

Trading Old Textiles: the Selective Diversification of Highland Livelihoods in Northern Vietnam

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This paper aims to advance our understandings of rural Hmong livelihoods in Northern Vietnam. It investigates the local production and trade dynamics that link the livelihoods of a number of highland Hmong minority women in the province of Lao Cai to local, national, and global trade networks. Anchored in ethnographic research, the paper focuses on the actors, exchange systems, and locations implicated in the trade of embroidered fabrics, and how these have been shaped through time. Drawing on commodity chain analyses of three textile products—one chain fairly localized, another cross-border, and a third increasingly globalized—the paper examines the processes whereby new relationships, hierarchies, and values have been produced, manipulated, and challenged among the many actors involved. These include not only Hmong women, but also lowland Vietnamese, the State, and tourists. The study concludes that this textile trade has resulted in the *selective* diversification of Hmong rural livelihoods, the women not fully reliant upon such trade, but becoming involved when the time is right for them in a very flexible form of engagement.

Key words: Hmong, Vietnam, commodity chains, livelihoods, textiles

Introduction

Responding to calls that new conceptualizations of development are needed that incorporate explicit “recognition of the cultural, historical, and spatial dynamics of rural livelihoods—in addition to the more obvious economic dynamics” (McSweeney 2004:38), this study examines the complexities of the livelihoods of a number of highlander Hmông women in Lào Cai province, Northern Viet Nam (located in Figure 1). While rejecting prescriptive assumptions about rural life (Arce and Long 2000; Bebbington 1999, 2000), I draw upon livelihood, commodity chain, and actor-orientated literatures to analyze the intricate production, marketing, and consumption networks of the textiles these women trade. To do so, I focus upon the multifaceted array of social interactions embedded in local systems of regulation, customs and cultures that influence and shape the economic exchanges occurring

among highlander Hmông women, and between them and other actors. I ask: exactly who are the diverse actors involved in this trade? How are these trade interactions navigated while cultural, social, and political relations are constantly being renegotiated? And what role does this trade play in shaping these women’s livelihoods? In turn, these questions allow us to better comprehend the diversification decisions that these women choose to make regarding their livelihoods.

This ethnographically informed research focuses on three diverse textile commodity chains in the northern Viet Nam highlands. The first of these is local in scope, the second introduces multiple cross-border relationships, and the third involves numerous multi-sited actors who are increasingly globalized in reach. Indeed, the textiles under scrutiny here are found for sale not only in the highlands and throughout Viet Nam, but also in boutiques and ethnic handicraft stores in such globalized locales as Montréal, Paris, and Tokyo.

The data regarding these commodities and actors that inform this study have been collected from an extensive range of sources. Utilizing predominantly qualitative methods, I have undertaken fieldwork in Lào Cai province since 1998. In Sa Pa, Bát Xát, Si Ma Cai, Muông Khuong, and Bac Hà districts, interviews have been completed with over 200 Hmông, Yao, Giay, and Vietnamese women producing and selling textiles in and around marketplaces. Since 2001, numerous semi-structured interviews have also been undertaken with Vietnamese and Tày men and women operating shops with textile goods or related items in the highland town of Sa Pa. As well, in-depth interviews have been carried out

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Figure 1. Lào Cai Province, Northern Viet Nam



over the years with a range of long-term residents of Sa Pa, including male and female Hmông and Vietnamese. In effect, the situation analyzed in this article reflects the state of the textile commodity chains as of mid-2006.¹

Approaching Highland Textile Trade

Livelihood Studies

In recent years, livelihood studies have contributed much to the study of individual and household income-generating strategies. Although several different livelihood frameworks are in use, the common threads that underlie them point to a need to understand assets and vulnerabilities (the presence or absence of forms of capital: human, physical, natural, financial, and social), strategies (how people deploy or 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).² In particular, as persuasively argued by Ellis (2000:6), 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.”³ Since factors determining the composition of livelihoods are seldom if ever static, both individuals and household forms are constantly being reconstituted 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 Ayyankeri 2004:232).

To survive such uncertainty, it is imperative that livelihoods are responsive and adaptive to shifts in the conditions that shape them. Recognition of this necessity has triggered the development of the concept of “sustainable livelihoods,” defined by Chambers and Conway (1991:6) as one 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 not only extends the notion of access to different types of capital over time, by focusing on “long-term flexibility” (de Haan and Zoomers 2005:31), it also requires an examination of critical elements such as a livelihood’s impact on resources and its relationship to poverty reduction, security, equity, well-being, and capability (see Chambers and Conway 1991; Conway et al. 2002; Scoones 1998).⁴

To be able to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities, individuals and households—such as the traders who form the focus of this study—often attempt to diversify their livelihood strategies (Eakin, Tucker, and Castellanos 2006; Moser 1998). This helps them to enhance their livelihood security while mitigating risks, resisting exogenous and endogenous shocks and stresses, and increasing their resilience. Moreover, in a rural context, according to Ellis (1998:4), this livelihood diversification is “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.” Diversification might be achieved, for example, by engaging in new income opportunities, by taking advantage of a range of different crops to increase food security, or by attempting to undertake a mixture of agricultural, livestock, and off-farm activities (Chambers and Conway 1991; Rigg 2006). Furthermore, as Eakin et al. (2006) point out, the most recent phase of global market integration has produced many new and often unprecedented challenges for rural families, challenges that can result in ever-changing diversification. Indeed, this is the focus of authors such as Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg (2004:615) who argue that the fluidity of livelihoods has been largely overlooked to date and that “the extent to which livelihoods are being constantly reworked, particularly when the wider economic context is fluid, is often underplayed.” This diversification and fluidity of livelihoods is a focus of this paper.

Commodity Chains and Systems of Provision

To study such fluidity and the complex dynamics that embrace highlander women’s textile trade networks in Lào Cai province, this study also draws from Leslie and Reimer’s (1999) critique of commodity chain literature.⁵ This literature focuses primarily on the links between the production, distribution, and consumption of goods. The centre of attention is thus the movement of a commodity through a series of phases, a focus identified by Leslie and Reimer (1999; see also Hughes 2000) as having three traditions, namely

the global commodity chain, the commodity circuit, and the systems of provision approaches. The third of these traditions is “the consequence of distinct relationships between material and cultural practices spanning the production, distribution, and consumption of goods” and is the approach adopted for this study (Leslie and Reimer 1999:405). This is because the systems of provision approach allows for a more critical assessment of producer-consumer relations, recognizing the importance of different cultural meanings attached to commodities and acknowledging that different industries have diverse dynamics (Hughes 2000).

A criticism of this approach however is the tendency for it to prioritize the significance of the production sphere, while downplaying connections between production and consumption (Hughes 2000; Leslie and Reimer 1999). I address this shortcoming by stressing the importance of understanding that commodity chains incorporate both vertical and horizontal dimensions. A horizontal analysis looks at “consumption practices that occur similarly across different networks or between commodity chains” (Bush 2004:39). This reveals how the actual commodity traded influences the processes along the way, as well as how these in turn differ in alternative commodity chains of the same goods when different actors are involved, in this case often cross-culturally. In comparison, a vertical analysis follows the trade of a specific commodity, examining all the steps involved as well as the negotiations required to move a good from producer to ultimate consumer (ibid). By incorporating both dimensions, an examination of each specific place or node in the commodity chain can be undertaken in regard to how it influences the overall flow and final consumption, and conclusions can be drawn about local, national, and global influences on such trading systems.

Respecting the Actors

Conventional approaches to commodity chain analyses have also been criticized for their inability to account for social practices that are part and parcel of production, exchange, and trade transactions regarding a certain commodity—such as a piece of Hmông textile. Individual people too, tend to disappear from such analyses, and the local is inclined to be forgotten (Whatmore and Thorne 1997). To overcome such limitations, I draw inspiration from actor-orientated approaches that focus attention on the interactions and social relations among participants embedded within local socioeconomic, political, and cultural dynamics. It has been argued that such an approach gives 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). This is an important advantage as it enables symbolic meanings of goods to be acknowledged since “different commodities are ideologically constructed according to varying logics. Thus, it is important to trace not only commodities, but also discourses, knowledges, and representations through systems of provision” (Leslie and Reimer 1999:405; see also Fine and Leopold 1993).

This study therefore draws upon and helps extend three bodies of literature. I utilize the first of these, the livelihoods literature, to gain a greater appreciation of the access people have to specific resources and why they decide to undertake certain livelihood opportunities and not others. Secondly, the systems of provision approach to commodity chains enables an analysis of trade networks that focuses upon both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Thirdly, an actor-orientated approach allows me to consider individuals as actors who operate within complex systems of economic, social, and cultural structures. Together, these make it possible to interpret how the commodity chains that form the focus of this paper and the livelihoods of the numerous actors involved—introduced next—are entwined.

Hmông Highlanders and Lào Cai Province

There are 54 official ethnic groups in Viet Nam, including the *Kinh* (lowland Vietnamese), leaving 53 ethnic *các dân tộc thiểu số* (minorities) representing 13.8 percent of the country's population. The provinces with the largest highland minority populations are in the north of the country and in Lào Cai province. Where this study is situated, there live approximately 397,500 highlanders (Michaud 2006; Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 1999). Since reunification in 1975, the Vietnamese State has been committed to integrating all such highland societies into the Viet Nation, the Communist State, and the national economy. This vigorous policy has been carried out through the relentless extension of infrastructure, national education in the Vietnamese language, and economic reorganization. Yet, despite their relative demographic importance, these minorities are not well understood among the lowland Vietnamese majority, often crudely pictured as “backward” (van de Walle and Gunewardena 2001). A large part of this perception is shaped by the fact that in a country that places great value on remembering and celebrating the past, few minority cultures have indigenous archives, and are thus classified as “peoples without history.” Thus, if the irrevocable erosion of the cultural identity of highland societies in Viet Nam is to be prevented, it is imperative to better understand and make known various elements of their histories and livelihoods (Ovesen 2003; Saleminck 2003). This study contributes to these understandings.

The highlands of Lào Cai province were probably first inhabited by members of the Hmông and Yao ethnic groups, as well as by smaller numbers of Tày and Giáy (Michaud and Turner 2006).⁶ As implied by oral history evidence, it is likely that the earliest Hmông and Yao settled in the area around 1820 (Michaud and Turner 2000). Since then, the Hmông in Viet Nam have remained relatively autonomous in their sociopolitical organization and in their economic production. Their livelihoods generally rely on subsistence production: in the past as horticulturalists who practiced rotational swiddening; and more so now as sedentarized peasants. These livelihoods are supported by the collection of forest products such as wood, fodder, herbal medicines, game, and honey (Corlin 2004). Commerce

has always been a complementary part of their economy. From the 1800s this took the form of opium production for a number of them, until production was banned by the Vietnamese State in the early 1990s. Felling timber was an additional commercial opportunity until the State also prohibited it in the same period. More recently, medicinal cardamom cultivation, tourism, and textile production have been channels by which some Hmông have maintained access to cash incomes.

Between their agricultural activities, Hmông women in Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province also produce hemp clothes, dyed dark blue and embroidered, as shown in Figure 2. The production of these clothing items for their families is time and labor intensive. Women plant, maintain, and harvest the hemp, then process, spin, and finally weave it, traditionally on a back-strap loom, now sometimes on a “modern” loom with four legs. They also plant, weed, and process the indigo plants used to dye the hemp. Embroidery is then the final decoration to be added (interviews and observations, 1998–2006).

From the 1920s onwards, highlanders started to sell small quantities of these clothes and textiles to Europeans spending summer in the Sa Pa region to avoid the lowland heat (interviews of elderly Hmông women, 2004). This trade in textiles, as well as in agricultural produce, used two channels. One was direct, with highlanders selling their produce to Europeans face-to-face, while the other was indirect and involved Vietnamese intermediaries. During this time, there is no evidence to suggest that highlanders might have felt inclined to abandon their traditional agricultural activities. In fact, it was only when surplus labor could be spared from traditional functions in the household economy that such trade took place, a strategy that ensured minimal impact on their daily livelihoods (Michaud 2000). Then, from 1946 when war broke out between the French and Viet Minh to the early 1990s, the majority of Hmông reverted back to their kinship-based subsistence livelihoods.

The exchange dynamics of highlander actors in Lào Cai province became increasingly complex again from 1993 when the Viet Nam government abolished permits required for travel by overseas tourists outside the country's main cities, following the initiation of the 1986 economic renovation policies of *doi moi* (Lloyd 2003). Relatively independent tourism thus became possible for the first time since the French colonial era. The resultant tourist interest in the highlands has begun to draw an increasing number of highland minority individuals into the capitalist economy in many new, varied, and also contested ways. In tourism locales in the northern highlands such as those in Lào Cai province, highlanders can now act as trekking guides and sell textile goods to tourists. It could be argued that these highlanders, women in particular, have even become involved in the global economy through their participation in the commodification of their used clothing, namely the reworking of colorfully embroidered hemp and cotton skirts for sale in highland marketplaces. Such textiles, the commodities I examine here, are now also being modified by other actors to be sold locally and elsewhere in Viet Nam to domestic and foreign tourists, and in outlets overseas.

Highlander Textile Commodity Chains

Commodity Chain 1: Local Wholesaler Based Trade

As overseas tourists began to trickle into Lào Cai province and especially to Sa Pa town in the early 1990s, a few elderly Hmông women saw an opportunity to sell their cloth as they had done during French colonial times. In the early 1990s, backpacker tourists were happy to purchase “authentic” cultural artifacts, and tourism items tended to consist of full pieces of Hmông and Yao clothing. Since then, tourist demand for Hmông textiles has outgrown the ability of the local women traders to produce sufficient supplies themselves. This supply deficit has encouraged a group of enterprising Hmông men and women to either hire a motorbike and driver, use their own (if men), or board a local jeep or bus, and roam the villages distant from Sa Pa seeking used textiles from Hmông villagers, hence acting as the wholesalers who begin the first commodity chain, shown in Figure 3 (points A and B).

The sections of old Hmông embroidery purchased by Hmông women in Sa Pa from this group of wholesalers were often then grafted onto dark blue cotton fabric purchased in the Sa Pa marketplace from Vietnamese traders. In 1995–1996, these pieces were commonly made into cushion covers, simple squares of cotton with gaps or a zip for closure. Some of these were completely handmade, while others were sewn by machine. In addition, smaller items such as bags, hats, and money belts made to suit Western backpacker consumption demand began to appear.

Nevertheless, Hmông women did not always command the technical capability required to complete bigger items for this trade. To meet such a need they would enlist the services of a Vietnamese or Tày woman tailor who had a sewing machine to finish cushion covers and larger blanket-style sections of fabric, often made from unpleated Hmông skirts (point C, Figure 3). The Hmông women would then ply their wares to tourists, often itinerantly on the streets of Sa Pa (points D and F).

From about 1997 onwards, Vietnamese shopkeepers and tailors permanently installed in Sa Pa town began to produce new styles of pseudo-traditional highlander clothes such as waistcoats and shirts. A trade thus emerged of Hmông women and wholesalers selling second hand textiles to these Vietnamese tailors. The latter made up the new-style clothes and then either sold them directly to tourists from shops on the town’s main streets, or “lent” the goods to Hmông women who walked around hawking their wares on a commission-like basis. Under this arrangement, the Hmông only paid the Vietnamese tailors if they were able to sell the goods (point E). In 1999, there were three shops in town known as places where Hmông could sell textiles—either complete clothes or sections—to Vietnamese traders, a number that rose quickly afterwards. Hmông women commented, however, that they were fairly reluctant to operate in this manner if it could be

Figure 2. Embroidered Hemp Cloths Worn by Hmông, Sa Pa District



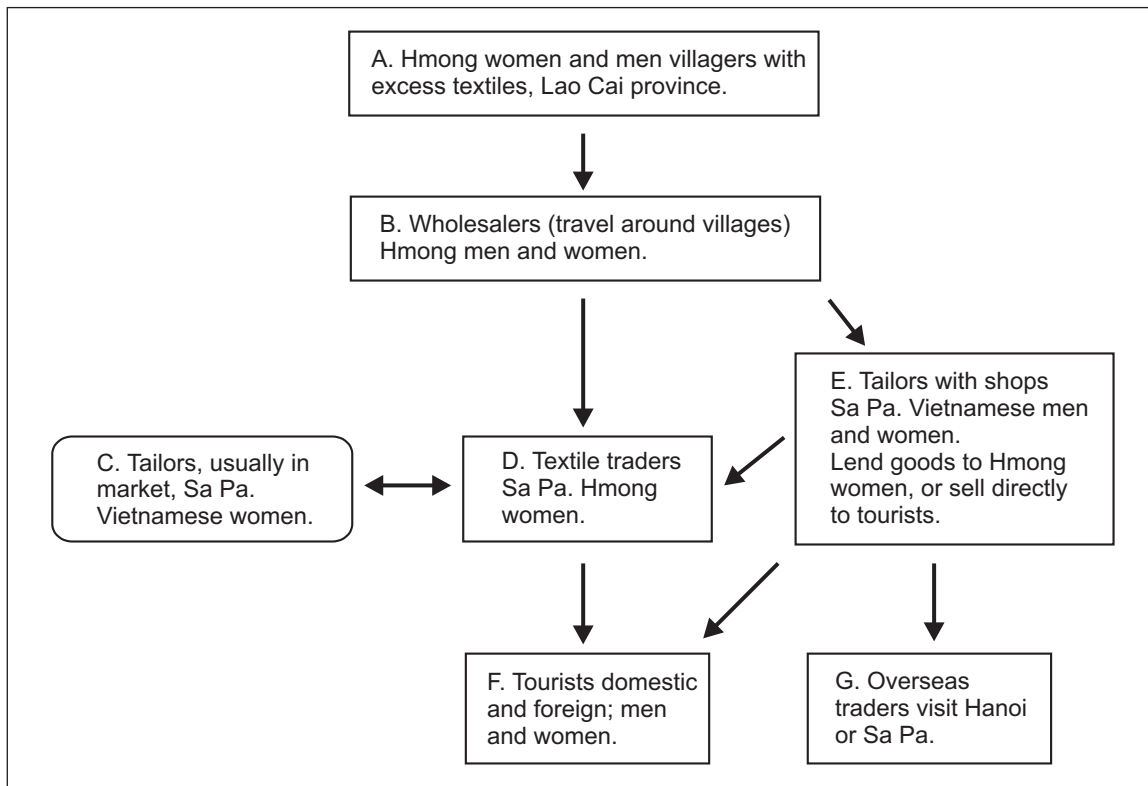
avoided because Vietnamese shopkeepers bargained hard to keep the prices of the used textiles very low (Hmông women interviews, 1999).

By the late 1990s, these pseudo-traditional goods could be found in a number of shops in Hà Nội. There, to maintain stock, Vietnamese shopkeepers telephoned their counterpart shops in Sa Pa and placed orders for a certain number of goods (Hà Nội female shopkeeper interview, 1999). These items were seen as far away as Hong Kong and London in 2000, with traders from overseas visiting both Sa Pa and Hà Nội to purchase items on a small scale from Vietnamese shopkeepers (point G).

A strength of this first commodity chain is the way that it draws attention to the manner in which the values placed by highlander women on their old, second-hand clothes have slowly changed through time and space. Before international tourism was resurrected in the 1990s, such textiles were predominantly valued if they were new, worn especially by young adults to gain the attention of youngsters of the opposite sex. That is, the clothes were not commodities by destination, “intended by their producers principally for exchange” (Appadurai 1986:16), but were items that had social and cultural meaning for those who wore them.⁷ More recently, an economic value has been added to the older, worn clothes of the Hmông through their reworking into tourist items.

Also highlighted here is the fact that these exchange relationships have created a new “interlocked world of actors” in Sa Pa district (Long 2001:2). This has brought Vietnamese and highlanders face-to-face to trade products other than those for immediate consumption at a rate never before experienced

Figure 3. Commodity Chain 1—Local Wholesaler Based Trade in Highlander Textiles



by Hmông women. This is in part because the previous, fairly limited, non-consumption trade between highlanders and Vietnamese—mainly opium before it was banned—was undertaken by highlander men.

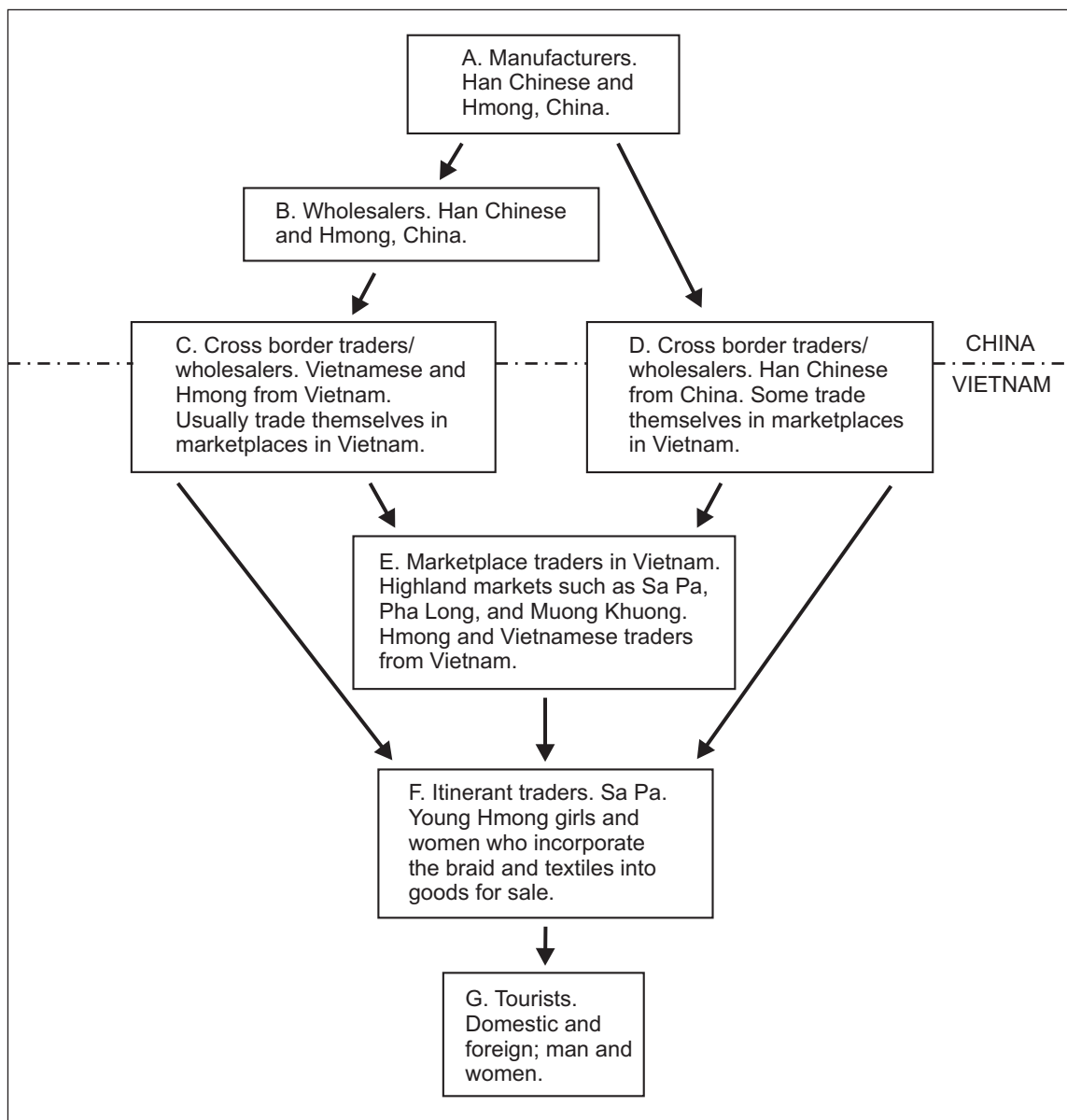
Commodity Chain 2: Cross-Border Trade

The second commodity chain I focus upon introduces a complex cross-border, transnational dimension. From the northern highlands in Viet Nam, there are both Vietnamese and Hmông women (point C, Figure 4) who cross into China to purchase industrially made textiles and braid. These goods are purchased from Hmông as well as Han Chinese who live in China close to the border (point B) and who have access to textile manufacturers there (point A) (Schoenberger 2006). The Vietnamese and Hmông cross-border traders from Viet Nam (point C) then sell their goods via two routes. Firstly, some sell direct to customers in markets back in Viet Nam, mainly Hmông women who purchase such goods to incorporate them into their textile designs, either for their own consumption or to sell to tourists (points F and G). Secondly, some cross-border traders act as wholesalers for other traders who operate in Viet Nam highland marketplaces such as Sa Pa, Pha Long and Muong Khuong (point E).

In addition, there are also Han Chinese traders, commonly men, who reside in China and cross the border to wholesale these goods in Viet Nam (point D), as well as selling them at periodic marketplaces there. Some of the highlanders who purchase these goods within Viet Nam (from any cross-border trader) are young Hmông girls who then befriend tourists to sell them jewelry and “Jews harps” (a musical instrument made of two pieces of metal carried in a bamboo container wrapped in the commercially embroidered braid from China) (points F and G).

The Hmông who travel across the border in search of textiles to trade are all women. They tend to be residents of districts such as **Muong Khuong and Si Ma Cai** which, unlike Sa Pa district, are located on the Chinese border. These inhabitants have the most favorable conditions for accessing the border since only border residents can cross at what is known as an “open entrance” crossing.⁸ One such cross-border trader I interviewed, Kawm, is a Hmông woman in her 60s. Originally from **Muong Khuong district** but selling in Sa Pa, Kawm travels to **Muong Khuong highland market** and then crosses over the Chinese border to gain goods about once a month. Purchasing her goods from other Hmông living close to the border in China, Kawm believes this is a very profitable way of trading because it enables her to buy a large roll of embroidered braid for 16.30 Chinese Yuan (\$1.98) and

Figure 4. Commodity chain 2—Cross-Border Trade



sell it for 50,000 Vietnamese dong (\$3.30). She explained that every time she travels to China, it is to buy several million dong worth of goods with the proceeds from previous sales, an amount accumulated slowly over the years.

This second commodity chain reveals an increasing complexity of spatial patterns. Of the numerous participants, some operate close to the Sino-Vietnamese border on either side, while others are based in marketplaces in a range of Vietnamese highland districts, among them Sa Pa, Muong Khuong, Bac Hà, and Si Ma Cai, all in Lào Cai province. Goods move between China and Viet Nam through different levels of border crossing, often via small open entrances as

noted above, that allow those who live closest to the border in Viet Nam to cross to purchase goods from nearby wholesalers in China. Specific actors involved in this commodity chain are therefore in advantageous positions to respond to these trade opportunities. This has made livelihood diversification possible for a group of Hmông women, due in part to modifications in physical capital, namely infrastructure developments regarding access to the border and markets beyond; changes in political capital in the form of State border access policies (discussed more later); and the location of their local place of residence in relation to the border, an important spatial variable.

Figure 5. Hmông Embroidery-Inspired Wall Hangings and Cushion Covers in a Vietnamese Owned Shop, Sa Pa Town



Commodity Chain 3: Multiple Actors and Power Relations

The third and final textile chain I explore is the latest to have emerged in the highlands, revealing an even more complex set of power dynamics than those underpinning either chain one or two. Since 2001, an increasing number of enterprising Vietnamese and Tày men and women shopkeepers in Sa Pa have been designing wall hangings and cushion covers, shown in Figure 5, for the more sophisticated tourist market (Figure 6, point B). This includes wealthy lowlander Vietnamese tourists as well as those from overseas (points E, H, and J). The owners of such shops ask Hmông women to embroider small patches to the size they request (a few of these patches are lying on the table in Figure 5).⁹ Vietnamese women then machine sew a series of such patches onto larger pieces of fabric to create a wall hanging or cushion cover (point D), using heavy cotton fabric backing ordered from Hà Noi (point A). While predominantly for sale in shops in Sa Pa, these goods can be found in Hà Noi, Ho Chi Minh City and, carried by Western traders who travel to Sa Pa yearly, as far away as France and the United States (points I and J).

One Vietnamese ethnic crafts seller of such goods, Hau, established his business on Sa Pa's main street in 2001. He orders the backing cloth over the phone (after initial contacts were made face-to-face) and has it transported from Hà Noi by train. The threads used by Hmông women for

embroidering small pieces of this cloth are acquired from Van Phuc, a town near Hà Noi well renown for its silk, and are delivered in a similar fashion. In 2004, Hau's business had five Vietnamese women working on location to sew the merchandise together.

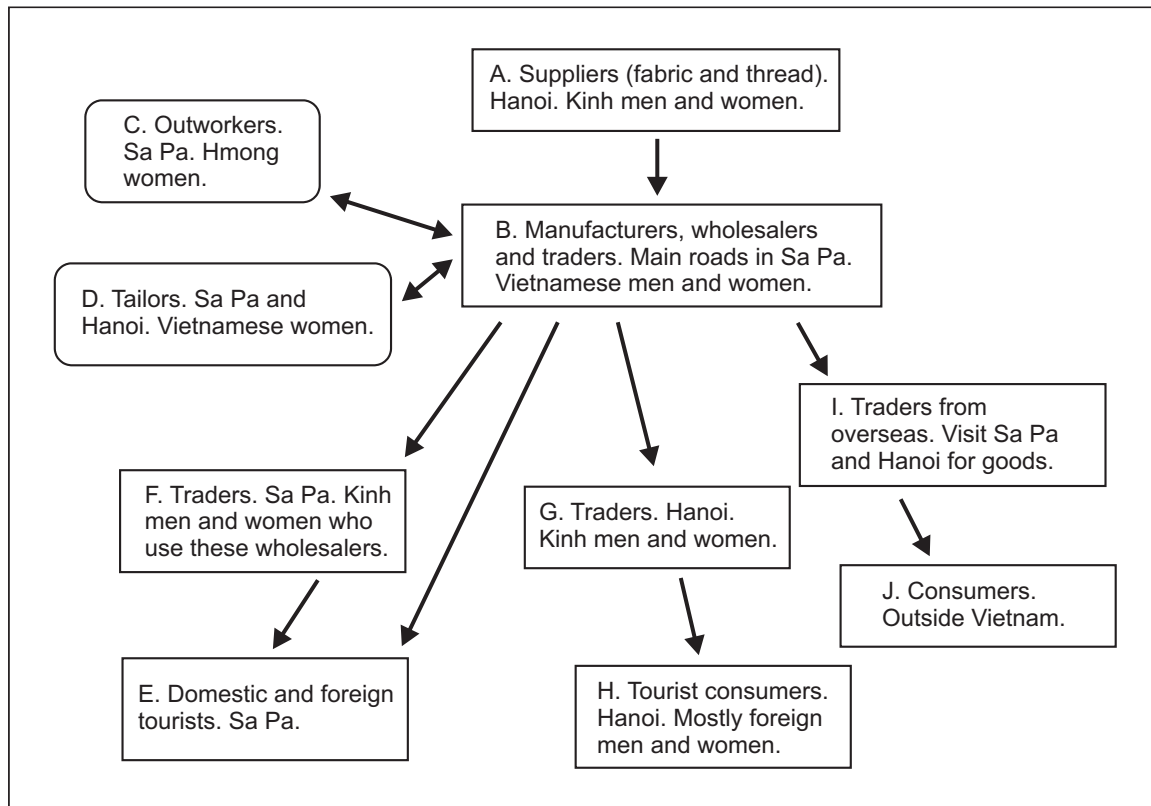
Hau initially asked about 20 Hmông women from hamlets nearby to embroider for him. He tested the skills of these potential embroiders by getting them to work small pieces of cloth using patterns they were already familiar with to determine how well they completed the task. Once established, the Hmông working for him gained new orders and delivered the embroidery pieces they had completed when they passed his shop en route to the weekly Sa Pa market.

From one shop in 2001, Hau managed four in Sa Pa by 2004 and was keen to globally expand his exporting links. At that stage he only had one international trade link via a French tourist, a woman who visited Sa Pa once a year and purchased a large number of goods she retailed in Paris. Hau wished to penetrate the United States, United Kingdom, and Japanese markets, but felt constrained in doing so by customs taxes, which he believed were very high for large quantities of goods (in-depth interview, 2004).

Like Hau, Anh, an ethnic Tày from Van Ban district just south of Sa Pa, also has a shop in Sa Pa. She uses this as a wholesale base for sales to other shops in the town and also Hà Noi. In 2006 she was aware of three similar wholesale shops in Sa Pa, but was not concerned about competition, stressing that hers was the largest shop. Anh's embroiderers are mainly Hmông, and while some regularly embroider for her, others are those that she sees walking the street while embroidering that she calls into the shop. On Sundays, market day in Sa Pa, Anh might purchase up to 10 million dong (\$65) worth of embroidery from highland women. She lends the women all the raw materials—fabric and silk thread sent to her from Nam Dinh, approximately 90 kilometres south of Hà Noi. Noting that in her experience Hmông are very honest people who always deliver the final goods on time, she sometimes gives these women money in advance if they request it to buy items at the market, and they pay her back in embroidered goods two to three days later. Anh also has four Vietnamese and Tày women sewing goods together for her in Sa Pa and another 20 completing the same tasks in Hà Noi. She then supplies the finished goods to about 15 shops in Hà Noi that all buy on credit, payments being made only when the goods have been sold. She also sells to shops in Ho Chi Minh City and Hoi An. In addition, customers come to Sa Pa from the United States, Thailand, and France to buy large amounts of her goods for resale in those countries, some returning yearly for new stock (in-depth interview, 2006).

Although it is nearly impossible to discern the profits that Hmông women make from this trade as none keep records and their semi-subsistence livelihoods introduce a range of complex factors, in 2006 women embroidering these patches were being paid about 30,000 dong (\$2) for completing five small patches, about two days' work. In comparison, the finished products—usually including five or more of these

Figure 6. Commodity Chain 3—Sophisticated “Ethnic Crafts”



patches on heavy cotton backgrounds—were being sold by Vietnamese and Tày traders for anywhere between \$20-\$40. Although shop rents are high in Sa Pa town (\$200-240 a month) compared to the provincial norm, this still resulted in a noteworthy difference between the economic rewards gained by the Hmông embroiders, compared with those selling the final products.

These vignettes reveal a web of sociospatial interactions more complex than those comprising commodity chains one and two—the range of actors has increased, while global scale transactions have become more intricate. Yet perhaps the most salutory difference is that two new labor relationships have been introduced, namely a style of outlier arrangement for highlander women and, in shops in Sa Pa and Hà Noi, the incorporation of significant numbers of Vietnamese wage laborers sewing the different textiles together. This further shift in power relations supports the contention that with the advent of outliers we begin to see the emergence of competitive flexibility, based on a growing reliance on the most vulnerable of workers. Furthermore, it appears that we have in Sa Pa “labor forces that are socially constructed in a recursive process involving the manipulation of differences based on gender and ethnicity, as well as economic circumstances” (Raynolds 1997:127).

At the same time though, because Vietnamese workers are not able to embroider the same patterns as carefully, as quickly, or are willing to be paid so little, shopkeepers remain reliant on the Hmông women to produce the embroidered textiles that are central to their sales. One might surmise that negotiations should thus be available to the Hmông women. Yet, as there are a number willing to sew for the Vietnamese and Tày shopkeepers, the latter maintain tight control over prices. Ultimately, it is also the shopkeepers who add the largest profit margin to the price of the final goods. Thus, while actively involving highlanders, this third commodity chain has been initiated, organized, and controlled by Vietnamese and Tày entrepreneurs advantaged by easier access to more spatially diverse trading networks, infrastructure, and financial capital (cf. Long and Villarreal 1998).

Other Actors: The State and Tourist Consumers

The character of highlander textile trade has been undoubtedly transformed since the French colonial period when a few Hmông women sold pieces of their used clothing as artifacts to French holidaymakers. Since tourism was

permitted again from the early 1990s, this trade has been substantially reformed by the participation of an increasing variety of actors, both in number and ethnicity, and by a widening spatial scale from the local to the global. During the French colonial period there were only two groups of actors, the Hmông women traders on the one hand, and on the other, French colonial tourists, with occasional interventions by Vietnamese intermediaries. More recently, with growing complexity and spatial scale, there has been an expansion in the range of actors on the input side of the commodity chains as epitomized by Hmông wholesalers who travel around villages purchasing used clothing, and Hmông, Vietnamese, and Han Chinese cross-border traders. Similarly, situated further along the chains there has also been an increase in the combination of actors, such as Vietnamese and Tày shop keepers who employ Hmông outliers, and an increasing number of Vietnamese intermediaries and traders. Paralleling these changes have been a growing number of consumption sites for the final products, not only in highland marketplaces like Bac Hà, Muong Khuong, and Sa Pa, but in shops in Sa Pa, Hà Nội, and Ho Chi Minh City and overseas in cities such as Bangkok, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Paris, and Montréal. To complete a thorough investigation of these chains however, two other important groups of participants must be focused upon, the institutional actors, namely the State and its representatives; and the tourists, the on-site consumers.

The State and Its Representatives

Politics and the “rules of the game” clearly embody power and gender relations in the context of highland textile trading. They influence access—constraining who may trade where and who can cross the border at which crossing points—and they define which livelihood strategies are available to whom, that is, the right to trade. The local People’s Committees are in charge of the future shape and planning of highland towns, and despite the fact that Vietnamese comprise a small percentage of the highland district populations, their representatives control all the key positions of the State apparatus. The highlanders, the majority of whom are not literate, and a large proportion of whom cannot speak Vietnamese, find themselves in a position from which they are able to contribute little to district politics and their voices are seldom heard.

The disparity in power relations becomes increasingly evident when one assesses the development over time of one highland marketplace, Sa Pa, a favorite destination for domestic and foreign tourists. Until 2002, it was the norm among the small group of highlander women selling goods in the town to do so in an itinerant fashion, walking around the main streets using either basic English or miming as they tried to convince tourists to buy their goods. During 1996 and 1997 the marketplace in Sa Pa underwent a major renovation that modified it from a one-story, tile roofed space to a two-story, concrete structure. Constructed as two large build-

ings with connecting walkways, it was rebuilt by the local People’s Committee. One top section of this enclosed space was labelled the “Ethnic market,” designated as a site where highlanders could sell their goods. Although highlanders were initially slow to respond to this initiative, by 2004 the hall was full of Hmông and Yao women traders, encouraged to trade there by the authorities who wished to reduce highlander itinerant trading in the town.

A Foucauldian, panoptic-style watch is now kept over highlander women selling in this marketplace by both the police and the Vietnamese market manager. Highlander women are not shy, however, to point out deficiencies in their new trading location to the young male manager, aged in his 30s. While interviewing in 2004, a “scene” occurred between two Hmông “senior” women sellers and the manager, the women yelling at him that goods had been stolen from the hall at night (when it should have been padlocked), that this was inexcusable since they were now charged to trade on the site, and that he should pay them for the goods lost.¹⁰ However, while able to voice their anger, it was clear that the manager was in no way inclined to refund the women for their losses, and that the trading fee the women paid gave them few entitlements vis-à-vis the local authorities. Although it could be argued that this is one of the first times that highlander women have had their voices heard directly by representatives of the Vietnamese State, it should also be noted that it did not result in change. Unlike research from locals in other developing countries which reveals that livelihood diversification can induce shifting patterns of and negotiations over local governance (see Bebbington 2001), this has not occurred in this case. Like elsewhere in socialist Viet Nam, the State maintains tight control over activities in the northern highlands.

Consuming Actors: The Tourists

Generally, current day tourists to the highlands who purchase Hmông women’s products fall into three broad categories: Western budget travellers or backpackers, affluent overseas travellers, and wealthy Vietnamese.¹¹ Foreign tourists of the backpacker variety who visit Sa Pa to explore the colorful market, to trek to minority villages nearby, and to take a break from the crowded lowlands (cf. Di Gregorio et al. 1997; Grindley 1998; Michaud and Turner 2006) are the most important on-location customer base for the Hmông women.

During the initial years after Sa Pa reopened to tourism in the mid-1990s, backpackers accounted for a significant proportion of the tourist market and made an important monetary impact in the town. Nowadays however, they are being outpaced by Vietnamese tourists (interviews Department of Tourism, Lào Cai, 2000; Victoria Sa Pa Hotel, 2003). Yet, at the same time, it is the foreign tourists, and especially the female backpacker crowd, with whom Hmông women prefer to undertake trade, rather than with the Vietnamese tourists who they tend to ignore.¹²

A small group of affluent Western tourists has also started to make a mark on Sa Pa. The four-star, French-owned Victoria Hotel situated on a hill overlooking the town is currently the only venue that caters to this category, offering international standard facilities. In general, the Victoria's clients follow itineraries suggested by the hotel, which include a visit to the Sa Pa market, and most often also a drive to a few nearby ethnic minority villages. Members of this well-to-do group are less likely to purchase goods directly from Hmông women sellers, especially if they are accompanied by Vietnamese guides who tend to suggest that goods be purchased from the Vietnamese-operated shops discussed in commodity chain three instead or, of course, from the hotel's own boutique.

The third tourist group, affluent Vietnamese tourists, seldom buy textiles directly from Hmông women. Again, they are more interested in the reconstituted wall hangings and clothes on sale to them via the Vietnamese shops. In this way, Vietnamese tourists are able to purchase a piece of "ethnic art" without actually having had to come face-to-face with a highlander women trader, an indication that many lowland Vietnamese perceive the highlanders to be backwards and dirty. In effect, it tends to be only the Western backpacker tourists who have any direct consequential interaction with Hmông women traders at all, members of the other groups more often than not tending to ignore them in the streets and avoiding or limiting their time in the highlander section of the market.

Diversifying Hmông Women Livelihoods

As noted at the beginning of this paper, calls are now being made for livelihood studies to focus more on the fluidity of livelihoods and how livelihoods are being reworked (Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg 2004). Indeed, this fluidity comes to the fore when analyzing the livelihood diversification of the actors involved in the textile trade in highland northern Viet Nam. Nonetheless, the literature to date, while recognizing a variety of different measures by which people might diversify their livelihoods, appears to suggest that such diversification is either a deliberate household strategy—a means to diminish rural inequality, or a safety valve for the poor; or more negatively, a response to crisis, a factor that can both impoverish agriculture by removing critical resources and increase rural inequality (see Ellis 1998).

Bouahom, Douangsavanh, and Rigg (2004) have made similar distinctions in their work on rural Laos. In this they define a difference between *distress* diversification or diversification for survival, and what they call *progressive* diversification. They argue that "diversification may be a reflection of proletarianisation and the immiserating effects of modernization and market integration (although this is clearly a source of considerable debate), or a means by which rural households can lever themselves into higher-return activities and occupations leading to improving standards of living" (ibid:613). Likewise, Davies and Hossain (1997:5) maintain

that livelihood adaptation is the process by which the livelihood choices made by individuals "either enhance existing security and wealth or try to reduce vulnerability and poverty." Similarly, Start and Johnson (2004:vi) view diversification as either a "strategic approach to an expanded opportunity (i.e., thriving) set, or a constrained response to a diminished set of opportunities (i.e. coping)" (see also Bryceson 2002; Eakin et al. 2006).

Building upon such interpretations, I argue for a third approach to be added to these fairly dualistic classifications of livelihood diversification, one that I define as *selective diversification*. First, I maintain that the Hmông women in Lào Cai province are not necessarily undertaking production and trade because of distress. Indeed, they explained that they undertake these activities because they enjoy being able to socialize in the market; because it gives them extra funds at times for small purchases such as salt, mono-sodium glutamate (a substitute for salt), cooking oil, cucumbers (eaten on the street as a snack), sesame seed cakes, and medicine;¹³ and because being in the market place is a welcome respite from working in the fields, providing protection from the sun, heat, and rain. These women made it clear though that when more labor-intensive periods of crop cultivation arrived, they would return to their responsibilities in the home and hamlet with tending to rice production always being the priority factor in their livelihoods. Certainly during such periods, their marketplace spaces were considerably less busy. In addition, such women continued to readily adapt when opportunities for selling textiles ceased, for instance if they returned to the village because of a child's illness or changing family circumstances (Hmông women traders interviews 2004, 2005, and 2006). Therefore, while selective diversification could be construed to be a form of progressive diversification, the decision-making processes of the women often resulted in only temporary engagement with these commodity chains, making this decision perhaps even more complex than progressive diversification would suggest.

Second, a temporal approach adds further weight to this new diversification category. Elderly Hmông women traders interviewed in 2005 and 2006, for example, explained that they had sold trinkets during the French colonial period, but that such trading activities had stopped when the French war with the Viet Minh broke out in 1946. Because most French civilians had left the area by the beginning of the next year, the Hmông traders reverted back to their traditional subsistence economy. Between the 1960s, when Vietnamese settlers had returned,¹⁴ and the early 1990s, the economy of the highlanders was tentatively reorganized in accordance with the national agricultural collectivization scheme based on cooperatives. Nevertheless, it is debateable to what degree this transformation was successful because, as many highlanders explained, they continued instead with their kinship-based subsistence livelihoods. In 1979, a border war occurred between China and Viet Nam as a result of Chinese disapproval of Vietnamese incursions into Cambodia. Then, with the normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations again in

1989, new avenues for cross-border trade were made possible for the highlanders. Further change came in the mid-1990s when the reappearance of international tourists enabled the resumption of the textile trade, now following multiple trading patterns. In sum, Hmông perceptions of the textile trade as dispensable when other valued livelihood priorities intrude, coupled with confirmation of the very selective nature of their appraisal of opportunities for livelihood diversification, was exemplified by elderly women who had participated in the original trade with the French. They expressed no regret about their limited ability to take part in it after 1946. In fact, when I raised this matter in discussions, they tended to shrug their shoulders and merely commented that it was a time when they “went back to the village” (Hmông women traders interviews 2004, 2006).

Given these past negotiations with political and economic change, and the selective participation of Hmông highlanders in this trade today, one must question the extent to which highlander women want to become more closely involved in the trio of textile commodity chains detailed above. Is it an assumption, tinged with Western biases regarding capitalist economic success, which makes us believe that they want greater involvement? Rather, as James Scott (1985:2) maintains, it is “only by capturing the experience in something like its fullness will we be able to say anything meaningful about how a given economic system influences those who constitute it and maintain or supersede it.” Understanding more about the micro-scale processes that make up the different nodes of these three commodity chains is imperative if the motivations behind such diversification are to be understood more fully. We need to reflect upon the motives and aspirations of Hmông highlander women rather than assume that these are shaped by “success” thought of only as capitalist economic growth (cf. Turner 2005).

Many of the Hmông women textile traders interviewed, especially those involved in embroidering patches for Vietnamese in commodity chain three, felt that their current involvement in this trade was sufficient and did not wish to get caught up in the more complex, even global interactions possible. Time and again these women explained to me their belief that greater involvement in the textile trade would result in expectations to work to certain standards, and increasing pressure to produce goods within a certain time period which they simply did not want, hence their preference for their current livelihood ways (Hmông women interviews 2005, 2006). Perhaps their “failure” to become even more involved in this trade, rather than, for example, removing themselves from their family’s rice production activities, 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). Indeed, as one young Hmông woman, Bee, explained candidly, “Hmông 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.” In other words, within the Hmông package

of livelihood diversification strategies there can be a whole host of reasons to engage in (or disengage from) them at one time or another. Their perspective also corroborates Long’s (2001:228) conclusion 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 marginalized. People may show strong allegiance to existing lifestyles and to the defence of local forms of knowledge.” Thus, while a group of Hmông women had decided to take up a trading opportunity, they were also content to “give it a miss” when other responsibilities called. Theirs was a selective involvement in a textile trade that comprised one component among the pluriactivity that constituted their livelihoods.

Final Reflections

While a livelihood approach considerably enhances understandings of the choices made by people—in this case highlander Hmông women—in order to make a living within certain constraints, our comprehension of that process is taken to a deeper level by the sort of commodity chain analysis presented in this paper. A clear advantage of the later approach is that it reveals the numerous interactions that take place between the production of a good and its final consumption; it also exposes the ways in which those interactions are played out across a range of actors, locations, and geographical scales. Thus, a combination of livelihood, actor-orientated, and commodity chain approaches enables one to construct a detailed inventory of the different actors involved in this highland textile trade, how they interact through relative power positions, and the nature of the outcomes for those participating. Additionally, a strength of the multi-faceted methodology applied in this paper is that it explicitly recognizes the importance to people of outcomes other than increased incomes and, in the process, provides an emphatic endorsement of the inaptness of Western-biased, rationalistic assumptions about local highlander socio-economic systems and livelihoods in Viet Nam (cf. Arce and Long 2000; Kanji, MacGregor, and Tacoli 2005). Such findings are of fundamental importance because they confirm that State or non-governmental organizations (NGO) that aim to enhance the development of highlanders, in the present case by, for example, intervening to expand or improve the ethnic textile trade, must first acknowledge and fully comprehend the selective flexibility that is part of the livelihood choices made by Hmông women. Development efforts that demand certain time commitments or specific volumes of deliverable outputs are therefore likely to fail. So too are those that ignore the cyclical nature of agricultural activities among Hmông households. Instead, any interventions must be tailored to the endogenous circumstances of their daily lives, and acknowledge that “orthodox microeconomic analysis is not *sufficient* for understanding how and why people do or do not diversify” (Start and Johnson 2004:44).¹⁵

In sum, the commodification of textiles at the heart of the Hmông trade examined here entwines old and new forms of production, consumption, and livelihoods, while generating heterogeneous patterns of multi-sited commerce. The processes exposed are complex, often ambivalent, and entail a range of actors, networks of differing social relations, and unequal access to resources (cf. Long 2001; Rankin 2003). The three commodity chains explored above reveal that a group of Hmông women are operating in a relatively new sphere of production and exchange, and indeed, have come to occupy new “action spaces” (Long 2001:236).

At the same time however, we must question whether the Hmông women actually wish to become more involved in such “action spaces,” or whether this diversification is a selective choice—based on an opportunity that has arisen, one that they are fully aware may disappear again one day, as the French colonial tourists and their trade did in the past. By utilizing a framework that does *not* “overstylize and externalize social and political dynamics, leaving insufficient room for the observation of non-economic processes of change that rural agents are not only contextualized in but actively shaping” as many livelihood approaches have previously done, argues Bryceson (2002:3), it is possible to determine that flexibility in livelihoods is a principal characteristic of the Hmông households examined in this paper. The women in these households are willing to become selectively involved in the diversification of their livelihoods through trading textiles, but only as an activity adopted when they judge the time is right.

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Notes

¹All names in the text are pseudonyms.

²These five assets—sometimes referred to as the “asset pentagon”—lie at the core of livelihood studies (Bebbington 1999; Carney 1998). Natural capital, or environmental resources, include firstly, non-renewable resources including minerals and soils; and secondly, renewable resources including nutrient cycling and ecosystem services (Bury 2004). Physical capital refers to human-produced infrastructure, such as buildings, transportation, and electrical services. Financial capital concerns supplies of cash that can be accessed, such as earned income, pensions, remittances, and transfers from the State. Human capital relates to capabilities such as skills, education, ability to labor,

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

³A household has been defined as “a person or co-resident group of people who contribute to and/or benefit from a joint economy in either cash or domestic labor” (Rakodi 1998:7). However many livelihood authors are unhappy with the use of such a construct, arguing that while individual members of a household may be involved in decision making processes, this is often not on an equal basis, especially with regards to gendered negotiations of power. Households should not, therefore, be considered inevitably cohesive, with household livelihood strategies often based on multiple motives, and often including a multi-locational character (see de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Long 2001; Rakodi 1998; Rigg 1998). Nevertheless, individual decisions—whether supported by other household members or not—can still frequently factor in overall household strategies (see Bouahom, Doungsavanh, and Rigg 2004).

⁴Further studies explore “well-being” (Chambers 1995, 1997) and “capability” (Sen 1984, 1987) in relation to livelihoods, it being suggested that Sen’s concept of capabilities provided one of the main inspirations for livelihood research in general (de Haan and Zoomers 2005).

⁵This body of literature has grown rapidly and comprehensive reviews are already available elsewhere, including those by Dicken et al. (2001), Hughes (2000), Jackson (1999), and Leslie and Reimer (1999). The purpose here, therefore, is to focus on how key concepts from this literature help inform the present study.

⁶Ethnonyms used in this text follow the most widely accepted international usage, based on ethnolinguistic divisions. In Viet Nam however, these first two groups are officially named “H’mông” and “Dao” (Zao) respectively. For ethnological information on Viet Nam’s National Minorities, see among others Condominas (1978) and Dang Nguiem Van, Chu Thai Son, and Luu Hung (2000).

⁷Hmông women usually have as a minimum one pleated, batiked, and embroidered traditional skirt made from hemp. Worn for marriage, when giving birth, and other special occasions, most importantly a woman is dressed in the skirt when she has died in order to meet her ancestors (Mai 1999).

⁸Those eligible to use “open entrances” can cross using a permit, rather than having to acquire a passport. The permit allows them access to a limited area on the other side of the border, often to the nearest border market. At these entrances too, there is often no tax on imports as the quantities carried by an individual trader tend to be small, unlike at international level crossings, such as in Lào Cai city, which are also accessible to travellers of non-Chinese or Viet Nam citizenship (Schoenberger 2006).

⁹A small number of Yao highlander women are also involved in this trade, with indistinguishable commodity chains.

¹⁰Most of these sellers have wooden chests doubling as display tables that can be padlocked for their goods to be stored in relative safety overnight. All pay a fee of 50,000 VND (\$3) a month to locate in the hall.

¹¹The wealthy Vietnamese are one of three groups of Vietnamese tourists currently arriving in Sa Pa in significant numbers, others tending to be families on tour packages, or workers belonging to the Socialist *biên che* system on group holidays (a term used to refer to those with a state position, with such employment considered permanent for life). These latter two groups tend to have very little interaction with the Hmông highlanders and are not discussed here (see Michaud and Turner 2006).

¹²In 2006, I asked a group of young Hmông women why they did not engage in their friendly conversation and banter with Vietnamese tourists as well as Western tourists. They replied that they ignored national tourists because the latter called them *mèo* (cats), which the women consider derogatory.

¹³Those able to make larger profits sometimes used it to buy labor for their fields if required or, if they had saved for a long time, a motorbike, but such levels of savings were relatively rare.

¹⁴These settlers were initially sent by the State to colonize the area under the New Economic Zones scheme (see Hardy 2002).

¹⁵While the Hmông women in Sa Pa district have yet to become closely involved in NGO textile projects, a group of Yao women, another highland minority, have. Yao women I interviewed in 2006 and 2007 expressed mixed feelings regarding the organization and expectations of the project.