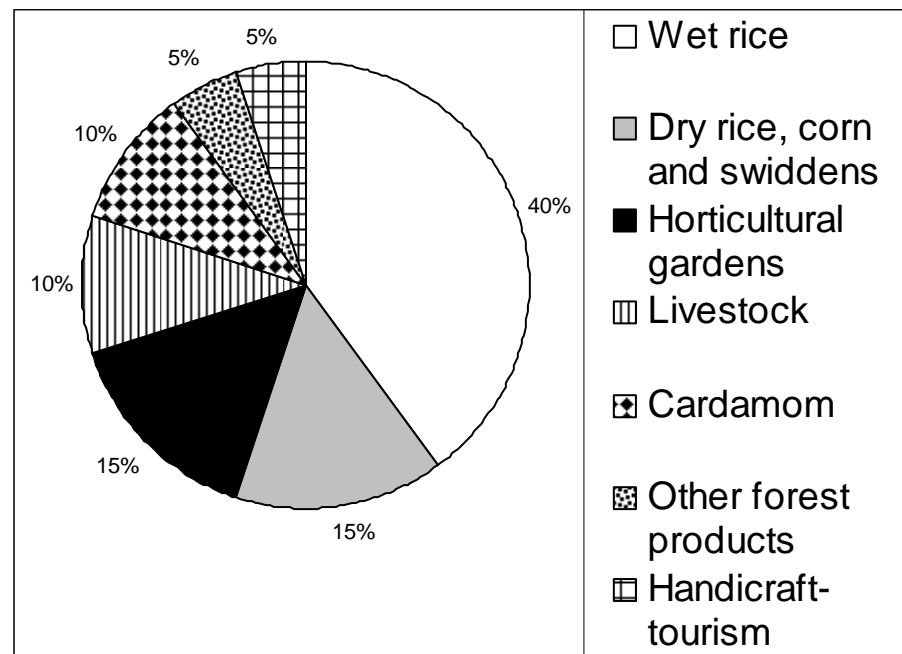
In-kind income for these households comes from wet and dry rice, corn, garden vegetables, food, feed and medicine from the forest as well as swidden crops; conversely, the cash component can include money earned by selling livestock, forest products (including cardamom) and handicrafts, wage labour (such as manual labouring on construction sites in Sa Pa town), and guiding tourist treks. The focus here is on considering the *emic* value of these different components to the Hmong households themselves. As such, the different percentages in the pie charts can be thought of as the importance of each activity to the basic survival of the household.

<sup>17</sup> There are a number of methodological difficulties associated with measuring the total household income in the Hmong context. First, it is difficult to use market values for products as they often do not reflect Hmong perceptions. Second, activities often overlap with one another: a trip to a swidden field is often combined with collecting fuel wood or herbal medicines. With these constraints in mind, these percentages should only be seen as rough estimates of mean income share by activity.

Hence, although the market price for wet rice might be much lower than the cash income received from the sale of cardamom, the percentages associated with wet rice in these charts remain higher than any other income source because of the perceived importance of rice to the household's basic survival, as explained to us during interviews.

The household livelihood portfolio of Hoa is shown in Figure 4. In 2006, Hoa and her husband had five children and lived in Lao Chải commune, one of the first Hmong settlements established in the district (Hoa 4/6/06). As such, the population density in this commune is relatively high compared to those in other nearby

**Figure 4.** Livelihood portfolio for Hoa's household,



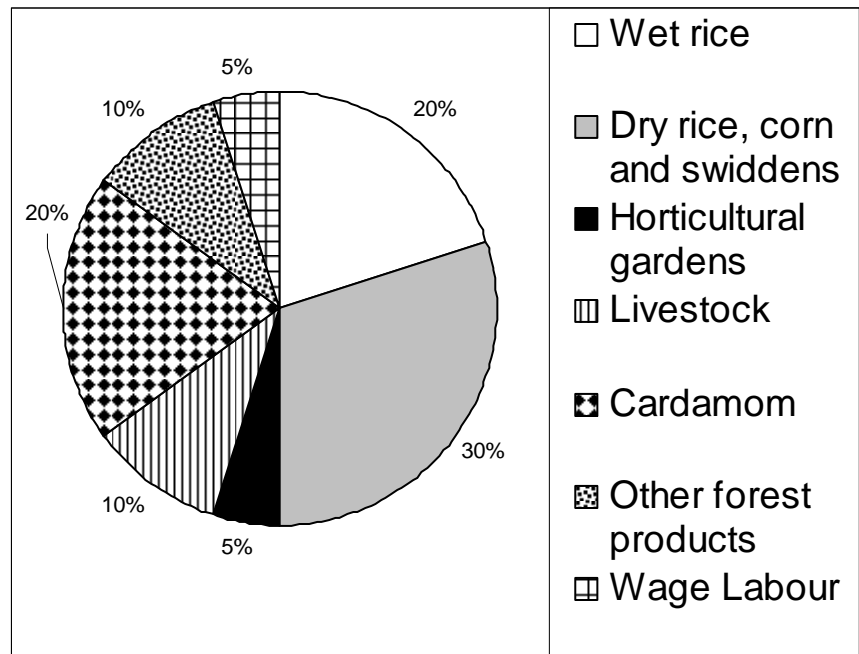
communes, resulting in greater pressure on nearby ecological resources. However, Lao Chải is also thought to have fertile land and contains many rice paddy fields. At the same time however, it is located far from the forest and Hoa's husband has to walk for a full day to reach their two cardamom fields. In 2005, he was able to produce 70 kg of cardamom, contributing about 15 per cent of their total household income. Hoa's household is fortunate to have enough rice to eat for the whole year, with their paddy land considered very important to their total

household income (approximately 40%). In contrast, dry rice, corn and swiddens provide only a minor part of the family's diet (15%). In fact, Hoa's household stopped growing dry rice in 2002, when her husband bought hybridised wet rice and corn seeds from the government. In addition, Hoa's household owns two water buffaloes, chickens and ducks (10%) and a vegetable garden located closer to the river provides them with vegetables for their daily meals (15%).

In terms of market accessibility, Lao Chải is relatively well connected to Sa Pa town via a paved road. Between June to September, when the rice fields require less labour, Hoa walks to the Sa Pa market twice a week to sell some handicrafts. Her income from this trade varies a great deal from trip to trip and she regards this revenue source as a 'lucky additional extra', rather than as secure and regular. As such, wet rice production accounts for the largest proportion of livelihood income, being the staple dietary food for this family year-round, and incomes derived from cardamom and handicrafts/tourism are seen as more discretionary.

Figure 5 illustrates the livelihood portfolio for Tao's household in Bản Khoang commune. As noted earlier, variations in ecological settings and access to economic opportunities account for some of the differences in the composition of the Hmong livelihood portfolios analysed here. The steep topography and rocky terrain in Bản Khoang commune makes rice paddy farming difficult, and fewer people have settled in this valley (Tao 16/6/06). With a lower population density than in Lao Chải commune, there also appears to be less pressure on existing forest and water resources. Hmong in Bản Khoang cultivate mostly dry rice and corn for subsistence foods, occasionally supplemented with some swiddens crops

**Figure 5.** Livelihood portfolio for Tao's household, Bản Khoang commune



such as cassava and potatoes. In contrast with Hoa's case above, wet rice accounts for only 20 per cent of Tao's income. Instead, corn, dry rice and other swidden crops occupy a larger share of their livelihood portfolio, accounting for about 30 per cent of their total household income. Tao (16/6/06) explained that cardamom provides his household with the vast majority of their cash earnings – indeed, about 20 per cent. In 2005, Tao was able to collect 200 kg of dry cardamom from his three fields – far more than Hoa's family in Lao Chải commune. In addition, living near the forest, Tao only walks for one or two hours before reaching his three fields, scattered in different parts of the forest.

On the contrary to the case of Hoa in Lao Chải commune, Tao's wife does not make handicrafts. With no paved road linking villagers to Sa Pa town, a trip by jeep can take up to two or three hours, and trips there are rare (once a month at most), thus making textile trading difficult. Instead, Tao occasionally goes to Sa Pa town to work for a Kinh man doing construction work.

A comparison of Hoa's and Tao's household livelihood portfolios at the micro level highlights the differential access these households have, within the same district, to a range of capitals

and strategies, that in turn shape the heterogeneous livelihood activities developed by each. For example, natural capital differences in terms of degree of nearby mountain slopes and soil types influence livelihood decisions. Tao, in Bàn Khoang commune has a greater ability to access the forest and cardamom fields cultivated there; but at the same time because of the mountainous terrain relies more on dry rice, corn and swiddens. Likewise, access to physical capital influences these livelihood portfolios with Tao's household having more difficulty getting to the local market, while Hoa is able to undertake new marketing opportunities to supplement her family's livelihood portfolio.

## Conclusions: livelihood diversification

The diversification of livelihood strategies by individuals and households is often at the core of attempts to create sustainable livelihood opportunities (Eakin, Tucker and Castellanos 2006; Moser 1998). Such diversification contributes to increasing livelihood security through helping to mitigate risks, withstand exogenous and endogenous shocks and stresses, and enhance overall resilience. In rural areas, this livelihood diversification can be described as "the process by which rural families construct a diverse portfolio of activities and social support capabilities in their struggle for survival and in order to improve their standards of living" (Ellis 1998: 4). This process might be achieved by undertaking new income opportunities, by planting new crops in an effort to enhance food security, or by attempting to create or alter the mixture of agricultural, livestock and off-farm activities (Chambers and Conway 1991; Rigg 2006). Global market integration also results in a multitude of new and often unparalleled challenges for rural families, resulting in further diversification (Eakin *et al.* 2006). Indeed, this has been brought to our attention by authors such as Bouahom, Douang-savanh, and Rigg (2004: 615) who contend that the *fluidity* of rural livelihoods has for the most part, been ignored to date, and that "the extent

to which livelihoods are being constantly re-worked, particularly when the wider economic context is fluid, is often underplayed".

Hmong livelihoods are clearly flexible and fluid, through both time and space. During the socialist period, rather than being tightly organised around agricultural collectivisation schemes, the highland livelihoods of the Hmong tended to remain reliant on kinship structures, largely subsistence oriented, and based upon swiddening. Logging and opium provided households with a limited cash income, while forest products were relied upon as emergency foods in times of famine and war. Since *Đổi Mới*, new economic policies, land titling schemes and forestry regulations have challenged customary land use practices and access to forest resources. These State interventions – such as the creation of a National Park, and laws banning logging and opium production – have collided with local environmental knowledge, directly affecting Hmong access to resources, land use rights and market integration.

Exploring the current livelihood portfolios of Hmong households in Sa Pa district, their complex decision-making processes regarding resource use are palpable, and several livelihood diversification strategies have occurred at the household level. Hmong have begun to intensify certain agricultural practices such as wet rice and corn, while at the same time diversifying their sources of cash income with cardamom and, to a lesser extent, handicraft trade and tourism. Differential access to local markets, distances to forests, micro-climatic conditions and topography are all important factors influencing their assessments of a range of viable options, resulting in a diversity of livelihood strategies.

Yet with these new income generating strategies in mind, we must be careful not to assume that Hmong households are moving full steam towards complete market integration, as part of their livelihood strategies. Based upon our findings, we argue that Hmong willingness to participate in the market is *discriminating* – as they carefully choose certain economic opportunities which best fit their needs and belief systems. For instance, following a growth in domes-

tic tourism to the highlands in recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of traditional herbal medicinal market stands and small shops in Sa Pa town (Tranh 6/29/06; Thuy 7/3/06). Living in hamlets next to forests, members of the Hmong and Yao ethnic minorities are well-positioned to collect and sell such goods to Kinh market retailers in Sa Pa town. Yet, as opposed to Yao individuals who sell herbal medicine to Kinh traders,<sup>18</sup> Hmong herbalists never reported selling what *they* consider to be herbal medicine on the market. One Hmong healer, Lan (13/7/06) explained:

We cannot bring the medicine and sell it to just anybody in the market because the spirits will be angry and this is very bad for the sick person. The spirits are very important for making people feel better. When somebody is sick, you cannot just go buy medicine... you need to go see somebody to help you. For one problem, you have to take many different plants.

Another Hmong female elder, Lam (10/7/06) elucidated: "We never sell our herbal medicine to the Vietnamese [Kinh]. If some people do, they sell only the dried medicine and a special tree bark and cut it into very small pieces. If not, the Vietnamese people will go to the forest and harvest it themselves". Hmong informants consistently replied that fresh herbal medicine should *never* be sold to traders, but only given or exchanged amongst friends, family or healers (Mai Yia 23/6/06, Zhia 15/7/06; Lam 10/7/06; Lu 10/7/06).

Fresh medicinal plants and botanical knowledge clearly hold intrinsic spiritual value, in Hmong health cosmologies. Despite increasing market demand for these goods, Hmong are keeping their herbal medicine knowledge outside the formal market system.

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed description of the commercialization of medicinal plants amongst the Yao, see Sowerwine (1999; 2004a).

This example highlights how Hmong in Sa Pa district are currently diversifying their livelihood portfolios selectively, in ways that best suit the opportunities available to meet their needs while, at the same time, "flexibility around a solid, culturally embedded core appears to be an important characteristic feature of Hmong livelihoods in Sa Pa district" (Turner and Michaud, 2006: 23).

These choices are made even more evident by the fact that, in contrast to their beliefs regarding traditional medicine, Hmong consider cardamom a cash crop. As such, they are more than willing to sell most of what they harvest to Kinh and Giay intermediaries, keeping only a small portion for their own needs. At the same time though, not all Hmong households are rushing into this economic activity and many are cautious of the problems surrounding its cultivation and trade such as climatic variations, disputes with neighbours regarding field rights and crops, and the illegal nature of much of the local cultivation (see Tugault Lafleur and Turner, in press). Hence, we argue that Hmong are both embracing *and* resisting new livelihood prospects offered by the growing market integration of the highlands in ways that they deem appropriate to their own cultural values. Their forms of market integration are selective, reflecting the choices, conditions and constraints of the local cultural, political and economic environments.

Returning to our framework, what we see here is the importance when utilising a livelihood approach, of not becoming trapped into utilising an equation where positive outcomes for those involved are only measured in terms of economic indicators, often poorly defined, such as poverty and wealth. Indeed, an actor-orientated approach to livelihood studies - while remaining cognizant of the importance of the broader political and economic context - prompts us to take into careful consideration non-material aspects of livelihoods, including decision making processes that are strongly influenced by local cultural and social frameworks. Examples here have included Hmong not wanting to sell certain medicinal plants, and not wishing to invest wholesale in cardamom pro-

duction, despite the potentially favourable monetary returns. Combined with an in-depth understanding of household access to different resources, assets and vulnerabilities, and how strategies are carried out, such an approach places local people at the centre of attention, allowing for “new layers of meaning and understanding” to be revealed (Rigg 2007: 8). In so doing, we begin to gain a more nuanced appreciation of how Hmong adapt to, negotiate and resist local and larger scale forces.

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