

Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands

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Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino- Vietnamese Borderlands

By Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin,
and Jean Michaud. Seattle, WA:
University of Washington Press,
2015. xii + 223 pp. US\$ 50.00.
ISBN 978-0-295-99466-6.

How do mountain people, at the physical, ethnic, and geopolitical margins of their countries, construct their livelihoods? Is it possible to speak of indigenous modernization, of mountain resistance to central powers, or of the inexorable penetration of capitalism, ironically in (post-) communist polities? *Frontier Livelihoods*, an empirically rich collaboration between 2 human geographers and an anthropologist, investigates these questions in the case of the Hmong, an ethnic group spread across the Southeast Asian uplands. The study's particularity is its comparative and non-national approach in Hmong (Moob, Miao) communities on both sides of the Chinese-Vietnamese border (specifically: Honghe and Wenshan prefectures in southern Yunnan, and Lai Châu, Lào Cai, and Hà Giang provinces in northern Vietnam).

Hmong are iconic mountain people, living scattered across Southeast Asia's vast upland zone that lowland-centered national polities (Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, China, Myanmar have struggled to incorporate into their nation-building efforts. Hmong identity is stronger than national borders, lived through language, styles of dress, styles of social organization, and relations. The book begins and ends with reference to James Scott's (2009) exposition of the state-avoidance strategies of highlanders across the region.

The argument constructed by Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud is centered on the strategies and abilities of Hmong individuals and families to negotiate, accommodate,

and selectively resist the opportunities and constraints presented to them by the Chinese and Vietnamese governments, by the border region itself, and by local, national, and global markets in different products. In their own words, "Hmong communities in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands are being tactically selective about modernity, using everyday politics and covert resistance to form culturally specific and locally adapted livelihood approaches. Hmong farmers and households deftly adjust and diversify their livelihoods to take advantage of current demands, often to gain cash income to support or supplement the subsistence of their livelihoods" (p 172).

This argument is in clear opposition to stereotypes held by national majority lowland ethnicities of hill tribe conservatism, entrepreneurial ineptness, or atavistic refusal. It undermines Marxist narratives that ascribe little power to marginal people in negotiating relations of capital. Finally, it reprimands the lack of attention to cultural meanings, trust relations, and everyday politics in classic livelihood approaches and their "five capitals." In doing so, the argument calls upon a variety of theories and concepts, including actor-centered approaches, indigenous modernity, border studies, and studies of micropolitics and resistance. The book does not have grand theoretical pretensions; instead, it presents brief, careful, and clear reminders of elements of these key debates and ideas. Throughout the analysis, the authors occasionally remind readers, briefly but effectively, of how what they have documented illustrates or challenges concepts found in the literature.

Following the introductory material and a chapter introducing the region and the historical and contemporary context of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands—from major conflict to everyday border policies—the book hits its pace with a series of 5 substantive empirical

chapters focused on particular important components of Hmong livelihoods: agriculture, water buffalo trade, distillation of rice and maize spirits, cardamom agroforestry, and textiles. Rich in quotes from interviews and conversations, as well as anecdotes from several decades of ethnographic work, the chapters investigate the strategies of people in the mountains on both sides of the border. It pays close attention to household subsistence strategies, to local reciprocal exchanges and trades within villages, and to trade at markets and across borders that links into national and even globalized networks. It is more ethnographic and interpretive in approach than quantitative and comprehensive. Household interviews, as well as observations and conversations in local and regional marketplaces, hold a privileged place in the empirical analysis. This is complemented with the context of national and regional policies as well as particular attention to the role of border crossings (and border politics) as additional constraints or opportunities.

Only a few criticisms are worth mentioning. The concept of "livelihoods," central to the book, is never clearly defined or problematized. Nor does the book engage with the literature on peasant livelihoods and strategies, such as the work of Van der Ploeg (2008), in which the authors might have found inspiration complementary to the traditions they cite. While the writing style is consistent despite the book's being written by 3 authors, in some places it feels as if individually contributed topical sections were used to fill an outline. At times, important context seems to appear rather late in its respective chapter: for instance, the discussion of what Hmong as an ethnic identity means or the discussion of the alcohol distillation process. Several of the more agronomic or technical aspects of rice farming, cardamom collection, or buffalo husbandry are treated in passing, despite their relevance to the shape

of local livelihoods. Finally, I would have wished for some more careful elaboration of certain analytical paragraphs, which seem to pass too quickly and briefly—such as the comparison between agrarian livelihoods in China and Vietnam (p 62).

The book makes a strong case about Hmong reluctance to “uncritically board the train of modernization, growth, and development” (p 171). It demonstrates that the strategies of individual Hmong farmers and traders amount to what could be seen as a collective strategy of guarding a sense of identity and culture and complicity, not through a strategy of isolation or retreat but through everyday activities of engaging certain market opportunities and state policies, and resisting, when possible, other

economic and political pressures. On the one hand, this is a reassuring message that diversity and difference will persist—and that modernity is being indigenized—despite the inexorable state and market pressures. On the other hand, I felt a residual sense of discomfort that the steamroller had been slowed, but not stopped. The comparison between countries shows clearly that Hmong communities in China are much more integrated than those in Vietnam. The steamroller may be slower, and indigenized, but does that matter? Perhaps from a large-scale perspective modernity is unstoppable, and its slower speed is irrelevant, but as Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud note in their final line, “alternatives are being enacted every day”—and these are what

matters today in the lives of the people in these mountain regions.

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