

**Government Munificence and the Struggle to be  
Poor**

**Politics, Power and the Local State in Vietnam's Northwest  
Borderlands**

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## Statement of Originality

I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where otherwise acknowledged.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Chaudhry', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Peter Chaudhry



## Abstract

Successive regimes since colonial times have sought to develop and incorporate the lands and people of northwestern Vietnam under a biopolitical imaginary: to nurture and render the state periphery productive and integrated into a unified nation state. However, local people of the region have always had their own ‘projects’, which they pursue on the ‘margins’ of this state project of power (Ortner 2006). This thesis sets out to understand, through an ethnographic study of Vĩnh Thủy, an ethnic minority commune in northwestern Vietnam, how the different projects of power at work in Vĩnh Thủy commune come together in (and through) the local state.

I theorise the local state as a political space created through the coming together of the projects of power of four vectors in Vĩnh Thủy: the centre state, the local community, local officials, and the translocal flows, actors and institutions that are increasingly prevalent in the northwestern uplands. These projects of power meet around the governmental narratives, technologies and everyday rituals of state that permeate the commune, and through which the biopolitical imaginary of integrating the uplands into the wider nation state is projected, and enacted. Prominent governmental processes in Vĩnh Thủy commune include regulating the division of political office between ethnic minority groups; identifying ‘the poor’ and delivering poverty reduction support; and attempting to modernise the uplands through ‘the market’. Projects of power congeal around these governmental processes and are contested, negotiated and made anew in the local state space.

Governmental schemes are themselves productive of power, as through them local ethnic minority people exercise a particular, dexterous and constantly learning form of political agency, what James Scott (1998) has called *metis*. However, where Scott saw *metis* operating independently of the systems of state power, in Vĩnh Thủy *metis* instead flourishes within the governmental processes of state, and is sustained and nurtured by them. Local elites in the commune, and local people in so far as they are connected to these elites and therefore to power, pursue their projects within and through the regulating technologies of state. They reshape them as they are applied in the local state space, even as they are themselves shaped by them.

It is through the local state too, that ideas of state are locally re-imagined, and thereby achieve relevance and potency for the people of Vĩnh Thủy. State ideas are shaped in the local state space through an intense politics of intimacy, which recognises that local elites pursue projects of power for the benefit of themselves, their lineage groups and their wider networks, but which also privileges notions of general provision, obligation and duty to the unfortunate, and to the community as a whole. Hopes, dreams and desires for development also crystallise around the state and ensure that local people remain bound in to locally imagined ideas of state, despite these dreams and desires frequently being frustrated.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

Vietnam today is a nation in flux. Cities and urban areas of the country are locked in a process of perpetual transformation as new housing projects, roads and flyovers increasingly replace the old markers of the urban landscape, such as single storied brick houses, narrow alleyways, neighbourhood stores and small public parks. Signifiers of the population's growing affluence abound too, with expensive cars and motorcycles clogging city roads, and families garbed in designer labelled clothes promenading through the new temples of high modernism, the foreign restaurants and shopping centres of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City's central urban districts. Anyone travelling through the northern provinces of Vietnam today cannot help but be struck by the rapid pace of change in the countryside too, albeit on a more modest scale. Provincial towns bustle with commerce and construction. Roads and bridges are being rebuilt in even some of the most remote corners of the country, and in district towns new multi-storey houses are everywhere, public buildings are being upgraded and public spaces beautified. Local markets throughout the north flourish through trade in both local products and Chinese goods trucked or carried across the nearby border.

These outward signs of modernity, development and progress are not of course the whole story. As even the most bullish champions of the onward march of capitalism in Southeast Asia acknowledge, capitalist development is uneven (Kim 2008). Successive reports on poverty and development in Vietnam throughout the 2000s identified the country's ethnic minorities as losers in this national development process. Vietnam's poverty rates fell spectacularly through the 1990s and early 2000s, but the decline in poverty for ethnic minorities was at a much slower rate than for the population overall (World Bank 2012; World Bank 2009). The country's ethnic minorities also lag behind in 'human development' indicators of progress, such as access to education, health care and formal sector employment (UNDP 2011). The narrative of the government and international development partners in Vietnam is that ethnic minorities are being 'left behind' in this process of increasing prosperity and modernisation. They are viewed as 'less developed' (*kém phát triển*) and consequently ill-equipped to engage with the market driven opportunities on offer in today's Vietnam.

Before undertaking research for this thesis, I spent six years working in the development bureaucracy in Vietnam and witnessed firsthand how these narratives of underdevelopment were formed and disseminated as policies and programmes for ethnic minority development.<sup>1</sup> I routinely attended government meetings and travelled extensively in the northern mountainous provinces of the country, a region heavily populated by ethnic minority people and characterised in the national development discourse as the underdeveloped periphery. My experience of visiting projects, participating in training and workshops, discussing state policy with local officials, and talking to local people about their livelihoods and their engagement with state development efforts jarred with the policy narratives and perceptions of senior policy makers in Hanoi. In these narratives ethnic minorities were usually portrayed as the dependent, passive and underdeveloped ‘other’.<sup>2</sup>

Most strikingly, however, I found that the local officials I dealt with at the district and commune levels of government were overwhelmingly ethnic minority people themselves. Many commune officials were long standing residents of the communities in which they served, with deep roots in local culture and politics. State power in the northern periphery is largely embodied in the persons of ethnic minority people, the supposed ‘objects’ of state development processes. I often found these local cadre and local commune people enthusiastic, proactive and innovative in their engagement with state programmes, which problematized the state development narratives that I encountered of ethnic minorities as being ill-equipped or unwilling to foster their

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<sup>1</sup> During the period 2006-2012 I lived in Hanoi and worked first as a researcher for an international non-government organisation (INGO) and subsequently as an adviser in two of Vietnam’s national government ministries: the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (*Bộ Lao động, Thương binh và Xã hội*), and the State Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (*Ủy ban Dân tộc*).

<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the problematic nature of the term ‘ethnic minorities’. In the northern borderlands of Vietnam, these ‘minorities’ are in fact the majority of the populace. It is a generic signifier used to describe a range of groups with complex and contested identities and relationships to each other, to other ‘ethnic’ people, and to central state power. It is therefore a reified term and deploying it in my analysis validates its use. However, as Akhil Gupta observes when reflecting similarly on the concept of ‘poverty’: “one simultaneously has to employ the category of poverty and adopt the metrics of its measurement *and* be critical of such deployment as well as of the metrics. It is not possible to approach this topic outside of a biopolitical imaginary” (Gupta 2012, 67). What I take from Gupta then is that using the language of modern governmentality is inescapable but it is important to critically reflect upon this usage. I discuss ‘ethnic minorities’ as a category of state in Chapter 2.

‘own’ development. It also challenged some of the academic scholarship I had read on ethnic minority agency which portrays ethnic minorities as typically seeking to ‘resist’ the state as a colonizing force. There was clearly more going on than this. The state’s presence in the borderlands is increasingly widespread and state regulation consequently extends to many facets of agricultural production, social organization and everyday life. Ethnic minority people’s ability to avoid the state, if this is indeed their intention, is therefore limited. Moreover, rural people in northern Vietnam often actively engage with the state for the promise of ‘development’ on offer, even though these desires for development are frequently frustrated.

I left my position as a government adviser at the beginning of 2012 in order to begin PhD research. I wanted to return to the northern uplands to explore in more depth the dynamics of ethnic minority people’s relationship with the Vietnamese state at the grassroots level. In particular I wanted to understand why, given the contentious history between the lowlands and uplands and their respective peoples, ethnic minority people participate in the modern nation state building project. On whose terms do they participate? What is the nature of state power in the ethnic minority periphery?

In pursuing these questions I wanted to observe local politics at a different pace than I had to date, as a development worker always just quickly passing through. I have therefore adopted a localized and ethnographic approach in my study, which took place in a fairly typical ethnic minority commune in the mountainous northwest of Vietnam. What follows in this dissertation is an ethnography of what I describe as the ‘local state’: A co-authored arena in which local, national and trans-national actors and processes (governmental and non-governmental) come together to co-operate over and compete for power and resources. The research question I have sought to address is the following: How do the different projects of power at work in the northwest uplands of Vietnam come together in (and through) the local state?

### **Existing perspectives on people’s engagement with the state**

A great deal has been written about ethnic minority people’s agency and their engagement (or otherwise) with the state. I discern four prevalent perspectives in the existing literature from Vietnam and Southeast Asia generally, on the relationship between people and state power, which I will reflect upon first in order to better locate

my own theoretical approach. These four approaches are what I describe as a ‘benevolent developmental state’ view; an ‘overbearing state’ view; a ‘resistant periphery’ view; and a ‘collaborative periphery’ view. The first two focus upon the state and depict state power as being either progressive or malign in intent. The second two views concentrate upon the ‘agentive periphery’ itself, and discern local people’s agency as seeking either to resist, or draw in the state.

### *The benevolent developmental state view*

The first prevalent perspective is a state-centric ‘developmentalist’ view of ethnic minorities that is apparent in the discourse and programming of the government and of international agencies working for ethnic minority development and poverty reduction in Vietnam. According to this view the state always acts towards ends that are essentially paternalistic and benevolent in seeking to ‘develop’ upland regions. This view largely concentrates upon elite focused explanations in which there seems to be little space for ordinary people themselves as agents of change (see for example Rama 2008). Ethnic minority people are consequently rendered passive objects of development, with the principle agents the central government actors and their international partners who are working to uplift the ‘undeveloped’ other.

This developmentalist view is prominently articulated through the many state policy documents for development and the projects and programmes of international development agencies.<sup>3</sup> According to this view ethnic minority poverty and underdevelopment is an abject condition, objectively measureable and scientifically definable, which results from clearly discernible deficiencies either in the physical and geographical environment, such as the topography, climate or remoteness of settlements in the uplands, or of people themselves. Ethnic minority people are therefore perceived of as hamstrung by elements of their culture and living conditions which root them in an inert state, which they can only be liberated from by development and poverty reduction interventions. Narratives of ethnic minority

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<sup>3</sup> This view is perhaps best embodied in the landmark Vietnam Development Report 2000 ‘Attacking Poverty’, issued by the Government of Vietnam, World Bank and international donor supporters. This report set the path for poverty reduction in Vietnam for more than a decade.



‘dependence’ and ‘passivity’ are critical justifications for the state developmentalist interventions that result.

In critiquing this view I am not arguing that poverty does not exist, quite the opposite. Deprivation and inequality are well understood and intensely felt by upland people, for example in having insufficient food to last the whole year, in being unable to meet ceremonial and ritual commitments, or in being beholden to others in the community through debt or labour obligations. But state directed efforts at poverty reduction create a produced status of being ‘poor’ and this status appears integral to governmental attempts to bring development to the northern uplands, as it enables this development. These narratives of underdevelopment and the technocratic rendering of poverty that prevail are unreflexive and ethnographically uninformed, resulting as they do from an abstracted and stereotyped construction of ethnic minority people and poverty.<sup>4</sup> The narratives are themselves an effect of the very state prescribed welfare flows intended to address this condition of poverty and underdevelopment.

Suffice to say at this stage, poverty and underdevelopment as prescribed by the state are not necessarily abject as no one particularly wants them to disappear: state officials, government departments, the Communist Party and international donors are all ennobled through being seen to combat them, and those who are ascribed as poor or underdeveloped benefit from the resources that are offered. Poverty and underdevelopment as diagnosed in narrow technocratic and governmental terms appear integral to extending the reach of the state in the northern borderlands of Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

### *The overbearing state view*

The second perspective informs the critique of state-centric developmentalism I have described above. This ‘overbearing state’ view is represented in the work of a number of prominent Vietnam scholars. Carl Thayer highlights how the party state has an effective and well developed machinery for the repression of dissent, incorporating

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<sup>4</sup> See Taylor 2008 for a comprehensive critique of state developmentalism.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Gainsborough’s work effectively deconstructs the idea of state benevolence which underlies the developmental state idea I have described. He shows how elite politics in Vietnam is organised around loose coalitions and groups of interests that are mobilised by money and self-interest (Gainsborough 2010a).

monitoring and surveillance, harassment and intimidation, and arrest, detention, trial and sentencing (Thayer, 2012). Thuong Vu notes that what distinguishes communist one party 'dictatorships' (his term) from others is the manner in which the Party is able to extend control beyond the realm of politics, to include the economy, culture and social spheres too (Vu, 2012). This makes party control both 'broad', in terms of societal coverage, and 'deep', in terms of permeating many, if not all, aspects of social life. For these writers then, pervasive and effective state coercion and control is a pre-eminent factor in explaining how state authority in Vietnam is maintained, and state-society relations are regulated.

According to the overbearing state view, state formation at the periphery should be viewed in essentially pessimistic terms with state agents enacting a colonizing process and structuring the space available to local ethnic minority people, restricting the degree to which local agency can be exercised (Leepreecha et al. 2008, Duncan 2004, McCaskill and Kampe, 1997). Scholars in this tradition observe how governmental schemes are often characterized by inflexible and bureaucratic procedures and bureaucratic abstraction. Power is often concentrated in the hands of bureaucrats and state officials and the result is the production of indifference, arbitrariness and unintended consequences for those that live at the periphery of state power (Gupta 2012, Herzfeld 1992, Ferguson 1990).

Much of the theoretically engaged literature in this tradition is influenced by Foucault's ideas on 'biopower': the ability of the state to nurture life and render it productive for the greater good of the state itself (Foucault 1991). Biopower and the associated biopolitics that result are nothing less than "strategies for the governing of life" (Rabinow and Rose 2003:i). In step with Foucault's complex and nuanced theorizing and in particular his view that power is everywhere, and is not simply the preserve of sovereign authorities, writers such as Ferguson and Gupta are at pains to stress the contingent nature of bureaucratic power and emphasize how the governmentality they observe can never be totalizing and hegemonic. Nevertheless, the outcomes they describe usually involve the indiscriminate destruction of local understandings, statuses and strategies at the periphery.

Some of James Scott's work too is notable for the contribution it makes to the overbearing state view. In his classic work *Seeing Like a State* he presents a bleak view of the prospects for human progress under 'high modernist' and totalizing state development schemes, socialist ones in particular (Scott 1998). Scott highlights how the state has attempted to regulate many domains of everyday life, from scientific forestry, to rural land use planning and urban development. These schemes attempted to simplify, homogenise and render legible complex social realities, in the process forcing local people to adopt ever more covert forms of action outside of state development processes.

### *The 'resistant periphery' view*

This brings us on to the third approach, which I shall call the 'resistant periphery' view. Writers on the state in Vietnam have challenged dystopian views of the possibility of agency in the face of state power, and shown its limits. Ben Kerkvliet has highlighted the challenges to the state 'from below' that took place during the state socialist period, through the everyday actions of ordinary cadre and local farmers (Kerkvliet 2005a).<sup>6</sup> Kerkvliet's work shows how the state's schemes for agricultural collectivization were resisted and reworked and eventually led to changes in national policy. Ken MacLean has written about the often ad hoc and contingent way that state socialism evolved, with the large scale public works schemes launched in the mid 1950's to 'build socialism' in fact becoming ongoing areas of conflict, both within the government machine, and with the populace. MacLean's work has highlighted a vast unexplored grey area between the forced compliance of the peasantry with state schemes, and their resistance to these schemes (Maclean, 2007). And Rupert Friederichsen has discussed the incomplete nature of much policy implementation and the local adaptation of policies by northern ethnic minorities in Vietnam (Friederichsen 2012, see also McElwee 2004 on the incompleteness of policy implementation).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See also Chi, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> The disjuncture between state ambition and the reality of state practice is a critical element in Joel Migdal's classic 'state in society' view (Migdal, 2001) whereby the ideal typical role of the state can never be fulfilled. Instead, there is significant competition between institutions of the state which limits the ability of the state to extend its mandate in a coherent way. His model is one of state weakness, whereby central state projects are always renegotiated and transformed in the process of state practice.

In Vietnam this tradition is also embodied in strong ethnographic work with ethnic minority people, which finds that these local and ‘peripheral’ grassroots actors have their own standards, resources, dignity and power. People of the periphery do not wait to be uplifted by state aid, and are not passive, colonized and reproduced in straightforward ways by state processes and categories. Notable work in this regard includes Turner (2012), Michaud (2012) and Hanh (2008) on the Hmông ethnic group, Anderson (2007) on the Nùng, Sikor (2004) on the Black Thái and Taylor (2007a) on the Khmer. These scholars recognize that the state is a colonizing entity, but are sceptical about the determining power of the state in realizing statist developmental visions.

James Scott’s (2009) recent work on the *Art of Not Being Governed* perhaps takes this ‘resistant periphery’ approach to its furthest extreme, as he characterizes the people of the pre-modern Southeast Asian uplands as state evaders, demonstrating a capacity to avoid colonization through deploying agentive strategies independent of an overbearing state. Scott’s position is open to critique on the grounds that it romanticizes ethnic minorities in the pre-modern period, and ignores the degree to which ethnic minority people have always been engaged with state building processes, in often complicated and contradictory ways. Scott’s state evasion premise also underplays the degree to which governance is actually desired on the periphery, a critique which is also applicable to some other resistant periphery advocates (Turner 2012, Bonnin and Turner 2012).

In a seminal article deconstructing resistance studies, Sherry Ortner (1995) argued that there are complex articulations and disarticulations that always take place between the dominant and dominated, and that the dominated may draw on aspects of the dominant culture to criticize their own world and the situation of domination. She pointed out that dominated groups are never homogenous, but rather are “divided by age, gender, status, and other forms of difference” which will give them “different, even opposed, but still legitimate, perspectives on the situation” (Ortner 1995:175). The framing of resistance that is prevalent in some ‘resistant periphery’ work is problematic as it projects a very one-dimensional view of agency, denying ethnic minority people in particular the complex, multi-faceted motivations we routinely ascribe to ourselves, or ‘modern’ others. This is particularly important in light of the ubiquitousness of the

state in the northern uplands today. As we shall see, the state's presence permeates all aspects of life in the region today through a routine and often banal presence in everyday activities. The state is increasingly hard to escape therefore, and correspondingly hard to 'resist'.

### *The 'collaborative periphery' view*

The final position that I discern in the scholarship on state and society relations in Southeast Asia generally, and state-ethnic minority relations in Vietnam in particular, is a 'collaborative periphery' view. In critiquing resistance studies Ortner advocates a need for an inventory of everyday forms of peasant collaboration, to balance the everyday forms of peasant resistance often talked about. She highlights how there is always a degree of ambivalence about resisting relationships of domination because "in a relationship of power, the dominant often has something to offer, and sometimes a great deal (though always of course at the price of continuing in power)" (Ortner 1995:175). Resistance, then, is just one amongst many strategies open to ethnic minority people in the northern uplands, and currently perhaps not even the most important one.

The notion of state avoidance that runs as a theme through much of the resistance literature has been challenged regionally by the work of Shu-Yuan Yang (2005) and Andrew Walker (2012). Yang describes what she sees as a "theoretical preoccupation with resistance" (Yang 2005:490) prevalent in scholarship of the region, and emphasizes that rather than resisting the intrusion of the state and capitalist relations into their lives, the local ethnic minority people in Taiwan that she studied sought to actively engage with state processes. Walker too argues that peasant agency in rural Thailand is motivated by a wish to be engaged with the state to secure resources, and that "new 'political society' is energised by a fundamental desire to be productively connected to sources of power" (Walker, 2012:13). Walker argues that rural people today are more likely to act against 'discrimination' in not being able to access state benefits, rather than to 'exploitation' by the state. Walker's work therefore transcends the standoff between state and society that is notable in some of the resistant periphery literature, and he and Yang both show how people in the periphery are adept at engaging productively with political power.

Holly High too examines the complex and ambivalent ways that rural Lao people engage with the state and poverty reduction programmes, highlighting in particular how the state is often the focus for rural people's desires (High 2014). Like Yang and Walker she shows how engaging with the state is not only increasingly unavoidable, but also often desirable in the pursuit of development, broadly understood. Unlike Walker and Yang, who perhaps paint an overly benign view of state power, High emphasises the ambivalence inherent in the intimacy that local people have with the state, an entity they both fear and long for (High 2014). Her framing of state engagement in terms of intimacy and desire offers a promising avenue of escape from the unhelpful dichotomy of either resistance or collaboration that permeates the agentive periphery literature.

### **Political *metis*, 'projects at the margins of power', and the local state**

I am seeking answers to the puzzle of why and how ethnic minority people in the northwest of Vietnam participate in the nation state building project and in addressing this puzzle, I critically engage elements from the four schools of thought that I have just discussed. But these respective theoretical approaches do not always overcome restricting binaries or address the critical underlying questions necessary to further our understanding of state making in the ethnic minority periphery. First, constructing ethnic minority agency in exclusive terms of domination, resistance or collaboration underplays the complex ways in which local people engage with state power. A more nuanced conceptualisation of agency in the uplands is therefore required. The second issue relates to understandings of the state itself. In the existing literature, the state is often conceived of as a unitary and unproblematic given. The nature of the state and of state power in the uplands needs to be more thoroughly interrogated in order to better understand how political authority is constituted and exercised in the uplands. The third issue relates to the relationship between the state as a structuring process, and local ethnic minority people's agency. There are powerful governmental processes at work in the northern uplands and local actors cannot stand apart from them, even if they want to. Ethnic minority people clearly have agency, but agency has limits. At the same time, state processes seldom work out as intended. How then can we best characterize the interplay between state and agency in the northern borderlands?

In order to address these questions I adopt three conceptual pillars in my study. First, I conceive of agency in terms of political *metis*; second, of local people engaged in the pursuit of projects at the margins of power; and third I theorise the space in which politics takes place in the ethnic minority uplands as the ‘local state’.

In regard to the first pillar, a conceptual framing of agency needs to reflect the routine and everyday practices of people situated at the margins of wider governmental processes. Agency needs to capture the way in which people accumulate knowledge and experience in an iterative way to engage with and rework the governmental categories and technologies that are applied in the uplands. James Scott describes this capacity for improvisation and adaptation as *metis*: “a wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural and human environment” (Scott 1998:313). This notion of *metis* embodies both agentic learning and a politically ‘savvy’ negotiation of governmental processes. It captures well then the nature of post-socialist development in the northern uplands, as ethnic minority people negotiate in and around increasingly ubiquitous governmental processes and technologies. But in an important departure from Scott, who contends that state power crushes *metis*, I wish to show that in fact in the northwest uplands of Vietnam, *metis* flourishes within the governmental processes of the state, and indeed feeds off these very processes.

Jean Michaud notes how the Hmông people of northern Vietnam with whom he works are being “tactically selective about modernity” (Michaud 2012:2). This idea of selectivity fits well with a compelling framing of agency that Sherry Ortner offers, and which I adopt as my second conceptual pillar: of people engaged in “projects at the margins of power” (Ortner 2006). These ‘projects’ are pursued by both the powerful and the relatively powerless and are the “culturally constituted intentions, desires and goals” which form the end object of power (Ortner 2006:151). Ortner contends that social beings are always engaged in a large number of these projects and that there are a “multiplicity of ways in which these projects feed on as well as collide with one another” (Ortner 2006:191). These projects are sited in the ‘margins of power’ as they

operate in the shadow of larger governmental projects of the state, or of wider historical processes.<sup>8</sup>

Ethnic minority people in the uplands, both citizens and local government officials alike, exercise political *metis* in pursuing their projects of power. They negotiate their way around and through the prevalent attempts at governmental control of the party state. Local people exercise political agency, but only within the bounds of prevailing state categories and processes. Actors reproduce structures through their everyday practices, but as Bourdieu observed there are limits that restrict the scope they have to reinvent them (Bourdieu 1977).<sup>9</sup> Agency is also subject to structured relations of power and the affective relations that prevail in Vĩnh Thủy commune, which shape everyday social relations. These factors too are critical in understanding how political authority in the ethnic minority uplands is constituted and maintained on an everyday basis, and how the exercise of political agency has both possibilities and limits.

This leads on to my third conceptual pillar: the local state, which is the space in which these complex interactions take place. The local state itself is a product of the friction resulting from the coming together of various projects of power; embedded structural and affective relations; governmental designs; and the translocal flows and technologies which operate in the commune. The local state as a conceptual lens allows for the examination of the particular ways in which state power manifests in the local, and how local people engage with and rework power. I outline in detail how I conceive of the local state space below. Together, my three conceptual pillars offer insight on the critical questions I identified, of how ethnic minority people relate to and engage with the state; the nature of the state itself; and how to best characterise the relationship of state and agency. To restate my research question then: how do the different projects of power at work in the northern uplands of Vietnam come together in (and through) the local state?

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<sup>8</sup> Ortner's example is drawn from the Sherpa's of Nepal and their encounter with the Himalayan trekking industry (Ortner 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu theorized how actors simultaneously produce structures, and are produced by them through their everyday, habitual practice, resulting in what he describes as the *habitus*, "a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception" (Bourdieu 1977:86).



### **‘The state’ as a system, and an idea**

Before elaborating further on my conceptual framing of the local state it is necessary first to clarify what I understand the state to be. On one level the state refers to the ensemble of government and Communist Party institutions that exercise control over the territorial space of Vietnam today. We talk of state institutions in reference to very particular regulatory and official bodies: the office of the prime minister for example, or the taxation office. Similarly we can identify particular state practices, such as the issuance of laws, or the policing of territorial borders. The use of the term state here refers to distinct and identifiable governing bodies and practices and I refer throughout my dissertation to the ‘centre state’ in this context, as supra-local government and party institutions and actors (at the national, provincial and district levels) that attempt to assert authority and control over ethnic minority communes, villages and people through the manifestation of particular effects in the local.

Implicit in the use of the term ‘the state’ though is a less tangible, more abstract meaning. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot observes, “something happens out there that is more than government. The question is what?” (Trouillot 2001:127). In an important contribution from the late 1970s Philip Abrams distinguished between the ‘state system’ and a ‘state idea’, which underpins political power (Abrams 1977). Abrams argued that the idea of the state promotes an illusory common interest in society, a general interest that he felt doesn’t exist, but which is promoted through the idea of the state to paper over the cracks of class conflict. For Abrams the state is a set of practices that legitimize politically organised subjection, through the “straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation (scrutiny) and dictate the terms of knowledge” (Abrams 1977:62).

Abrams, Gramsci (1971) and others show how the state idea underpins the functioning of government through granting ideational legitimacy to the routine operation of political power. As well as functioning bureaucratic apparatuses then, states are powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production and it is the underlying imaginative and symbolic devices that are produced in the name of the state that give the notion of the state power and potency (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). The deployment of state technologies, rituals, symbols and bureaucratic practices are all part of what Foucault

describes as the ‘normalising’ techniques of governance, the attempt to “turn unruly reality into something amenable to the application of instrumental calculation” (Finlayson and Martin 2006:169).

Trouillot identifies what he describes as four critical ‘effects’ that are integral to this process of establishing the state idea (Trouillot 2001). The first is an isolation effect, which is the production of atomized, individualized subjects largely separated from any previous communal or social attachments. Second is an identification effect: realigning these atomized subjects into collectives through which people can recognise themselves. Third is a legibility effect: the production of both language and knowledge for governance through which to classify and regulate collectivities. And fourth is a spatialisation effect: the production of boundaries and jurisdictions that order and regulate these collectives (Trouillot 2001:126). These four state effects are apparent in the schemes for social improvement that many regimes produced in the twentieth century, schemes intended to order subjects in particular ways amenable to rule. These effects have also been critical to the process of state building in the northwestern uplands of Vietnam.

Importantly, state ideas are imagined in multiple sites and by multiple actors, not least by ordinary people who make the state idea real through their routine and everyday practices (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Taussig 1997). Indeed Michael Taussig asserts that the fantasies of those at the margins, about the centre, are what are important to the state idea, as these fantasies fuel what he describes as the ‘fetishism’ of the state that underlies state power. Fantasy and desire are integral in the construction of the idea of the state then too: the hopes, dreams and desires for betterment that crystallise around the state idea, in often intangible but very powerful ways (Navaro-Yashin 2002, High 2014).

In summary, there is a state system of bureaucratic institutions, actors and practices, but ‘the state’ is also a powerful idea (or set of ideas), and these ideas are critical in projecting power and validating the actions of institutions and actors of the state system, at different levels. The state system is rendered material through state effects, which are the technological and bureaucratic practices through which political participation takes place, power is exercised, and state ideas made real. But state ideas

are also made real through less tangible but no less powerful means: through the hopes, dreams and desires that form around the notion of the state and the future promise of development that it offers, which give authority and power to political regimes in their claims to rule. The state in both its local and supra-local embodiments then is a space in which claims to rule are made and political power is formed, contested and remade. The ability of state actors and institutions to act, and to exercise power, stems from the potency of state ideas and the everyday participation of people in manifesting state effects.<sup>10</sup>

### **The local state: an arena of political contestation and the exercise of power**

State imaginaries and state effects manifest in a variety of spatial and scalar locations (Trouillot 2001; Navarro-Yashin 2002) but appear particularly clearly in ‘the local’: the point at which governmental practices and projects of power intersect in very visible and tangible ways. In my study I set out to examine ethnographically how state effects are manifested and the state idea imagined in the very particular, localized context in which northwestern upland ethnic minority people live. The commune level (*xã*) is the lowest official level of government in rural areas in Vietnam and is the point at which local people most regularly interact with everyday government processes.<sup>11</sup> I therefore selected the commune level as the site for my research, a ‘local state’ space in which both the state idea and state effects are generated, and where the politics that surrounds them is apparent.

I theorise the local state as an arena in which distinct clusters of actors, institutions and practices operate. I describe these clusters as vectors. They come together in the local

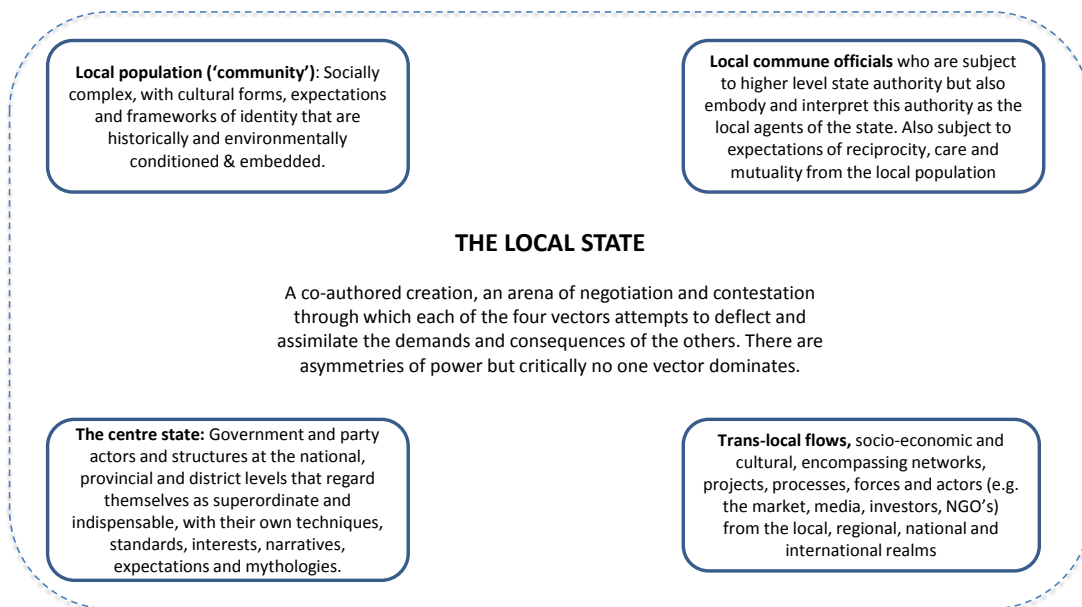
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<sup>10</sup> In Vietnamese, the term *nhà nước* best reflects the notion of the state as an ensemble of government institutions and practices which embody political power and authority, distinct from any one particular institution or body. Lenin’s classic work on ‘State and Revolution’ is thus commonly translated as *nhà nước và cách mạng*. In common usage *nhà nước* is distinct from *chính phủ*, which is used to refer to government more narrowly, and from *quốc gia*, the nation, though here again state and nation are often entangled and used (by the Vietnam Communist Party in particular) in ways to express complex notions of community, belonging, authority and power. There is continuing scholarly debate over what Vietnamese term best encapsulates the complex meanings of ‘the state’ discussed here (see for example the 2014 discussion thread in the Vietnam Studies Group, ‘*nhà nước* or *quốc gia*’: [https://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist\\_2014/Thread%20%2310%20State%20=%20nh%E0%20nu\\_c%20or%20qu\\_c%20gia.htm](https://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist_2014/Thread%20%2310%20State%20=%20nh%E0%20nu_c%20or%20qu_c%20gia.htm)).

<sup>11</sup> Communes in northern Vietnam are also often quite diverse, as they are made up of clusters of villages (*làng, thôn*), which are often inhabited by different ethnic groups.

state space to cooperate and compete over ideas of wellbeing, modernity and development. The local state is also the space where rival projects for the accumulation of material assets and resources intersect and compete. Critically local people, as officials and citizens, exercise political *metis* in the local state space in pursuit of their projects of power. In the process they also create, contest and remake the state idea. The four vectors of the local state that I identify are the centre state; local officials; local people; and a constellation of translocal actors, institutions and processes which I label as ‘translocal flows’. My conceptual model of the local state through which I frame my enquiry is presented diagrammatically in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.1: Conceptual model of the local state**



The first of the four vectors, the ‘centre state’, is evoked locally through the technologies and effects of higher-level actors and institutions of the Party, mass organisations and government that span national, provincial and district levels. These structures and agents regard themselves as superordinate in the system and thus indispensable to the process of governing. They have their own techniques, standards, narratives and regimes of truth which they seek to project through the modern techniques of government, for example through promulgating policies and programmes, laws, campaigns and projects. Centre state agents are active in the local state arena through, for example, supervision visits and training exercises. But the centre state largely manifests in the local through the projection and enforcement of the

four critical state effects that Trouillot describes, of isolation, identification, legibility and spatialisation. These are projected through the every day modes and methods of governing that take place in the local state space. The centre state is not homogenous and is characterised as much by competition and conflict between state agencies as cooperation.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, cumulatively the governmental processes of the centre state that manifest in the uplands are part of a historical continuum that sets out to regulate behaviour and foster life in a biopolitical manner, nurturing the populace as pliant and productive citizens of a wider national polity.

The second vector is the local population, or ‘community’. Local populations are socially complex with distinct cultural forms and frameworks of identity. Local communities are historically embedded and are the product of particular environmental conditions. As with the centre state, the ‘community’ is far from a unitary entity: communities in my field site and throughout the northwestern Vietnam region are riven with social and economic divisions and with gradations in the ability to command government resources, assets such as land, and in being able to exercise political power. Nevertheless the local population warrants being identified as a distinct vector within the local state as the local population sets out to exercise political *metis* in common ways (though with differentiated success) in engaging with other vectors in the local state arena. The community also has shared moral economy expectations of reciprocity and care, towards each other and on the part of the government in dealing with local people. The local community also shares common imaginaries of the state, despite their many differences.

The third vector straddles the first two, but is distinct: that of local (commune and village level) party and government officials. They are subject to higher-level state authority and indeed embody state power through their persons, as the local representatives and executors of state power. In the northwestern uplands local officials have always been important in enacting the projects of incorporation and control of the region, by the centre. They continue to play this role, as well as being the

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<sup>12</sup> Ken Maclean highlights how contestation and conflict between branches of the Party, government ministries and departments has been a significant feature of the Vietnamese state since state socialist times (MacLean 2013). I witnessed this contestation and its paralysing effects upon government at close quarters as an embedded government adviser in Hanoi from 2008-2012.

architects and beneficiaries of personalised and lineage based projects of accumulation, which are played out through the local state. Local officials though are also embedded in the local population, and are prominent members of the ‘community’ which they serve. They are therefore subject to powerful ties of kinship, affect, reciprocity and obligation that shape their own individual projects of power.<sup>13</sup>

The final vector is that of the translocal institutions, flows and practices that impinge upon and influence the locality. This vector includes intangible but nevertheless powerful socio-economic and cultural processes that manifest through television and the media; through non-governmental practices and discourses; and through translocal narratives and practices. This vector also encompasses the wider networks in which local people participate through their market interactions and their engagements with outside investors, and the operation of international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through the medium of development ‘projects’ in particular.

All of the actors and institutions represented in the four vectors of the model have distinct narratives and mythologies of their own. All are socially complex, and historically and environmentally embedded, with their own cultural forms, expectations and frameworks of understanding and being. The vectors themselves are not necessarily homogenous, with significant conflict taking place between local officials, between local groups in the community, and between institutions of the centre state. Crucially though, the vectors come together around governmental processes in the local state space and interact through shared narratives and practices. Different vectors may at times share goals and aspirations around these governmental processes and cooperate in pursuit of their projects of power, or they may compete and be in conflict at different times, and in different local state spaces. But there is a shared set of foundational beliefs and vocabulary, a cultural and political intimacy that makes interaction possible.

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<sup>13</sup> There is an extensive literature on the ambivalent positioning of local officials and the complex role they play in mediating state and local designs for modernisation and development. See for example Sikor 2004 for a discussion of Black Thái officials in northern Vietnam; David Koh for the important role local officials play in the urban context as a familiar presence through which the party state can “reach right into homes” (Koh, 2004:203); and in the Chinese context, Luigi Tomba’s (2014) work which similarly shows the importance of local neighbourhood officials in the everyday regulation of the urban citizenry, and their important role in cementing regime legitimacy.

The local state is an intimate arena in which politics is conducted, but it is not a neutral or a-political site of practice. Rather, the local state is an unevenly contoured landscape of power marked by struggle (Jessop 2008).<sup>14</sup> Historically entrenched patterns of privilege and power grant particular actors strategic advantages in pursuing their own projects of power, and advantages too in shaping the future terrain of the local state. But there are no pre-determined outcomes. The local state is ultimately a co-authored arena: a place in which local agency is exercised in the context of structurally determined relations of power. Through the local state the interests and demands of the four distinct but overlapping vectors are struggled over, contested, negotiated and made anew.

The local state doesn't exist independently of these political processes of conflict and cooperation. Rather it is the syncretic product of competing projects of power. Both its ideational form and materiality lie in the coming together of actors and processes from each of the four vectors I have described. The friction that results generates outcomes often very different to those intended by any one of these clusters of actors. All attempt to deflect and divert the projects of others whilst simultaneously attempting to establish the primacy of their own and what usually results are outcomes which are not the dominant project of any one vector in the model. In the chapters that follow I explore the coming together in the local state arena of local, national and translocal projects of power. These coalesce around prevalent governmental processes and technologies in the commune and I examine the political processes and outcomes that result.

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Jessop's work has been important in helping me frame my ideas about the local state. Jessop adopts what he describes as a 'strategic relational' approach to the state, whereby social and political change occurs through strategic interactions as people and group's strategies collide with and impinge upon the structured terrain within which they are formulated (Jessop 2008). Jessop shows us that the state is a strategic site traversed by (in his terms) class struggles, a dynamic and constantly unfolding system with no fixed boundaries or pre-given unity. There is no pre-determined outcome to these processes of struggle he contends, neither reproduction of the system or its demise. Rather social and political change is contingent upon institutional, historical and strategic conditions at particular moments (Jessop 2008). Jessop shows us that the state as the site for these encounters is 'strategically selective' in that it is not a level playing field for social interaction. Instead the state is 'unevenly contoured' and thus favours particular strategies and class interests (and actors) over others.

## Research Methods

In pursuing an ethnographic approach to the study of the local state I set out to follow the lead of Clifford Geertz, whose interpretative methodology he described as “thick description” or “constructions of other people’s constructions of what they are up to” (Geertz 1973:3). The commune in which I lived and worked I call Vĩnh Thủy (a pseudonym), in the district of Cao Xuyên.<sup>15</sup> I was able to conduct my fieldwork in Vĩnh Thủy through the kind support of SEED, a non-governmental organisation (NGO).<sup>16</sup> SEED introduced me to the commune authorities and helped me to secure permission to conduct my research through the provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (*sở Nông nghiệp và Phát triển nông thôn tỉnh Lào Cai*). I had initially planned to spend six months living in Vĩnh Thủy but, as I quickly discovered, authorities in Vietnam are extremely sensitive about allowing foreign researchers to live in border communes. It therefore took longer than anticipated to secure permission from the district and provincial authorities for my commune residence. This meant that I spent the first two months of my six-month visa visiting Vĩnh Thủy (and other communes in the province) from a base in Lào Cai City.<sup>17</sup>

Once permission to live in the commune was granted I took up residence in the house of the Hmông chairman of the commune People’s Committee, Mr. Võ Văn Bình. This arrangement was the only way the authorities would grant me permission to conduct my research in the commune but for my purposes, in terms of understanding how the politics of the local state works and the overlap between the official and community roles of ethnic minority cadre like Mr. Bình, my residence in his house was ideal. Much commune and community business took place away from the commune office,

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<sup>15</sup> The name of the commune, district and all of the names of my informants are pseudonyms. All of the people with whom I worked were happy for me to use their real names in my study, but some of the information they provided which I use in the subsequent chapters was sensitive and, after discussion with some of my principal informants, I decided that it was best to protect their identity through disguising the commune location and people’s real names.

<sup>16</sup> SEED too is a pseudonym.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to my six months fieldwork in Vĩnh Thủy and northern Vietnam, conducted in the second half of 2013, I visited Vietnam regularly throughout my PhD candidature. I visited every six months for a month or more in 2012, 2014 and 2015 and spent this time conducting interviews in Hanoi, Lào Cai and travelling throughout the north. During this time I also visited ethnic minority communes and communities in different parts of the country too, which gave me an important comparative perspective on the wider governmental project for ethnic minorities in Vietnam, and local people’s responses.



in the sitting room of Mr. Bình's house, in the early morning and late at night, and I was therefore ideally placed to observe an important site of local state politics.

I often started my day in the commune in the only noodle shop, to eat a breakfast of *phở bò* (beef noodle soup). I would chat with the proprietor and with local officials, and well-to-do residents of the commune who would also eat their breakfast there. I also often ate breakfast with the commune policeman, whose job it was to keep track of my activities, and this routine helped to keep him at ease over my research activities. The noodle shop was an ideal place in which to hear what was going on that day, who would be visiting the commune, and what local government work was scheduled. It was also a wonderful place to hear the latest commune gossip, and I would often sit in the noodle shop at night too, drinking beer or the local spirits brewed from corn (*rượu ngô*) and chatting with whoever was there.

After breakfast, if I had no specific activities planned, I would usually go to sit in the commune office. This was a large two-storey building in the centre of the commune where local party and government officials spent most of their day. There was a wooden furniture set in the lobby where officials and visiting residents would smoke and drink tea together, and I would often sit there for hours, talking with whichever officials and commune residents were there. The lobby was also strategically positioned next to the main meeting room and I was therefore also able to observe all of the official commune events that took place there.

In the afternoons, evenings and weekends I would visit the outlying villages of the commune, initially visiting people I had met in the central village or at the commune office, and expanding my network through meeting and talking with their friends, relatives and acquaintances. In this way I quickly built up a wide network of contacts and came to rely in particular on a dozen or so key informants in different villages who were particularly knowledgeable and open in discussing commune and village politics. It was to this network that I would go to discuss and validate things that I had heard, or to request introductions to other knowledgeable people whom I could talk to about aspects of village life or local politics that interested me.

As local government officials and their practices were of particular interest to my research, I spent a lot of time observing meetings, training sessions and other official commune events. I also often accompanied Mr. Bình and other officials on their visits to commune villages. Consequently my position in the commune was unclear to some local residents in the early weeks of my research. Despite explaining at length to everyone with whom I talked that I was a researcher from an Australian university, and was neither attached to the government, or to the NGO who had supported my resident application, both officials and local residents inevitably had expectations of me. After the first month of visiting the commune however local people saw that I wasn't just a casual visitor and more importantly, that I wasn't the vanguard for a larger evaluation or planning mission that was coming for a major development scheme or project.

To their credit local people hid from me any disappointment they might have felt that I wasn't the bearer of project largesse, and continued to generously spend time talking to me and educating me in commune matters. Local people soon stopped asking me what I was doing there, and my conversations no longer had to be prefaced with a long explanation that I wasn't in fact bringing a project, building a road, or evaluating any of the numerous government and donor schemes taking place in the commune. I like to think that my hapless attempts at negotiating the steep slopes of the commune on my motorbike, my unsuitable footwear and perhaps most importantly, my work-in-progress Vietnamese language all served to reassure local people that I was nothing more than I said I was: an inquisitive observer keen to learn about the commune from them.<sup>18</sup>

Vĩnh Thủy is a polyglot community reflecting the mosaic of ethnicities of the people living there. For much of my time spent in the commune I had a Vietnamese research assistant who stayed with me during weekdays, helping me to conduct interviews and transcribing the interviews that I taped. Most of the residents of the central villages in the commune spoke Vietnamese well, and most of the Nùng and Dao men throughout

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<sup>18</sup> Soon after I began visiting the commune there was a period of intense rain that turned the commune's paths into thick rivers of mud. I had thick walking boots but hadn't anticipated the difficulties involved in buying size eleven gumboots in Vietnam. I scoured the local markets in Lào Cai and Hanoi but had no success and would therefore often turn up in villages with my trousers caked in mud up to the knees. This was always a source of great amusement to local people, and a good conversational opener during the early weeks of fieldwork.

the commune could speak and understand Vietnamese to a reasonable degree. Young people in the commune above primary school age could also converse confidently in Vietnamese. But amongst Hmông people, and Hmông women and old people in particular, conversing in Vietnamese was a challenge. I therefore sometimes brought along a Hmông friend to help me with my conversations in Hmông villages. Having a Hmông assistant meant interviewees were more at ease talking about sensitive topics than they would have been had my Vietnamese research assistant been in attendance. But my Hmông friend was also from outside the commune and was a confident and cosmopolitan woman and this also shaped the nature of the conversations I had with village residents, who were always curious to compare aspects of life in the commune with the experiences of my friend in her home district, which was more affluent and connected than Vĩnh Thủy.

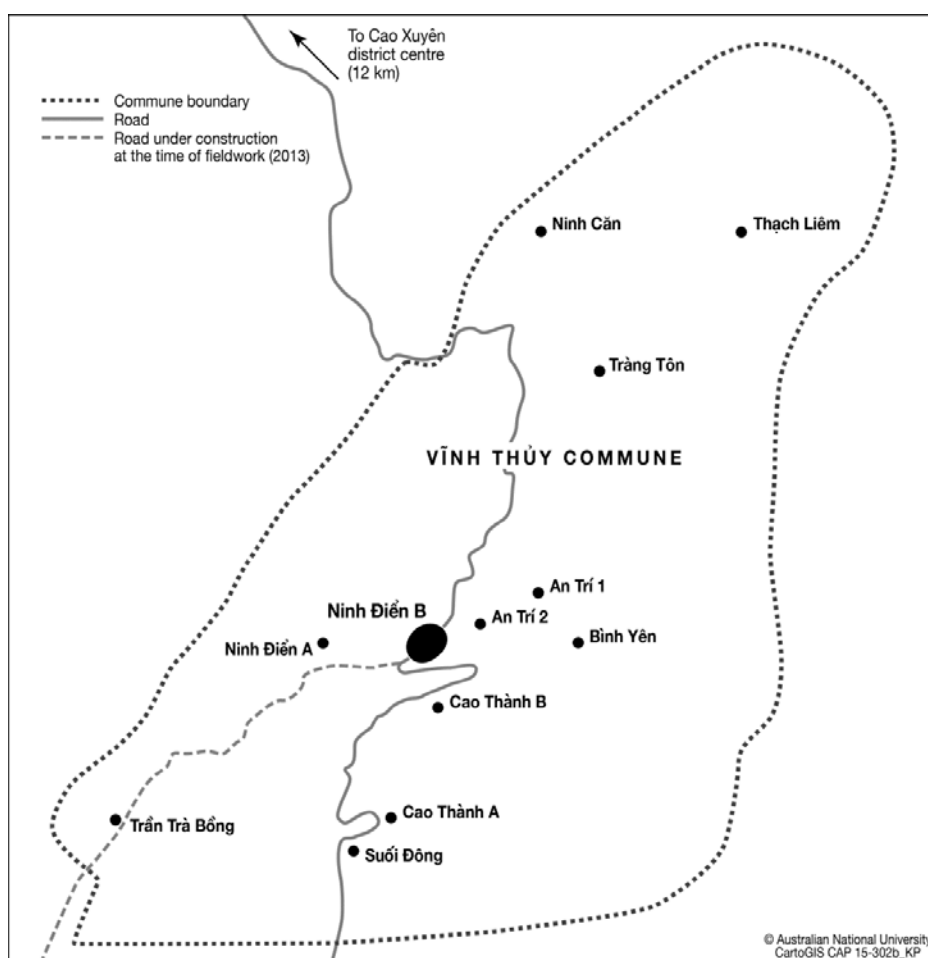
### **The research site: Vĩnh Thủy commune**

Vĩnh Thủy commune is in Cao Xuyên district, a mountainous district of Lào Cai province that borders China (See Map 1). The district has an important border gate with China where agricultural commodities from northern Vietnam cross into Honghe Autonomous Prefecture in China's Yunnan province. Production in the region is almost exclusively agriculture based, with corn the primary crop in the north of the district. The district's more southern communes are more densely populated and lie at lower altitudes, and there is consequently more diversity in crop production: tea, cassava, rice and some pineapple is produced. A large part of the district's agricultural production goes to China, with hybrid corn in particular trucked in large quantities across the border, where it is processed into feed for the livestock industry.

**Map 1: The Northwest of Vietnam**



## Map 2: Vĩnh Thủy Commune



**Table 1.1: Vĩnh Thủy commune information**

Village name	Distance from commune centre	Resident ethnic groups	Village population 2013 (households & people)
Ninh Điển B	Commune centre	Hmông & Nùng (majority), Kinh, Tày, Pa'Si, Tu'Si.	62 (279)
Ninh Điển A	1 km.	Hmông (majority), Tu'Si.	58 (298)
An Trí 2	1 km.	Nùng	40 (169)
An Trí 1	1.5 km.	Nùng	58 (259)
Bình Yên	2 km.	Hmông	42 (206)
Cao Thành B	2.5 km.	Hmông	33 (164)
Cao Thành A	4 km.	Hmông	37 (191)
Suối Đông	4.5 km.	Hmông (majority), Tu'Si.	41 (193)
Tràng Tôn	5 km.	Nùng (majority), Dao.	84 (406)
Ninh Căn	6 km.	Dao	64 (280)
Trần Trà Bồng	6 km.	Dao	37 (208)
Thạch Liêm	7 km.	Nùng	49 (224)
		Total commune population (2013)	605 households 2877 people

Source: Population figures from the official commune record, 2013. Village distances are accepted approximations used by commune officials.

Vĩnh Thủy commune itself is a typically sized commune for the far north of Vietnam. The commune has about 600 households and nearly 3000 people, with an average household size of just over five people. The centre of the commune sits at 1700 metres, in a high mountain valley with spectacular views across to the neighbouring district and the mountains of China beyond (see Photo 1.3). The commune is connected to the district town of Cao Xuyên, twelve kilometres away, by a single lane tarmac road, which is in poor condition. There is also a rudimentary unpaved road from the commune centre to the national highway running between the district centre and the provincial capital of Lào Cai City. This road was being upgraded under a large World Bank project at the time of my fieldwork in the second half of 2013 and once completed, the rehabilitated road significantly reduced the travel time from the commune to Lào Cai City and beyond.

Households in the commune are primarily engaged in growing corn: hybrid varieties for sale and local varieties for feeding their own livestock and for making alcohol and local foods. Commune households also grow limited amounts of rice for household consumption. Rice production takes place in the terraced central valley of the commune, with corn grown throughout the rest of the commune's steeply sloping agricultural land (see Photo 1.4). There is some production of 'sán cù' rice, a specialised rice variety that fetches a high price in markets in Lào Cai and Hanoi. Tea production is also starting in the commune and there have been experiments with tobacco and vegetable production for the market in the recent past. Vĩnh Thủy is unquestionably a poor commune and is recognised by the government as such, with nearly three quarters of the commune population classified as being poor in 2013.

The commune became an important administrative centre during Vietnam's border conflict with China in 1979. Following the invasion by Chinese troops and their occupation of northern border regions of Lào Cai province, the district government was relocated to Vĩnh Thủy. The commune's position was recognized at the time as highly strategic as it lies in the centre of the district but is also well protected because of its position high in the mountains. As a result, the district government's key functions and offices were based in the commune for ten years between 1979 – 1989, along with two important schools: the district ethnic minority boarding school (*trường Phổ thông Dân tộc Nội trú*) at which the children of the district's Communist Party

elite are educated, and the centre for continuing education (*Trung tâm Giáo dục Thường xuyên*), a vocational training centre where future party cadre receive their political education.<sup>19</sup>

Consequently many future leaders of the district spent their formative years in the commune, and the commune is also well known to important provincial officials, who visited and spent time there during the conflict with China. A number of current commune officials actually moved to the commune during this period to receive their cadre training and never left and the legacy of the period is still apparent in the centre of the commune, where old government buildings have been occupied by residents as houses even as they slowly fall into ruin. The conflict with China and the relocation of the district government to Vĩnh Thủy commune remains a significant historical marker for many people in the commune.

Vĩnh Thủy is made up of twelve villages and has seven different ethnic groups (see Table 1.1). The two largest ethnic groups are the Hmông and the Nùng, each of which has 40% of the commune population. The Dao ethnic minority makes up 10% of the population, and the remaining 10% is made up of Kinh, Tay, Pa'Si and Tu'Si people (also known as the Bó Y). The villages are primarily ethnically based, though the central village, Ninh Điền B, has residents from each of the seven different ethnic groups. The largest village, Tràng Tôn, is a Nùng village but also has a significant Dao population and there are a handful of ethnic Pa'Si, Tu'Si, Tay and Kinh people living in some of the commune's villages.

The villages Ninh Điền B, Cao Thành B, Cao Thành A and Suối Đông all lie along the main single lane paved road to the district town which dissects the commune and are therefore accessible all year round. An Trí 2 village is off this main road but very close, and so can be considered accessible, whilst Ninh Điền A and Trần Trà Bồng

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<sup>19</sup> Both of these schools were relocated back to the district town in 1989, along with the other branches of the district administration. They now occupy a prominent site in the centre of the district town, and continue to play an important role in educating and training the children of ethnic minority cadre in the district. Many future leaders who missed out on their education during the years following the Chinese invasion subsequently attended political training and education at the vocational school in the 1990's, and *trường Phổ thông Dân tộc Nội trú* today includes three schools for boarders: a nursery school, primary school and secondary school (which is national standard).

villages are situated on the road that was being rehabilitated by the World Bank project so became accessible all the year round, via a paved road. Bình Yên village also had the track leading up to the village upgraded to a concrete all weather surface during my fieldwork, under the government's flagship 'New Rural' programme. The other villages are all currently accessible only via a dirt path, and so remain inaccessible to vehicles during the wet season.

The only two-storey houses in the commune are located along the main street of the central village of Ninh Điền B, and this street is also the only place in the commune with established shops.<sup>20</sup> There are three small provision stores (one of which is also the only noodle shop), two small shops selling second hand mobile phones, two motorbike repair shops and a small post office. There are also three small storehouses along the street, run by local wholesalers, where farmers can bring their corn to sell after harvesting.

At the end of the street on a small hill is the two-storey commune government office, which is the biggest and grandest building in Vĩnh Thủy. This is the administrative centre of the commune, where both commune people's committee officials and party officials work. It is also the main meeting centre in the commune and the place where all administrative and bureaucratic processes are dealt with. Adjacent to the commune office is a single storey block of rooms left over from the wartime operation of the district government in Vĩnh Thủy. These rooms are now a dormitory block for the administrative and technical staff that live outside the commune, but who lodge there during the week and travel home at the weekends. The small commune medical post is also located next to the commune office, and also occupies a former district government building (see Photo 1.6).

Ninh Điền B village is the site for the main weekly public commune event: the market held every Thursday morning (see Photo's 1.7 and 1.8). This is an important occasion for all commune residents, as they come to buy household goods, sell farm produce and exchange gossip and information. Traders in the market are a mix of itinerant traders from the district selling fruit, cheap manufactured goods, clothes, household

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<sup>20</sup> There was something of a building boom going on along this main street in 2013, with three large, two story-houses being built, to supplement the two existing two-storey houses.



utensils and other hardware from China, and local residents selling cooked goods, sugar cane, pigs, chickens and other agricultural produce. The location of the market, shops and governmental services in Ninh Điền B village cements the domination of the central village in the social, commercial and political life of the commune.

The commune has a secondary school (up to year nine), after which students are required to go to one of the three high schools in the district to continue their education. The main primary school in the centre of the commune is a national standard school, well staffed and well resourced with books and equipment. It is also located in Ninh Điền B village and serves the four central villages (Ninh Điền B, Ninh Điền A, An Trí 1 and An Trí 2). Primary age children in the other villages must attend the satellite schools in their villages, where teachers from the central primary school come to conduct lessons every day on a rotational basis. These satellite school buildings are much more rudimentary and, in the case of two of the schools, have no electricity. Teachers from the commune centre are therefore often reluctant to spend the night in these villages so that lessons can start on time in the morning. Instead, children must wait for the teachers to arrive by motorbike. Because of the poor state of the commune roads though, the satellite schools are often inaccessible when it rains, in which case the teachers don't come at all.

Young children in these peripheral villages are much more likely to speak an ethnic minority language (Nùng or Hmông) rather than Vietnamese, but none of the teachers can speak more than a few words of these languages as they are all ethnically Kinh or Tay. A woman in Cao Thành A village, with three children, explained how the children in the village learn: "When they first go to the school they don't really understand, but we send them anyway. After two to three years they start to understand Vietnamese better and by the time they're ten years old they can speak some Vietnamese too". Children in the central villages are also ethnic minorities, but they are exposed to the Kinh language much more regularly and are consequently more comfortable using it.

## **The chapters that follow**

In this final section of the Introduction I will briefly outline the contents of the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 locates attempts at governing the northwestern uplands in historical perspective. The chapter highlights important continuities between colonial, postcolonial, socialist and post socialist eras, in the construction of governmental categories of rule and in the attempt to co-opt local ethnic minority elites into political projects for control of the region. Ethnic classification as a governmental project is discussed and parallels are drawn with the modern governmental project of classifying people as ‘poor’, as both ethnicity and the poor are socially constructed and heavily incentivised categories. The chapter discusses how ethnic minority elites in the region have adeptly deployed *metis* in working within these central attempts to manage the uplands. Local elites have pursued their own projects of power alongside central attempts to co-opt them, and have similarly skilfully reworked and contorted the ethnic classification process for their own ends. From the late 1990s onwards a new era of government ‘munificence’ was apparent in the uplands, as significant resources were directed towards poverty reduction and development of the state periphery, increasing the reach of the centre state. The chapter concludes by discussing how the centre state imagines the northwestern borderlands today as an ‘ethnic state’: a stable region in which people and natural resources are increasingly integrated into the nation state under the aegis of ethnic minority elites.

Chapter 3 discusses the governance mechanisms through which centre state planners attempt to make their ethnic state imaginary real in the domain of the local state in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Ethnic harmony in the borderlands is a central concern of the centre state and is managed through the careful regulation of political office between different ethnic groups. This mechanism is used, through the skilful deployment of *metis*, by the two dominant family lineages in the commune to consolidate and perpetuate their control of commune politics and the local party state structure, in pursuit of their projects of power. The chapter describes how the carefully managed façade of harmony is occasionally ruptured through political contestation in the local state space, and how family lineage in fact trumps ethnicity when it comes to the distribution of patronage and state resources. Inequality and partial exclusion from political power results for some in the commune, though concepts of obligation,

reciprocity and duty to the wider community ensures that even the relatively disenfranchised remain engaged with state power. The primacy of elite lineages in the commune is perpetuated by the system of recruitment of local officials, which results in a closed circuit of power where only those with existing connections to local state officials are able to secure office. The local ethnic state that results is quite different then, to that imagined by centre state planners. It is deeply embedded in local structures of power and local conceptions of moral economy and both feeds off, and transforms, the governmental mechanisms of the centre state.

Chapter 4 examines the bureaucratic technologies and everyday rituals of state enacted in the local state space, through which government officials attempt to establish an apparatus for control of Vĩnh Thủy commune. State ceremonies and celebrations, meetings, training events, documents, party discipline and education are all important mediums through which the centre state attempts to extend and maintain political control. Local officials are key agents in creating and sustaining this bureaucratic apparatus and enacting local state rituals and effects: they are the intermediaries and mediators of centre state processes and embody state power in their persons. At the same time they deploy *metis* in pursuit of local projects of power, which once again ensures that outcomes are quite different to those originally intended. A pervasive cynicism about the everyday operation of government is apparent amongst local people in Vĩnh Thủy but even as local people cynically deconstruct state power, they recreate it through their everyday participation in the rituals and practices of government, and through their dreams and desires for betterment, which crystallise around ideas of state in the local state space. These hopes and desires sustain and nurture state ideas locally, as people seek out government largesse and the promise of development.

Cynicism and desire are key aspects of the intimate political culture of the commune. In Chapter 5 I discuss a third important dimension to the politics of intimacy which sustains and builds state ideas in the commune: the affective ties which permeate social relations and bind people together within the realm of the local state. These affective ties blur the boundaries between the public and private and build and sustain local imaginings of the state through the intimate political culture that results. The chapter examines a number of intimate episodes and affective encounters in the local state space, through which local state ideas manifest: social bonding amongst state officials,

a family tragedy, and the moral persuasion exerted by local officials. The chapter also examines the intimate projects of power of local officials and the ways in which moral economy precepts serve to ensure that a wide network of commune residents, and the community good as a whole, are encompassed by these projects. The chapter concludes by considering the important role alcohol plays in lubricating these intimate ties within the local state, and in bolstering state imaginaries.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine how local people deploy political *metis* in the local state space, in negotiating in and around two prominent governmental processes in Vĩnh Thủy commune: poverty reduction and attempts to modernise the uplands through the market. Local officials and local residents actively engage with these processes and adopt and live within the state governmental categories and practices that are ascribed. At the same time they transform these processes according to community norms, values and projects of power. Chapter 6 discusses government attempts to identify the poor and deliver poverty reduction support, an extension of the historical biopolitical project to develop, pacify and incorporate the uplands. This state support is critical to local household's attempts at accumulation, and desires for development in Vĩnh Thủy therefore crystallise around accessing the poverty reduction resources of the state. The chapter follows the primary process for deciding who is to be classified as poor in the local state arena, the annual poor household census. This is a highly technocratic process but is rife with contradictions and these are exploited by local commune officials and residents. The census process is contorted through *metis* as local people engage in a struggle to be classified as poor. They deploy strategies to render themselves legible to local officials, who usually favour their own networks when allocating these state poverty reduction benefits. Those who lack connections and are thus less able to assert their claims largely lose out, though what results for them is stasis rather than abject hunger, as they are assured of a minimum level of state support, and are encompassed within a locally determined biopolitical schema that sustains life in the commune. The governmental designs of the centre state feed this process, even as they are reworked upon the terrain of the local state.

Chapter 7 considers attempts by translocal and centre state actors to modernise the uplands through 'the market', another prevalent governmental technology around which politics coalesces in the local state space. The notion of the market is central to

state development narratives and the schemes for improvement that permeate the northwestern uplands today. Individual dreams and desires for betterment in Vĩnh Thủy also often crystalize around notions of the market, its potency and potential. Notions of the market are intensely contested and contorted through the deployment of *metis* and the pursuit of projects of power in the local state arena. I illustrate this through discussing attempts to foster tea and tobacco development for the market in Vĩnh Thủy. The centre state seeks to domesticate and control the ways in which the market is manifested, but local people in the commune too have complex understandings and beliefs about the market: They demonstrate a shrewd understanding of market exchange and the benefits, but also have expectations of fairness, care and reciprocity, particularly in their market dealings with supra-local actors and the centre state. The ‘project’ is examined in this chapter too, as both a technology through which the market is made real in the commune, and an important site within the local state space for contestation and negotiation over market imaginings. What results is a process of ‘actually existing’ market integration in the commune, quite different to that envisaged by state planners and Vietnam’s international development partners. The final Chapter draws together conclusions and explores implications from my ethnography of the local state in Vĩnh Thủy.



**Photo 1.1:** The border between Vietnam and China at Lào Cai City, with China on the left bank of the river across the bridge, and Vietnam on the right bank. Vĩnh Thủy commune is about 60 kilometres by road from Lào Cai City.



**Photo 1.2:** The view towards the centre of Vĩnh Thủy commune.



**Photo 1.3:** Remote villages in Vĩnh Thủy, with the hills of China beyond.





**Photo 1.4:** Terraced fields in Vinh Thủy, with a road visible, rehabilitated under the ‘New Rural’ programme of the government.



**Photo 1.5:** An upland village in the commune.



**Photo 1.6:** The commune health post in Vĩnh Thủy



**Photo 1.7:** Preparing for market day in Vinh Thủy.



**Photo 1.8:** Market day in Vinh Thủy



## CHAPTER 2

### The Ethnic State Imaginary in the Northern Borderlands

#### Introduction

In this chapter I discuss how successive centre state regimes have attempted to shape a particular form of the local state in the ethnic minority borderlands of northwestern Vietnam: what I describe as the ‘ethnic state’. Colonial, nationalist, socialist and post-socialist states have all imagined and attempted to order, classify and control the uplands in ways that build upon the projects of power of their predecessors. These continuities are apparent in both the imaginative construct of the borderlands and the ethnic minority ‘others’ who live there, and in the technologies of rule through which lowland powerholders have attempted to exert control. Current attempts to modernize the northwest and to deliver development and poverty reduction build upon this legacy.

Over the past 100 years, centre state attempts at incorporating the uplands into a unified national whole have always relied heavily upon local proxies. The ethnic state construct is therefore centred on prominent local elites who are intimately embedded in local structures of power, but who operate the state machinery on behalf of central authorities and who are expected to pursue an overarching goal of gradually incorporating the ‘periphery’ into the wider national polity. The local ethnic state imagined by central state planners is therefore a subordinate client, self-regulating but beholden to the centre. The populace too is imagined in a certain way under the local ethnic state, as cooperative and productive, gradually acquiring the skills and cultural capacity to be just like the majority Kinh in every way. Needless to say this ethnic state imaginary is fraught with problems, as local populations have consistently pursued their own projects of power within this wider governmental project of the centre.

What results in this local ethnic state space is a highly contingent and vernacularized form of political rule. Centre state objectives of ensuring a peaceful and harmonious borderland region are secured but at the price of ceding significant control and autonomy to local political elites. These elites, operating as local state officials and local powerbrokers, in turn enact an ethnic state project (or micro-projects) of their own, in pursuit of their own projects of power. They embody state power in the local

and are consequently able to operate with a significant degree of autonomy within the wider purview of the centre state's designs for the uplands. All of this plays out in the arena of the local state: an unevenly contoured landscape of power through which governmental processes are contested, appropriated and renegotiated in a dynamic and continually evolving way.

In what follows I first describe the attempts made by successive regimes to 'civilise the margins' (Duncan et. al 2004). Ethnically Kinh lowlanders have largely viewed upland people with suspicion, as different and uncivilised 'others'. State planners have consequently been engaged in what Michaud describes as a process of 'handling minorities' (Michaud 2009). That is to say, the uplands have been the target for schemes to manage minorities and the upland environment in the most effective way possible to utilise land, labour and resources. Rule through ethnic minority proxies has been central to this process, as have narratives of civilisation and underdevelopment.

The chapter then discusses the state's ethnic classificatory process as an important technology of rule. Ascribing labels to people is an important means of building the state through making citizens and subjects legible to state power, as Trouillot (2011) observes. In the process large numbers of ethnic minority people have been effectively bound into the state. These ethnic categories serve the interests of both state planners and local people themselves, as both deploy projects of power through the language of ethnicity. Ethnicity operates simultaneously as a regulatory mechanism and an incentivised category through which claims are made upon the state. It is a make believe compact upon which rulers and ruled are mutually dependent. As a result it is also an important space in which the practice of politics takes place in the local state space.

From the mid 1990's onwards the government gradually acquired an enhanced capacity to deliver development benefits to the northern uplands, and I describe this continuing form of state making in the region as state munificence. Programmes for rural development and poverty reduction have subsequently become ubiquitous and the chapter examines in detail one programme document in order to pick apart the constituent elements of the current centre state's biopolitical imaginary, applied through the ethnic state, for the transformation for the uplands. Continuities with past



state projects abound in the construction of this contemporary ethnic state imaginary, of security, modernisation, harmony and productivity. Finally the chapter discusses examples of how the centre state projects this ethnic state imaginary in the borderlands through visual and performative mediums: iconography and billboards depicting an idealised and harmonious uplands, and dance and music performances at official functions where local officials and centre state bureaucrats meet and work together.

### **Governing the borderlands in historical perspective**

It is necessary first to locate the ‘peripheral’ regions of the country in which ethnic minorities live within a wider story of nation building and national development. Vietnam is a long, ecologically and climatically diverse country, with correspondingly diverse socio-cultural and linguistic patterns. Approximately fourteen percent of the population belongs to ethnic groups culturally distinct from the majority Kinh ethnic group, and these groups live primarily at the supposed margins of state power, in mountainous border areas in the northern and central highland regions, or in the remote Mekong Delta in the south of the country. These regions have long, complex and semi-autonomous histories, which have often evolved with only a tenuous link to central state authority. The central highlands of Vietnam for example were still, until quite recently, considered something of a frontier for the state, even in official discourse (Hardy 2003, Tan 2006). The concept of Vietnam, as a unitary and spatially defined territory, is perhaps best understood in Christian Lentz’s terms then, as a “project in the making” whereby lowland power centres have attempted to assert rule over what he describes as a “contested space we now label Vietnamese” (Lentz 2011:70).

Political power has often been strong in the flat, fertile delta regions of the country close to large cities, and more fractious and contested in the mountainous and remote regions. High mountain ranges in the north and the plateau of the central highlands have served as effective natural barriers to successive attempts to impose central authority over time, as Li Tana’s work on southern Vietnam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries shows (Li 1998, see also Taylor 1998). The people of the region have traditionally moved freely across the whole of the mountainous massif of Southeast Asia (Scott 2009), and groups in the northwest today share kinship and ethnic ties with others in southern China, Laos and northeastern Thailand. Prior to the establishment of the French colonial state, the northern upland region was largely

outside the orbit of lowland Vietnamese influence (Proschan 2003) and centralised control of the region only began to be exerted from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Even then David Marr notes how in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the grand designs of the colonial state could never be realised given Vietnam's poverty and fragmented geography (Marr 2004). Central attempts to control the state periphery were always deflected as local elites found ways to exploit the lack of bureaucratic capacity and used the governing hierarchy to pursue their own projects of power, usually in alliance with someone at the centre. Marr concludes "Vietnam's political culture has long combined firm ideological dispositions towards centralisation of power with practical recognition of local particularities and responsibilities" (Marr 2004:28). It wasn't until the early decades of the twentieth century that the colonial state began to build the physical infrastructure necessary to consistently exert some influence in the uplands (Pelley 1998, Friederichsen 2012). Only by the 1960's were ethnic minority groups in the remote regions of the country notably subject to state authority and the cultural and material influences of the majority Kinh, a process Nguyen Van Thang attributes to three factors: state policies for Kinh migration to the highlands, fixed cultivation and settlement, and population growth (Thang 2007).

### ***Proxy rule through local elites in the borderlands***

During the late colonial period from the 1900s onwards, the first Indochina war with the French (1945-55) and the second Indochina war with the Americans and the southern Republic of Vietnam (1960-75) Vietnamese nationalists, revolutionaries, foreign colonialists and foreign powers all attempted to impose regimes of control upon the uplands, and enlist the people of the region in their respective projects of power (McLeod 1999). This continued the long-standing practice of appropriating the bodies and labour of upland people's through conscription to fight in regional conflicts, a consequence of the ambiguous position of the northwest as a contested border and buffer zone between competing powers.

The French colonial state put in place a system of rule in the northern uplands that depended heavily upon the elites of locally dominant Tai speaking groups: the Tày in the northeast and the Thái in the northwest. The principle Tai speaking group in Vĩnh

Thủy commune are the Nùng, and it is in reference to the Nùng that I write throughout the thesis as the important Thái group powerbrokers in this part of northwestern Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> The Thái have traditionally been wetland rice cultivators and the principal landowners in the northwest region, and exerted political control through local *muang*, administrative organisations that were controlled by Thái noble families (Thang 2007:87). Thái nobles subjugated and extracted taxes and tribute from smaller, more recently arrived Mon-Khmer and Hmông-Đao groups who worked their land as tenant farmers, and whom they referred to as *xá* (slaves) until this language was abolished by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) after 1954.

Phillipe Le Failler (2011) has carefully examined the French colonial system of proxy rule through Thái elites in Lai Châu province, bordering Lào Cai in the northwest. There the Đèo clan were the preeminent group for centuries and were invested with colonial state authority as a low cost means of maintaining control and exerting power over what must have appeared to colonial planners as a complex and bewildering patchwork of ethnic groups. As Le Failler shows, the Đèo clan and the patriarch Đèo Văn Trì in particular, were far from passive proxies and they continued to pursue their own interests and alliances, principally with the Chinese in Yunnan province. The Đèo clan's involvement in opium trading directly conflicted with colonial state policy but the relationship was ultimately beneficial to both parties, with Đèo Văn Trì and his Thái allies exercising administrative control on behalf of the French and protecting the French military from the Chinese.

Đèo Văn Trì cooperated with other Thái clans throughout the northwest and farmed out power and authority in order to draw many into his network. In turn he demanded taxes and corvee labour from other ethnic groups in a systematic process of exploitation of uplanders that caused great resentment, and resulted in an uprising of the Hmông in 1918 (Le Failler 2011). In 1948 the colonial state formally established a Thái Federation (1948-53) whose privileges further antagonised other ethnic groups, and went some way to determining the sides in the emergent struggle for control of the

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<sup>1</sup> In Vietnamese ethnography, the Tày, Thái and Nùng are all part of the Austro-Asian language family (Van, Son and Hung, 1993). These three groups were amongst the earliest settlers of the northern upland region and have consequently been the principal landowning class. They are heavily represented amongst state administrators today.

uplands in the late 1940's and early 1950's, between the Vietnamese nationalists (the Việt Minh) on one side, and the French colonial state and their ethnic allies on the other (Friederichsen 2012). The nationalists came to rely upon the ethnic minority people of the region to maintain the zones of liberation that were established, and to feed, porter for and fight with the nationalist forces (McLeod 1999). Consequently during this time many of the future leaders of the DRV formed close bonds with their local ethnic minority compatriots and it was during this time that local autonomy for ethnic minority groups was discussed. But alliances were not always clear cut: the Hmông, for example, backed the Việt Minh where they opposed the Thái, but opposed them in the northeast where the Tày were fighting with the Việt Minh (Friederichsen 2012).

After the defeat of the French the victorious nationalists established two autonomous zones in the northern uplands in 1955, the Viet Bac and Tay Bac autonomous regions. This was an unpopular move with other local ethnic groups and resulted in the outbreak of unrest and rebellion throughout the 1955-58 period. Ultimately the experiment with autonomy was shortlived and by 1975 the zones had been dismantled. McLeod (1999) and Michaud (2009) contend that the autonomous zones were simply propaganda tools to co-opt southern highlanders into the war against the Republic of Vietnam in the south. Lentz views the establishment of these autonomous zone as part of a process of “making the northwest Vietnamese”, arguing that the whole Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) project in ethnic minority areas can be seen in ethnic terms, as an attempt by the Kinh to consolidate power in the uplands (Lentz 2011).

In support of his case, Lentz carefully traces the history and evolution of the term *dân tộc* (commonly translated as ‘ethnicity’ or ‘ethnic group’) and shows how its meaning hardened over time and came to serve the political project of power of the centre state at the time, as a claim to rule. With Pelley (2008), Lentz views the use of the term as a political form of ‘sorting’ the world and categorising difference, a means of managing ambiguity in the interests of the centre state. Over time *quốc gia* (nation) was increasingly promoted over *dân tộc* as the organising principle for the uplands. Consequently earlier promises made by the nationalists for ethnic autonomy in the uplands were postponed indefinitely as ‘the nation’ increasingly subverted ethnic autonomy as the central organising principle of state (Lentz 2011).

Despite the role many different ethnic minority groups played in supporting the liberation struggle, the victorious nationalist forces preserved Thái domination in the northwest. The Communist Party largely passed up the chance to implement the sweeping land reforms that they initiated in lowland areas after 1954 and persisted instead with the pattern of local rule through Thái elites. They therefore failed to overturn the class and ethnic hierarchies that maintained the Thái as landlords and political overlords, and the Thái moved seamlessly into new official bureaucratic positions under the DRV. Establishing exclusive territorial sovereignty in the northern uplands and maintaining a unified nation remained the preeminent goal in the uplands and centre state planners consequently relied upon Thái elites to consolidate control on their behalf in a region where the population were unfamiliar with the terms of their rule. As Lentz concludes: “Far from a revolutionary rupture, in fact, Thái elites remained the externally-supported and military-protected sovereigns of a highland domain that marginalized local Khmu, Hmông and other groups” (Lentz 2011:84). The local ethnic state idea therefore remained intact, and indeed solidified.

With the consolidation of the DRV in northern Vietnam, the period from 1960-1975 was marked by the twin demands of war and collectivisation. The government drafted highlanders for the war effort, and sought to extend the model of collective farming from the northern lowlands into the upland region, though with limited success. The sparse population of upland regions and the unsuitability of upland areas to lowland production models meant that the establishment of state owned enterprises (SOEs) and the collectivization of the uplands never really took firm hold, and was not really the focus of national cadres collectivization efforts in any case (Fredericksen and Neef 2010, Michaud 2009). Certainly collectivization never took hold in any substantive sense in Vĩnh Thủy commune during this period.

National attempts to decollectivise and restructure the command economy followed after 1986, with the northwest subject to sporadic attempts at post-socialist marketization. From 1985-1995 the state’s lack of resources and the relatively underdeveloped state of agriculture meant that these attempts were largely paper exercises only though, and a kind of post-socialist hiatus resulted. At this time too there appears to have been a drive to place many of the children of ethnic minority

cadre into ethnic minority colleges and boarding schools in the region, where they were systematically exposed to party training and ideological orientation and groomed to become the next generation of ethnic minority leaders in the northwest.

The perpetuation of ethnic minority rule by Thái elites throughout this period was the culmination of a process intended to create a trusted ethnic state in the northwest. It was to be a self-administering region within the larger national project of consolidating Kinh rule throughout the territorial space claimed by the new Vietnamese state. Despite the experience of living closely with ethnic groups in the region and fighting with them against the French, the need to project an imagined national community and consolidate political power led state planners to quickly abandon promises for ethnic autonomy. Instead the system of ethnic rule through local elites further entrenched local ethnic hierarchies and relationships of subordination and domination amongst the region's groups. Today political authority is exercised by trusted local ethnic elites through the ethnic state, in a continuing attempt to incorporate the uplands as a part of a uniform Vietnamese nation state.<sup>2</sup>

### *Discourses of backwardness and underdevelopment in the borderlands*

Discourses of 'civilisation' (*văn minh*) and the need to develop 'underdeveloped' (*không phát triển*) ethnic groups came to prominence in tandem with the post-1945 political processes just described, and remain integral to the centre state's project of power in the uplands today. The notion of a civilising mission for the state in the uplands was (and remains) an important justification for bolstering the power of existing ethnic elites and constructing an ethnic hierarchy amongst uplands groups. The Thái practiced wetland rice cultivation, were engaged in commerce and most importantly perhaps were often proficient in the Vietnamese language, so they were deemed to be closer to the Kinh ideal of what is to be modern and civilised. Groups like the Hmông and the Khmu in contrast were seen as being more primitive as they

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<sup>2</sup> This pattern of rule through elite local proxies is characteristic of the extension of central state power throughout the region. Writing on the incorporation of the predominantly Lao speaking Isan plateau into the Thai state Charles Keyes writes: "Beginning with the reign of King Taksin (1767-82), central Thai administration of the Lao areas, including present-day northeastern Thailand, was based on a semi-feudal principle whereby villagers were subject to indigenous elites and these elites in turn were subject to Thonburi and, after 1782, Bangkok" (Keyes 2014:29).

lived further from Kinh units of government and administration, practiced shifting cultivation and had cultural norms and spiritual practices which Kinh administrators and migrants could not easily identify with. They were thus an ‘Other’: little understood, occupying an ambiguous relationship to the emerging state project, and thus untrustworthy and in need of change.

Notions of the backwardness of ethnic groups were not new to the northern uplands. As Philip Taylor notes:

modern depictions of the ethnic minorities, with their multitude of gross disadvantages, overlap uncannily with the premodern vision in lowland Vietnamese courts of those cultural Others who lived in the inhospitable mountains and fringes of civilization, as barbarians [*man*], savages [*mọi*], and uncultured beings (Taylor 2008:17).

Throughout the colonial era in Vietnam (and Southeast Asia more widely) ideas of ethnic groups being primitive and somehow sub-human persisted and were important in ideologically justifying colonial adventures. Following the liberation of the north of Vietnam the notion of a civilizational hierarchy for ethnic groups gained prominence as the Vietnamese national state project solidified. Fraternal affection for the ethnic minorities in the north remained as a result of the shared struggle for national liberation, and solidarity of peoples was championed as the state socialist project emerged through the late 1950’s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> But ethnic minorities remained a caricature in state ideology: noble, spiritual and primitive, living close to the land but hopelessly unsuited to furthering the socialist goals of the state without radical improvement. McLeod (following Harrell) describes northern highlanders engagement with outside forces as a succession of “Confucian, Christian and Communist civilising projects” (McLeod 1999:354) and these continue today, as Michaud observes:

The policy of selective cultural preservation amongst the national minorities is still implemented, in which the state decides unilaterally which aspects of a culture are sufficiently valuable – and politically acceptable – to be retained, and which ones should be actively discouraged (Michaud 2009:35).

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<sup>3</sup> 1950s models from the USSR for ‘minority nationalities’ were prevalent and influential in Vietnam throughout the 1960s. These models were inherently hierarchical in ascribing these nationalities a lower position in the ascendancy towards the model ‘new socialist man’. The rhetoric throughout successive periods remained evolutionist, with highlanders at the lowest stage of development and in dire need of assistance (Michaud 2009).

### *Ethnology and the politics of the ethnic classification process*

The process of classifying and ordering ethnic groups is an extension of the discourses of underdevelopment just described, and an important technology through which the centre state has attempted to extend the centralising project of power in the northern uplands. State planners hoped to make the uplands more knowable and more accepting of rule through categorizing upland people into legible and orderly groups. This ordering also served to legitimate civilizational discourses and notions of ethnic hierarchy. State planners perceived of development in linear terms with the Kinh at the top of the civilisation ladder, and upland people arranged below according to how many of the lowland Kinh's traits they had adopted. In order for this hierarchy to resonate, groups had to be clearly delineated and ordered, with the messy ambiguity of lived culture and self-identity subordinated to externally defined categories of state.

Officially Vietnam has 54 designated ethnic groups, the largest being the majority Kinh. Government announcement 121 of the 'List of Ethnic Group Composition of Vietnam' (*Danh mục các thành phần dân tộc Việt Nam*) was officially promulgated on 2 March 1979 and established this list, which has remained fixed ever since. The list resulted from the classification work of state ethnologists and universities but in common with much academic endeavour in Vietnam, ethnology has always been closely linked to the political work of the state and in particular the development of national development policy (*chính sách phát triển quốc gia*).

The inherently political nature of academic work in the social sciences in Vietnam is of course nothing new. Oscar Salemink traces the historical entanglements of anthropology with the colonial project in Southeast Asia generally and highlights the role that anthropologists played within the United States military during the Vietnam War (Salemink 2003). The Japanese anthropologist Masako Ito has also carefully documented the evolution of the ethnic classification process in Vietnam (Ito 2013). As Ito shows, the Việt Minh quickly began work on classifying the people of the northern uplands following the establishment of the DRV in 1945, and borrowed heavily from French colonial era scholarship and administrative practice in doing so. The ethnic classification process gained momentum after 1954 and was given added urgency by the need to facilitate the mass mobilization of the population for the war



against the south.<sup>4</sup> Those responsible for the ethnic classification process in the early years of the DRV were a mix of professional ethnologists and state cadre, demonstrating how the ethnological and political projects in the uplands were closely aligned from the very beginning in the new socialist state.<sup>5</sup>

Ethnology in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s was strongly influenced by a soviet-style philosophy and approach, with the main architects of Vietnamese ethnology all trained in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Under this highly politicized system the role of ethnology in serving the objectives of the state became increasingly formalised. For state cadre, the goal of policy directed towards ethnic groups in the uplands was to promote solidarity between groups, in the interests of national integration, and to do this they needed to have clearly delineated groups whom they could target. Dặng Nghiêm Vạn, a prominent ethnologist involved in the process of classifying ethnic groups over many years, described the process and ethnologist's role within it like this:

The complex character of Vietnamese ethnicities, especially of the smaller groups living in areas rarely visited or studied in the past, has obligated Vietnamese ethnology to clarify the situation, both for theoretical and scientific reasons and for practical purposes (Vạn 1998:10).

State ethnologists like Professor Vạn and his colleagues were assigned the task of scientifically establishing the veracity of claims to ethnicity. While they claimed to

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<sup>4</sup> An early attempt at classification in 1958 identified 63 different ethnic minority groups, and was heavily influenced by work done previously by the French colonial state. The 1960 census allowed for some self-declaration of ethnicity by groups and consequently resulted in a list of 125 different groups, considered too many by Vietnamese state planners, possibly because the number was larger than that of China, whose example in ethnic classification the Vietnamese state followed closely. Ito also notes that the pressure is always to reduce the number of ethnic groups (Ito 2013).

<sup>5</sup> In 1955 the State Committee for Ethnic Minorities (*Ủy ban dân tộc*, later the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs - CEMA) was formed and was responsible thereafter for all matters pertaining to ethnic minorities, including the ethnic group classification process. During my time as an adviser with CEMA the ministry was still heavily involved in projects for classifying ethnic minority groups and developing statistical indicators to measure their development.

<sup>6</sup> Ito contends that the early classification system was modelled on China's example, but that the enthusiasm for replicating China's policy on ethnic minorities didn't survive the Vietnam-China conflict that ensued between 1979 and the normalisation of relations in 1991. Thomas Mullaney confirms both the apparent early convergence of Chinese and Vietnamese ethnology, and the subsequent differences (Mullaney, 2014).

respect the wishes of people themselves, it was clear that their technical and scientific reasoning was to be the ultimate arbiter of group identity:

Our fundamental principle in determining and naming ethnicities is respect for the wishes of that ethnicity. This does not mean that the ethnicity will make a declaration in an intuitive basis, but rather that it will be a fully informed choice on the basis of scientific findings (Vạn 1998:39).

Vạn and his colleagues' attempts to delineate groups through 'scientific' means lead Ito to conclude that "Vietnam's ethnology aimed to serve the political goal of national integration from the start" (Ito 2013:179).

The state gradually began directing significant resources towards ethnic minority communities in the 1990s, after launching wide ranging structural reforms in the late 1980s, and this stimulated significant political pressure from below for reform of the classification system. Following the census of 1999, smaller but vocal and politically powerful ethnic groups lobbied vociferously to be recognised and included as separate groups, in the hope of gaining access to the significant state resources on offer for minority groups. The classification process was itself responsible therefore for generating political demands and self-perceptions of separateness and group identity even amongst groups that had already been largely assimilated with other, larger ethnic groups. Ethnic minority people exercised *metis* within this make believe compact of ethnicity, projecting their own projects of power to rival those of the centre state.

The Government began a review of the classification process in the early 2000s but making changes to the 54 ethnic groups was never really seriously considered, as it threatened the sacred goal of national integration. Again it became obvious that the classification process was more about the politics of state formation and cohesion than about rigorous ethnological investigation, or local people's self-perceptions of identity. The state feared national disintegration under the weight of the demands of different ethnic groups and the review process was thus quietly shelved, with state employed ethnologists deployed to champion the 54-group classification and defend the decision not to change it (Ito 2013).

The ethnic classification process has clearly been driven by the need to consolidate the Vietnamese state as a national imaginary. State ethnologists have taken the flexible and

ambiguous signifiers through which people in the northern uplands have identified themselves, and frozen them in time and space, rendering ethnic categories immutable and fixed (Rambo 2003, Salemink 2003, Thang 2007). This clumsy and rather wooden rendering of ethnicity better serves the centre state's attempt to regulate and manage the people of the borderlands as malleable citizens under a unified state, through imposing particular 'Vietnamese' cultural frames of reference (Friedericksen and Neef, 2010).<sup>7</sup> But it also opened spaces in which people could pursue their own projects of power too, within the governmental categories of ethnicity that were established.

Through the ethnic categorisation process centre state planners believed that the people of the uplands could more easily be incorporated into collective farms and state owned agricultural enterprises, though these attempts never really took hold on a large scale in the northwest region through the 1970s and 1980s. During the 1990s though, ethnic minorities were allocated lands on which to produce agro-industrial crops according to the latest state campaigns to facilitate market production and greater incorporation of the uplands into the national development project (discussed in Chapter 7).

In comparing the ethnic classification systems of Thailand, China and Vietnam Charles Keyes notes how ethnic self-consciousness, which he considers to be the primary determinant of ethnicity, is easily subordinated to external classificatory categories of the state, such as place of residence and observable 'cultural traditions' (Keyes 2002). Keyes concludes that ethnic groups are "products of the process of restructuring communities under the hegemonic authority of modern nation states" (Keyes in Thang 2007:18). As a consequence of the classification process in Vietnam, smaller ethnic groups have been incorporated into larger ones or been ignored altogether under the state's classification schema, as state planners bypassed the self-identification of groups themselves in an attempt to impose order and render legible the complex ethnic mosaic of the uplands. For example, in his detailed study of the Mieu in Lang Son province, northeastern Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thang highlights how the Mieu were classified as a sub-group of the Hmông, despite their languages being mutually

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<sup>7</sup> This process of categorisation for overtly political ends is not unique to ethnicity in Vietnam. Jayne Werner (2002) discusses how gendered representations too has been used in the *đổi mới* era for political projects of state, and I shall discuss the case of poverty classification in this light in Chapter 6.

unintelligible (Thang, 2007). But more powerful groups were able to assert their ‘separateness’ under the classification system. Reflecting on the experience of the Mieu, Thang concludes that “ethnicity emerges and changes as the result of a social problem rather than through some intrinsic quality of its own” (Thang 2007:79), the ‘social problem’ at hand being the classification system itself.

Socialist state ethnographers argued that the classification process would reawaken an inherent, primordial identity amongst ethnic people, but in fact the process itself served to construct and legitimate these identities, as local groups have come to adopt and live their lives through the very categories the state imagines for them, particularly when there are material benefits to being a state sanctioned ethnic minority. In so doing they have flexibly deployed *metis* in pursuit of projects of power. Both the centre state and local people appear to be engaged in making claims through the classification process, thereby making it real as a compact rooted in competing but mutually dependent imaginaries of an ethnic state. The ‘revival’ of primordial ethnic identities should be seen in this light, as a very modern phenomenon, the result of intentional nation building and a top-down politically driven process but also as an attempt by powerful ethnic groups to assert projects of power to make claims upon the state. While ethnicity has been deployed as a tool of state to manage the uplands, it has also been colonized and reworked by local people to serve their own interests, as we shall see in the following chapter.

### **State munificence in the borderlands from the late-1990s onwards**

1996 seems to mark the point at which a new era began in the northwest. Nguyen Van Thang documents how fluency in Vietnamese in the early to mid-1990s dramatically increased amongst the Mieu he studied, as they shifted from subsistence to commercial agriculture and were increasingly drawn into wider networks (Thang 2007). From the late 1990s onwards the centre state also appears to have demonstrated an enhanced ability to channel state financial resources to the region for development. More and more programmes of support for peripheral areas and ‘marginal’ groups were developed and rolled-out and, unlike previously, the state appears to have been able to support these programmes with ever-increasing levels of funding.

These centre state efforts at facilitating the development of the ethnic minority ‘periphery’ were no doubt stimulated by the wave of protests that took place in the northern lowland province of Thái Bình in 1997, and protests in the central highland provinces of Dak Lak and Gia Lai in 2001 (and again in 2004) gave added stimulus and renewed vigour to these development efforts.<sup>8</sup> For centre state planners, protests amongst the ethnic minority people of the state’s borderlands represented a serious threat to the national state building project and necessitated a purposeful response.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2.1: Nominal rates of assistance to agriculture<sup>[a]</sup>, China and Southeast Asia, 1960 to 2004.**

(percent)

	1960-64	1965-69	1970-74	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04
China [b]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-45.2	-35.5	-14.3	6.6	5.9
Southeast Asia [c]	n/a	Na	-8.8	0.0	4.6	-0.4	-4.2	0.0	11.1
Indonesia	n/a	Na	-2.6	9.3	9.2	-1.7	-6.6	-8.6	12.0
Malaysia	-7.2	-7.5	-9.0	-13.0	-4.6	1.3	2.3	-0.2	1.2
Philippines	-5.3	14.4	-5.1	-7.1	-1.0	18.7	18.5	32.9	22.0
Thailand	n/a	n/a	-20.3	-14.0	-2.0	-6.2	-5.7	1.7	-0.2
Vietnam [b]	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	-13.9	-25.4	0.6	21.2

n/a – data not available

[a] Weighted average of each country, including product-specific input distortions and non-product specific assistance as well as authors’ guestimates for non-covered farm products, with weights based on gross value of agricultural production at undistorted prices.

[b] Chinese data for 1980-84 are actually 1981-84; Vietnamese data for 1985-89 are 1986-89.

[c] Weighted average for the five countries below, with weights based on gross value of agricultural production at undistorted prices.

*Source: Anderson and Martin, 2008. Pg. 29.*

<sup>8</sup> The protests in the central highlands involved ethnic minority people and appeared to bring to a head long simmering frustrations amongst indigenous ethnic groups in the region over their alienation from traditional lands and the rapid changes taking place as a result of large scale immigration of both Kinh and other ethnic minorities into the central highlands (see <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/vietnam/viet0402-10.htm>)

<sup>9</sup> Akhil Gupta has observed a similar shift in the role of the state in India over time with the enormous expansion in antipoverty programmes by the postcolonial Indian state. Gupta hypothesises that this may reflect the central state’s long term need to cement ideological rule. In the context of democratic India he argues, projects of welfare have been central to the construction of notions of citizenship. Thus: “For groups on the social and economic margins, citizenship was principally about inclusion in the developmental project” (Gupta 2012:99). Partha Chatterjee argues, also in reference to India, that increased state provision of social programmes reflects a fear of class war amongst India’s elite (Chatterjee 2008, cited in Gupta 2012:291).

The trend of state munificence accelerated through the 2000s as international development partners came on board to provide further funds for the myriad programmes for development of the uplands. State support primarily took the form of investment in infrastructure, but also direct support to households in the form of agricultural inputs, credit, and sometimes direct cash payments. This trend of state munificence to outlying and ‘underdeveloped’ regions is not particular to Vietnam alone. In fact it is characteristic of many of the nation states of Southeast Asia today, where rural areas generally have increasingly become focus areas for state support. This is reflected in the data contained in Table 2.1 above, which charts the shift in the rates of assistance to agriculture in the region over the past 45 years. As the data clearly shows, support shifted to a positive balance in China from the mid 1990s, and the same happened in Southeast Asia overall from the early 2000s. The shift in Vietnam was particularly steep after the 1995-99 period so that, by the mid 2000s, Vietnam enjoyed one of the highest levels of state assistance to agriculture in the region.<sup>10</sup> As the authors of the study observe:

Instead of being effectively taxed more than \$100 billion per year in the early 1980s (or more than \$200 per person working in agriculture), farmers in the region now enjoy support worth more than \$30 per person employed on farms in China and \$70 in Southeast Asia (Anderson and Martin, 2008:12).

Support programmes are important technologies through which the central state has enacted this large-scale transfer of material resources to remote and mountainous areas, and these are largely channelled through the local ethnic state mechanism. A large number of these programmes are specifically targeted at ethnic minority poverty reduction (*giảm nghèo*). Table 2.2 lists some major national programmes for rural development and poverty reduction in operation in the northwest in 2010.

Jones et al. found 41 different poverty reduction policies and programmes in operation at the time of their survey, in 2009. These were a mix of national, regional, group based and sector based support programmes, all with multiple components that overlapped with other programmes. There are a large number of provincial programmes to support ethnic minority households too, developed within the

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<sup>10</sup> Vietnam had an official system of collectivised agriculture under state socialism from the 1960s until the 1980s which accounts for the lack of comparable data before the mid-1980s.

overarching framework of these national policies and programmes. This situation led Terry Rambo and Neil Jameson (2003) to contend that poor provinces in the uplands in the early 2000's had become heavily reliant upon central government transfers, and that this provincial reliance was reflected in household reliance upon state transfers too. Rambo and Jameson cite an example from a survey of the Hmông in a locality in northern Vietnam where 16% of household cash income was estimated to derive from transfer payments (Rambo and Jamieson, 2003).

**Table 2.2: Main national poverty reduction programmes (2009)**

<i>Programme</i> <sup>11</sup>	<i>Government Decision</i>	<i>Operating Years</i> <sup>12</sup>
Socio-Economic Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (P135-II)	07/2006/QD-TTg 10/01/2006	2006-2010
National Target Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTP-PR)	20/2007/QD-TTg 05/02/2007	2006-2010
Rapid and Sustainable Poverty Reduction Programme for the 62 Poorest Districts (30a)	30a/2008/NQ-CP 27/12/2008	2008-2010
Support to Access for Land, Housing and Water (P134)	134/2004/QD-TTg 20/07/2004	2004 – 2010
Housing Support for Poor Households (P167)	167/2008/QD-TTg 12/12/2008	2008-
National Target Programme on Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (RWSS)	277/2006/QD-TTg 11/12/2006	2006-2010

*Source: Adapted from Jones et. al, UNDP, 2009.*

Vĩnh Thủy commune is broadly typical of upland ethnic minority communes in the northwest of Vietnam and receives a large number of these programmes, with the associated financial investment in infrastructure and resources for households. In fact the large number of programmes and the complexity of centre state provisions for poor areas means that few local officials in the commune could authoritatively list a full set of the programmes available without first checking commune records. The picture is further complicated by the existence of a number of international donor supported

<sup>11</sup> For the period 2011-15 Programme 135, NTP-PR and Resolution 30a were incorporated into a new National Target Programme for Sustainable Poverty Reduction. There is also a National Target Programme for Rural Development for the period 2011-15, which also channels significant resources to rural, mountainous areas. This programme is discussed in more detail in chapter six.

<sup>12</sup> These programmes roll over from each planning period into the next.

projects in the commune, primarily provided through the World Bank's Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project and through the international non-governmental organisation (SEED) with which I was associated, which had provided project support to the commune for more than 10 years.

In his influential book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) James Scott adopted the notion of 'Zomia' to describe a broad area spanning the Southeast Asian massif as a region of refuge, where ethnic minorities have historically escaped to in order to avoid incorporation by the centralising state powers of the region. But the depiction of the northern uplands I have just given contradicts this, with the region now characterized by massive resource flows to rural areas. The notion of the people of the region being invisible to the state, separate, or able to somehow evade the state under this process would appear then to be problematic. However, in a critical early passage in the book Scott makes clear that he is describing a situation that predates the current era. Zomia-like conditions no longer exist, Scott contends, and very different processes are now at work:

Since 1945, and in some cases before then, the power of the state to deploy distance-demolishing technologies – railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology – so changed the strategic balance of power between self-governing peoples and nation-states, so diminished the friction of terrain, that my analysis largely ceases to be useful. On the contrary, the sovereign nation-state is now busy projecting its power to its outermost territorial borders and mopping up zones of weak or no sovereignty (Scott 2009:xii).

Largesse appears then to characterise the current relationship of the centre state to the people of the upland region, with the state having become increasingly pervasive in the everyday lives of residents. I shall show in later chapters how this in turn has led to ethnic minority people directly seeking to engage with the state in the local state space, in order to connect with political power and fulfil their own desires for development.

### **The centre state's imaginary for the borderlands today**

The constituent elements which together make up the ethnic state imaginary today have clear continuities with past colonial, state socialist and post-socialist projects. State munificence is new, but is part of an enduring concern and project of power on



the part of lowland centre state authorities to incorporate the uplands, civilise and domesticate the inhabitants and render the borderlands harmonious, secure and self-regulating. Centre state planners today envision the borderlands gradually becoming more like the lowland ideal, and integrating seamlessly with ‘national’ culture, economy, and society. Both the state’s contemporary imaginary of what the uplands should be, and some of the rhetorical and visual devices used to promulgate this vision, are the subject of this final section.

### *Inscribing the ethnic state through programme documents*

The centre state’s current imaginative construction of the region and its people is apparent in the documents which underpin the programmes of state support for the uplands, which have become ubiquitous during the munificent state period. It is to one of these documents that I now turn. The document is the fourth draft of a proposed third phase of the state’s renowned Programme 135, for the ‘Socio-Economic Development of Communes and Villages Facing Extreme Hardship in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas, 2011-2015’.

This particular draft for the new programme was formulated in May 2010 and is illuminating as, up to this point, the programme document had been exclusively produced by centre state cadre, led by the State Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA). It had not yet been exposed to the international donor partners of the programme who invariably reframe such documents in the language of international development and lobby for the removal of contentious phrases, in order for the programme to be approved for funding by their head offices.<sup>13</sup> This version of the document therefore closely reflects centre state planner’s thinking on the development of the uplands.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Policy documents and programmes of course stem from the political resolutions issued by the highest echelons of the Party, the Politburo and Party Central Committee. The National Assembly is also becoming an increasingly important driver of policy initiatives.

<sup>14</sup> In the event Programme 135 Phase III was never implemented as a stand alone programme, as it was incorporated into a new ‘National Target Programme for Sustainable Poverty Reduction’. I was closely involved in the formulation of this programme from 2008-2012 whilst working as an embedded adviser with CEMA. I was therefore able to closely observe how the programme was formulated, what the interests of respective centre state actors in the process were, and how development of the borderlands was perceived amongst my state cadre colleagues.

At one level, the document and the programme of support on offer embody the party-state's continuing duty of care to the less fortunate upland ethnic minorities, who are perceived as disadvantaged through living in 'difficult' environments at the margins of the state. This narrative is rooted in the debt the party state is felt to owe to ethnic minorities for their war service. It is also rooted in state socialist era ideals of fraternity and solidarity which remain a strong narrative current in the political discourse of the Party today. Thus narrowing the gap in living standards between different ethnic groups is seen as key to the development of the borderlands, as reflected in the overall objective of the programme:

To accelerate the rate of socio-economic development in communes and villages facing extreme hardship in ethnic minority and mountainous areas; to promote economic structural transformation towards commodity-based production to increase income; to improve the material life and spiritual well-being of ethnic minority people in a sustainable manner, and to narrow development gaps between ethnic groups and regions in the whole country.

The state's vision for the uplands continues to be strongly imbued with paternalistic conceptions of ethnic minorities as less advanced than lowland Kinh, and in need of greater civilisation (improving 'material and spiritual well-being') and development. In the government's diagnostic of what is wrong with the uplands, the backward practices and 'traditional' culture of ethnic minorities continues to be seen as a blockage to their modern development and a critical form of disadvantage.

The government provides support to the borderlands to promote social and economic development then, but also to bolster current ideological orthodoxy, as the document goes on to state:

Investments for socio-economic development of ethnic minority and mountainous areas should not merely bring about socio-economic benefits but should also serve as a solid foundation for strengthening national unity and for maintaining the national political system and security.

This passage reflects the government's continuing insecurity around the northern borderlands' ambiguous status, as only relatively recently incorporated into the central state-building project. Perceived security concerns are both internal and external in nature. On the internal front ethnic minority groups have had a troubled relationship

with the central party state, and security officials consequently continue to view them as being untrustworthy and in need of surveillance.<sup>15</sup> In terms of external security threats, there are significant and long-standing geopolitical tensions between Vietnam and China, and these tensions have heightened over the disputed sovereignty claims for territory in the South China Sea.<sup>16</sup> Increasing state resources to border regions is thus seen to be necessary to ensure there is a large population in the border areas, to protect against possible encroachment upon Vietnamese land by China. The head of the provincial office of Lào Cai's Department for Agriculture and Rural Development explained this to me matter-of-factly one day, when he said: "the border areas are highly strategic for the defence of the country and we need people to be living there in order to protect the country".

This view was echoed during a discussion I had in 2013 with middle ranking members of CEMA in Hanoi. Following a meeting with one official in his office I was invited to join him and his colleagues in a coffee shop on the street and in further discussion they proceeded to express strong views on the settlement of the borderlands. "Poverty reduction is all about keeping the people there in the border areas to stop Chinese expansion" one young official said, whilst another expressed the popular view that "China moves the border ten or twenty metres every year".<sup>17</sup>

These perceived threats to national unity and security in the borderlands are framed in the draft document as a result of Vietnam's recent opening up following the collapse of state-socialism in the late 1980s. Ethnic minorities are portrayed as having subsequently been exploited by those intent on undermining the state, as the document makes clear:

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<sup>15</sup> This is particularly the case with the Hmông in the northern uplands, where millenarian Christian movements have frequently brought Hmông communities into conflict with state authorities. This occurred for example in May 2011 in Dien Bien province, where there was a mass Hmông Christian protest that was broken up by government security forces (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13284122>).

<sup>16</sup> The border gate between Vietnam and China just outside the district town of Cao Xuyên was closed temporarily in 2012 in response to tensions between the two countries. This impacted significantly upon household incomes in Vĩnh Thủy, where most households rely upon the sale of their hybrid corn surplus to traders that then sell the corn on to China.

<sup>17</sup> It is not unusual to hear these views in the coffee shops of Hanoi, but this was the first time I had heard them expressed by state cadre closely involved in the process of the development of the border regions.

Reality has shown that evil and reactionary forces in and outside the country have taken advantage of the open door policy and have formed coalitions to implement conspiracies to sabotage the united bloc of ethnic groups in order to cause the loss of stability, integrity and unity of the country. At present, a number of malefactors and hostile forces are continuing to take advantage of religious issues and ethnic minority policies to sow division amongst different ethnic groups, provoke riots, cause social disorder, and sabotage national unity.

Interestingly, this was one of the passages of the draft document that international donors took exception to, with one head of mission memorably exclaiming in a meeting at the time “what has this got to do with development?” In fact though the concern with internal order and security is an integral part of the political project of power of the centre state and is central to the state’s imagining of the borderlands.

Ethnic solidarity and harmony in turn are key to ensuring internal order and security, as the document makes clear through a particular rendering of the history of the uplands:

The minority ethnic and mountainous areas in our country have always been the strategic areas in terms of politics, security and national defense, i.e. the hedge of the nation [*là phần dậu của quốc gia*]. Following a long period of intermingled residence, cooperation in production development, and fighting against invasions, solidarity and unity amongst the ethnic groups of Vietnam has become stronger, creating a community as the origin and important basis for ensuring political stability, security and defense for the ethnic minority and mountainous areas in particular and the country in general.<sup>18</sup>

The idea of a harmonious upland (imagined) community again resonates strongly with socialist era ideas of fraternity and solidarity and highlights how the centre state does not just deploy disciplinary notions of power in its imaginary: rather, the contemporary vision for the uplands encompasses a range of development narratives: of modernisation, marketisation, cultural improvement, ethnic harmony, as well as of internal order and social stability. It is truly a ‘biopolitical’ project, in Foucauldian terms, as power is deployed to nurture upland populations to be uniform within the national ideal, and passive and productive in the nation building process.

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<sup>18</sup> The oblique reference to ‘politics’ here (*chính trị*) no doubt relates to the occasional outbreak of unrest in ethnic minority areas, notably the protests in the central highlands in the mid 1990s. But it also refers to the wider struggles of the centre state to incorporate (in earlier periods) and placate (more recently) the uplands within their political project.

### *Depoliticising ethnic minorities through performances and pictures*

Through textual devices such as the programme document I have just described the centre state projects the idea of a peaceful and unified society in the borderlands, uniformly striving for development and progress in the uplands under the benevolent hand of the party state. In the process all cultural, social and economic differences between groups will dissolve, or will at least become 'non-political'. Performative rituals and pictorial representations are important in buttressing this modern state rendering of ethnicity and ethnic harmony. For what they embody is a particular projection of ethnic identity, as exotic, primordial, unique and flamboyant but ultimately delinked from all historical and social context.

When important meetings take place in the borderlands between visiting cadre from the centre and local provincial and district officials, these occasions are invariably prefaced by some form of ethnic minority cultural performance. Ethnic groups in traditional costumes serenade the delegates with dance performances, singing and instrument playing. The impression of harmony is carefully cultivated as ethnic minority groups serenade each other in a state-imagined recreation of an upland idyll. Through these performances the particular ethnic groups themselves, and the complexity of their culture, customs and identity, are delinked from any context and dissolve in a kaleidoscope of colour, costume and exoticism. The state and the certainty of bureaucratic order is then poised to impose unity and harmony upon this chaotic diversity as the delegates get down to the serious business of making and discussing policy. In this way ethnic solidarity and harmony is portrayed as the gift of the state to the people of the uplands, providing a stable and rational platform through which mutual progress and development can take place.

This imaginary is visually present everywhere in the northern uplands, through the billboards, posters and banners that line highways and important intersections, and which dominate state spaces in towns and villages. Slogans and pictures are a potent medium through which state ideas can be propagated and their use has been integral to state-making practices since the early years of the state socialist project. Representations of ethnic harmony also remain remarkably consistent from past to present. Glossy picture books of socialist-era iconography have become popular and

are widely sold to tourists in Hanoi, and the number of stalls and shops selling supposedly authentic hand painted propaganda posters has also mushroomed. Many of the images of ethnic minorities on these older posters resonate with the current depictions. Ethnic minorities are invariably portrayed as travelling in solidarity along a common pathway to progress, fortified by staunch slogans extolling the people of the region to strive for development under the state's direction.

One common slogan I encountered during fieldwork could be seen on large billboards in the district town of Cao Xuyên, through which I often passed: “All ethnic minority people join hands to build the new rural areas” (*nhân dân các dân tộc chung tay xây dựng nông thôn mới*).<sup>19</sup> The huge picture on the billboard depicts smiling ethnic minority people dressed in traditional costume, along with state cadre, workers and soldiers, all with happy and expectant expressions. The backdrop to the picture is a panorama of ethnic minority women working in fields laden with ripening corn at harvest time (see Photo 2.2).

A large billboard in the centre of Vĩnh Thủy commune has the same slogan and a similar highly stylised depiction of different ethnic minority groups. All are standing together beside a woman driving a tractor, and some of the ethnic minority people in the picture are clutching instructional books from the Party. In the background are power lines and a modern factory, along with abundant corn in the fields and modern farm machinery. White doves flutter around a large flower in the centre of the picture, with each of the six petals bearing a modernising slogan: healthy identity, culture (*bản sắc, văn hóa lành mạnh*); advanced knowledge (*kiến thức nâng cao*); a rich and civilised lifestyle (*cuộc sống giàu văn minh*); economic commodity development (*kinh tế, hàng hóa phát triển*); clean, green and beautiful environment (*môi trường xanh, sạch, đẹp*); and modern development planning (*quy hoạch phát triển hiện đại*)<sup>20</sup> (see Photo 2.3). These pictures and slogans embody the government's modernising vision

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<sup>19</sup> This slogan is part of the ‘New Rural’ programme, a major party state initiative to promote rural modernisation which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup> On the right side of the sign, under the words “build the new rural areas” (*xây dựng nông thôn mới*) is a popular slogan of rule of the party state in the post *đổi mới* era, following the 1998 ‘grassroots democracy’ decree: “The people know, the people discuss, the people do, the people inspect and the people enjoy” (*dân biết, dân bàn, dân làm, dân kiểm tra, dân hưởng thụ*).

for ethnic minorities in the uplands and the overall message is clear: ethnic differences and cultural traditions dissolve under the party state's leadership for modernisation and progress in the borderlands.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has focused upon attempts by the centre state to incorporate the ethnic minority uplands into a unified nation state, as a historical project of power. Despite differences between the successive colonial, nationalist, socialist and post socialist regimes that have operated in the northern uplands over the past 100 years, all have shared a common concern with extending the authority and state forms prevalent in the lowlands, to the upland, ethnic minority periphery. Until very recently, these attempts have been only partially successful at best. Instead, the very technologies that centre state planners have deployed to regulate and incorporate the people of the region, have in fact provided the space in which ethnic minority people have been able to pursue their own projects of power. The people of the uplands feed off and transform the governmental categories and technologies of state, even as they are transformed by them.

Centre state powerholders from colonial times onwards have imagined and attempted to construct a particular local state form in the uplands through which to project their integrative project of power: that of the ethnic state. It is in this local ethnic state space that political *metis* is exercised, and projects of power pursued. Under the ethnic state idea, ethnic minority elites were to manage the uplands as willing proxies of the centre state, gradually incorporating the lands and people of the region under the mantle of lowland, centre state rule. In return, these ethnic elites (principally the Thái, but also the Nùng who hold positions of power and authority in Vĩnh Thủy commune today) were preserved in their preeminent position in the uplands as overlords administering

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<sup>21</sup> The billboards and performances I have described evoke aspects of Peter Jackson's analysis of the 'regime of images' in Thailand, whereby performance is deemed the preeminent criteria for judging proper Thai citizenship, overseen by a 'system of political power over public discourse that holds the regime of images in place' (Jackson 2004:194). Alongside the ordering of superficial appearances, Jackson contends that in Thailand there is a corresponding 'disinterest in controlling the private domain of life' (Jackson 2004:181) but this is not the case in Vietnam, where the state building project has always been concerned with policing private behaviour and imposing a disciplining morality. Attempts at imposing this morality are discussed in detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

to other upland ethnic groups, first as landlords and more recently as local bureaucrats. But from colonial times onwards, local elites have not fulfilled this centre state imagined role. Rather, they have pursued their own projects of power within this ethnic state construct. The Dèò family clan worked with the French colonial state, but also around it as they continued to traffic opium and engaged in political alliances with the Chinese. They deployed *metis* as an adaptive and cunning form of agency to pursue their projects of power in the local ethnic state space.

In tandem with the system of proxy rule, the centre state has also attempted to carefully manage a process of ethnic classification through which the people's of the region have been ordered and made legible to the state. This regulatory system has embedded ethnicity as an overarching governmental category within the ethnic state, and has buttressed the centre state's project of power in the uplands, but has also opened up spaces through which ethnic minority people have pursued their own projects of power. The classification system delineating ethnic groups is a heavily incentivised process that has itself generated demands to be recognised as an ethnic group.

Ethnic categories, as social constructs of the state, serve various project of power for as Philip Taylor points out they matter "in shaping the social terrain and the categories through which ethnic minorities can be known" (Taylor 2008:6). We can recognise ethnic categories as social constructs and attempts at social engineering, but they are then no less potent. In time they have come to be the categories through which people define themselves and others, particularly in relation to the state. Group identities are not primordial 'givens' then, but are "modern entities constructed in tandem with the emergence of the nation-state" (Taylor 2008:16).

From the late 1990s onwards, the centre state has demonstrated an increased capacity to deliver resources to the uplands, effectively intensifying the integration process through distributing state munificence. Economic development and prosperity are increasingly shared goals between state cadre and local people, a compact which ultimately cements the state's project of power for national integration. Local ethnic minority people though continue to exercise *metis* in around the governmental technologies of state, and indeed their ability to pursue projects of power in the local



state space is dependent upon the governmental practices and processes with which these projects are intimately and symbiotically entwined.



**Photo 2.1:** A billboard on a main highway, advertising Hmông mobile phone language services from Viettel, a military owned telecom company. This image is symptomatic of state attempts to incorporate the uplands, and reflects too local people's desires to link in to wider networks of opportunity.



**Photo 2.2:** 'New Rural' programme billboard in the district town, Cao Xuyen



**Photo 2.3:** A 'New Rural' billboard in Vĩnh Thủy commune

## CHAPTER 3

### The Locally Enacted Ethnic State

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter I discussed the historical projects of power of colonial, nationalist, socialist and post-socialist states in the northwest of Vietnam. I characterised these projects as successive attempts to pacify, render legible and ultimately incorporate the highlands and the people living there under a unified, centralised state idea, a local ‘ethnic’ state run by ethnic minority people themselves. The ethnic state imagined by centre state planners today is one where ethnic groups co-exist peacefully, harmoniously and a-politically under the paternal eye of the (ethnically Kinh) government in Hanoi. How does the centre state project and enact this ethnic state imaginary in the northwestern borderlands?

In this chapter I show how, in the fairly typical upland ethnic minority commune of Vĩnh Thủy in Lào Cai province, ethnic minority groups, and particularly the elites within these groups, rework this centre state imaginary and the associated governmental technologies through which state planners attempt to make it real. Local people reimagine the ethnic state and skilfully manipulate state technologies in the local state space, according to local norms, political practices and structures of power. They work within the centre state’s own governmental categories, simultaneously feeding off them and continually transforming them through the exercise of *metis* in their everyday political practice. In the process the local lineages that dominate commune politics continually bolster and perpetuate an entrenched pattern of elite rule.

Rural elites have of course always dominated village politics throughout Vietnam. In 1988 the respected historian Dinh Thu Cuc found it necessary to castigate, in the Communist Party’s theoretical journal *Tạp Chí Cộng Sản*, those he described as ‘village bullies’ who he said:

have been using their public positions and lineage ties – a problem that has become a grave concern in recent years – to control people, form factions, and oppress honest and legitimate laborers, resulting in the loss of internal unity (Dutton et. al. 2012:520).

In the previous chapter I highlighted how Thái lineages have traditionally dominated upland politics and become the dominant overlords in the northwest highlands. In Vĩnh Thủy commune there are no Thái households, but another Tai speaking group, the Nùng, are one of the two largest and most dominant groups in the commune. The Nùng are closely associated with the Thái and have historically been close to lowland administrators, carrying out a similar role as proxy rulers in the highlands. Their prevalence in village politics in Vĩnh Thủy is therefore consistent with the historical pattern of elite rule I have described for the northwest region generally.

The other dominant ethnic group in Vĩnh Thủy is the Hmông, who have traditionally been one of the highland groups subject to oppression by Tai speaking landlords and political overseers in the northwest, under the ethnic state construct. Writing on the Hmông in Lào Cai province Jean Michaud portrays them as political outsiders, claiming that what he sees as their locally rooted decision-making processes “ill fit modern politics” (Michaud 2012:15). Sarah Turner shares a similar view, arguing that:

Although the Vietnam state appoints Hmông to local People’s Committees, the limited power of these individuals within Hmông communities is widely recognised, and seldom results in chances to exploit opportunities for accumulation (Turner, 2012:10).

Rather than being the “society unfamiliar with the workings of centralised politics” that Michaud (2012:6) describes, I contend that many amongst the Hmông in Vĩnh Thủy are highly politically literate, and are in fact intimately involved in the politics of the local state. Hmông elites, like their Nùng counterparts, staff the local bureaucracy as local agents of the state and therefore effectively embody state power in the locality.<sup>1</sup> They are deeply engaged in governmental processes, and are highly adept at securing both material resources, and political power, through the local state. Local Hmông residents of the commune in turn are keen to engage with the state in order to gain government employment and to access programmes for social welfare, poverty reduction and agricultural modernization. Local people in Vĩnh Thủy engage

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<sup>1</sup> The Hmông’s political prominence in Vĩnh Thủy stems from their long residence in the commune and their position as one of the numerically largest groups. The increased confidence and political integration of Hmông in Lào Cai generally though also perhaps stems from increased integration in marketing networks, for cardamom for example, but also hybrid corn, which is the predominant cash crop in Vĩnh Thủy. Hmông farmers have done well from the trade in hybrid corn in the commune, as they have extensive upland land holdings on which corn is grown.

intimately with the state through their ties to officials in the local state space: ties of family, friendship, and relationships of reciprocity and obligation. They attempt to leverage whatever connections they have to access their share of state resources.

Local officials exercise the mandate of the centre state, but do so in a highly vernacularized and contingent way. This vernacularisation of the centre state's governmental processes is particularly apparent in regard to the classificatory category of 'ethnicity'. As I shall show in this chapter, in and through the local state in Vĩnh Thủy commune, dominant lineage groups use the government prescribed division of power between ethnic groups to cement their own political ascendancy. They work within the rigid ethnic boxes to favour those in their familial and political networks in the distribution of state resources. As a result, those in the commune who are not well connected suffer relative neglect, including Hmông and Nùng people in outlying villages of the commune, as well as other smaller ethnic groups, notably the Dao. Power in the commune comes from control of the local party state apparatus in the local state space, and the opportunities this presents to manipulate and feed off centre state governmental processes.

### **Making the ethnic state idea real in Vĩnh Thủy commune**

The ethnic state imaginary that I described in the previous chapter is enacted in very real ways, through specific institutional arrangements and associated governmental technologies. Through these means the centre state attempts to carefully regulate ethnic groups and impose order, discipline and legibility. It is these mechanisms that I shall first examine, starting with the local party state system, which is a critical technology of rule.

#### ***The commune level party state system***

Vĩnh Thủy shares a common institutional system with rural areas throughout Vietnam, and this system is the basic building block upon which the local ethnic state is constructed. In rural Vietnam the commune (*xã*) is the lowest official level of government, mirrored in urban areas by the ward (*phường*) level. Communes are usually made up of a cluster of villages (*thôn*). The commune in turn sits below the district (*huyện*) and the province (*tỉnh*) in the administrative and political hierarchy of

the Vietnamese system. The hierarchical relationship between levels of government is clearly enshrined in the constitution as ‘democratic centralism’ and is reinforced through routine administrative and regulatory practice. For example, the district controls budget allocations for the commune and approves personnel positions and salaries, and the province in turn is similarly responsible for budgets and personnel at the district level. Trang explains that:

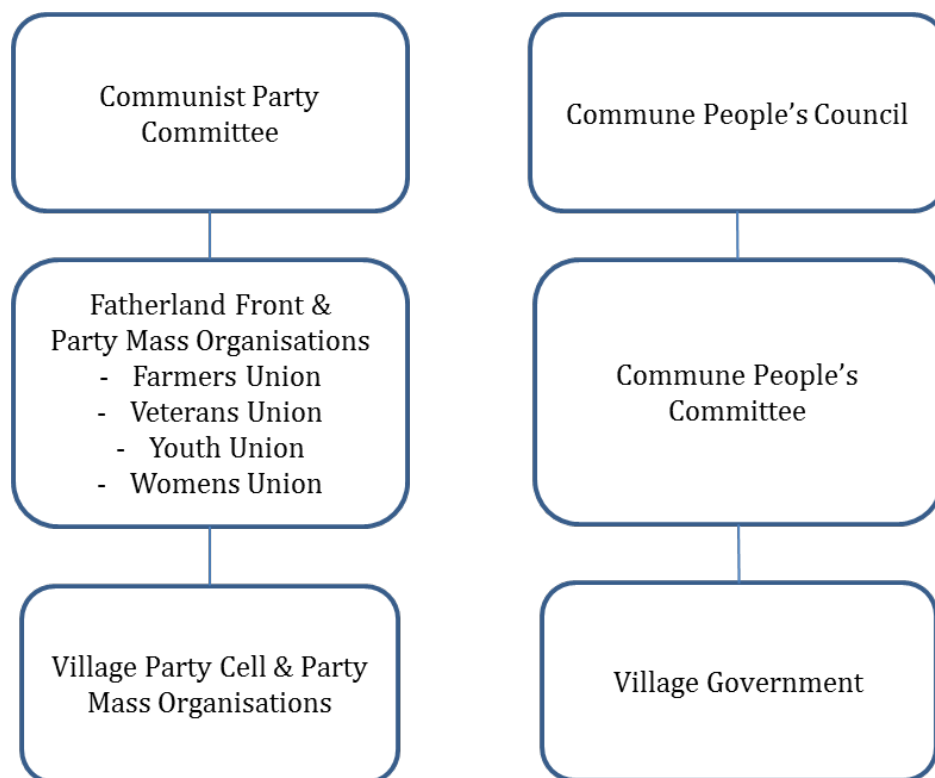
For the Vietnamese authorities, there is no contradiction between the two concepts of centralism and democracy. In fact, they believe that centralism without democracy leads to bureaucratic, authoritarian and dictatorial centralism. Democracy with a lack of centralism leads to a kind of indiscriminate democracy and anarchism (Trang 2004:140).

The central level of government is responsible for making national policies and guidelines to which provinces must adhere, but provinces have the scope to interpret national policies according to local circumstances, through issuing provincial level plans, guiding circulars and instructions for the implementation of national policy.

Upland communes like Vĩnh Thủy are also subject to a dual system of control by the Communist Party, which operates throughout the political system in Vietnam. At every administrative level there is a corresponding party organisation that operates in parallel with the government. One party state officer in the commune described the respective responsibilities of the Party and government in these terms: “the Party is the leader and the government is the manager”. This is a common expression amongst officials throughout Vietnam and clearly states the primacy of the Party (and the political) in the state system. At the commune, district and provincial levels then, the People’s Committee does the work of government but is held accountable to the Party: to the mass organisations under the Fatherland Front, and ultimately to the Communist Party secretary who is the preeminent official at each level. In Vĩnh Thủy the primacy of the Party in the system is reinforced as the existing party secretary is also the chairman of the People’s Council. Figure 3.1 shows the institutional arrangements for Vĩnh Thủy commune, with the twin pillars of rule apparent, of party and government.



**Figure 3.1: The parallel party state system in Vĩnh Thủy commune**



The People's Council elects members of the People's Committee, and the people directly elect the People's Council. However, in practice elections are seldom competitive, with the Party able to approve, and thus restrict, the list of candidates.<sup>1</sup> Tran Thi Thu Thang notes in her study of village level elections how there is usually only one candidate for positions and how that candidate is carefully vetted and pre-selected by the local party cell (Trang 2004), leading Ben Kerkvliet to remark of the Vietnamese system generally that "selection is more significant than election" (Kerkvliet 2004:11).<sup>2</sup> For elections in Vĩnh Thủy commune too, local party state officials carefully manage the process of selecting and approving candidates, and there is often only one candidate for a post, rendering the election itself a formality.

<sup>1</sup> Vietnam has regular national and local elections in which all registered voters participate. To be registered as a voter one does not need to be a member of the Party. Similarly in theory to stand for election to public office one does not need to be a member of the Party. In practice, however, the party machinery vets all candidates and closely controls the electoral process. Only party approved 'independent' candidates can therefore stand. At the National Assembly election in May 2011, 8.4% of elected representatives were not Communist Party members. (Voice of Vietnam website, 03/06/2011: <http://english.vov.vn/Home/Election-results-for-NA-and-Peoples-Council-deputies-announced/20116/127197.vov>).

<sup>2</sup> This is also the case for ward level elections in Hanoi City (Koh 2004).

There are 22 posts listed in the official commune officer's manifest for Vĩnh Thủy commune, which is presented in Table 3.1.<sup>3</sup> At the highest level of commune politics the commune party secretary (*bí thư đảng ủy xã*) has the pre-eminent role as we have discussed, working closely with the chairman of the Commune People's Committee (*chủ tịch UBND xã*) who is responsible for day-to-day management of the commune. Whilst officials nominally report to the party secretary, the chairman of the People's Committee also has a great deal of power within the system, in making decisions and ensuring for the effective management of the commune.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 3.1: Commune party state officers in Vĩnh Thủy commune**

No.	Position in the commune	Ethnic Group of the current incumbent
Party officials		
1	Secretary of the Party <i>Bí thư Đảng ủy xã</i>	Nùng
2	President of Fatherland Front <i>Chủ tịch mặt trận tổ quốc xã</i>	Pa'Si
3	President of the Women's Union <i>Chủ tịch hội phụ nữ xã</i>	Hmông
4	President of the Veteran's Union <i>Chủ tịch hội cựu chiến binh xã</i>	Kinh
5	President of the Farmer's Union <i>Chủ tịch hội nông dân xã</i>	Hmông
6	Secretary of the Youth Union <i>Bí thư đoàn thanh niên</i>	Hmông
Government officials		
1	Chairman of the People's Committee <i>Chủ tịch UBND xã</i>	Hmông
2	Vice Chairman of People's Committee <i>Phó chủ tịch UBND xã</i>	Hmông
3	Vice Chairman of People's Committee <i>Phó chủ tịch UBND xã</i>	Nùng
4	Cadastral & Construction officer <i>Địa chính – Xây dựng xã</i>	Hmông
5	Cadastral & Construction officer <i>Địa chính – Xây dựng xã</i>	Nùng
6	Cultural & Social officer <i>Văn hóa – Xã hội xã</i>	Nùng
7	Cultural & Social officer <i>Văn hóa – Xã hội xã</i>	Nùng

<sup>3</sup> In addition to these posts, there are a number of deputy positions that also receive a small stipend, for example the position of deputy commune policeman. These 22 positions listed are the ones identified as important by the authorities in their official lists.

<sup>4</sup> The level of political representation of women in the commune party state structure is extremely low. There is only one senior female cadre, the Head of the Women's Union.

8	Justice & Civil officer <i>Tư pháp – Hộ tịch xã</i>	Hmông
9	Justice & Civil officer <i>Tư pháp – Hộ tịch xã</i>	Nùng
10	Financial & Planning officer <i>Tài chính – Kế hoạch xã</i>	Kinh
11	Office – Statistics officer <i>Văn phòng – Thống kê xã</i>	Nùng
12	Office – Statistics officer <i>Văn phòng – Thống kê</i>	Nùng
13	Office – Statistics officer <i>Văn phòng – Thống kê xã</i>	Kinh
Others		
1	Military Commander <i>Chỉ huy trưởng Quân sự xã</i>	Nùng
2	Chief Policeman <i>Trưởng công an xã</i>	Hmông
3	Vice Chairman of the People’s Council <i>Phó chủ tịch hội đồng nhân dân</i>	Dao

The chairman has two deputies who are responsible respectively for economic development and social and cultural development and who oversee the work of the commune officers in these respective fields. Within the People’s Committee there are officers responsible for cultural and social affairs, the administration of justice and regulations, mapping and construction, and financial planning and statistics.

The mass organisations of the party are responsible for political mobilization and disseminating political doctrine and directives from the Party. They are also nominally responsible for overseeing the work of the People’s Committee officers working in their respective fields. Each in turn sits under the umbrella of the Fatherland Front, the apex mass organisation of the Party. Within the commune party state structure there is also a vice chairman of the People’s Council and representatives of the security establishment: The military commander (otherwise described as the head of national defence in the commune, or perhaps more appropriately the militia head) and the chief policeman.

Officially the Party sets the political direction, whilst the officers of the People’s Committee manage and take responsibility for the day-to-day business and functioning of government. This arrangement holds true at all levels of government, from the national to provincial, district and commune levels. In practice though, the routine

operation of commune government and politics in Vĩnh Thủy sees the blurring of these clear divisions of labour and responsibility amongst government officials and party cadre. The melding of responsibilities and practices is reflected too in the fact that appointments to positions in either the Party or the People's Committee are interchangeable, with many commune officials taking up posts in both bodies over the course of their careers. All officials in the commune are party members after all, and membership of the Party remains paramount for centre state leaders in determining who is fit to rule.

### *The village level political system and closed circuits of power*

Beneath the commune level government and party system lies a very similar village-level system. Whilst the structure is not exactly identical, many of the important posts are replicated (see Table 3.2). Thus there is a village head responsible for the day-to-day management of the village, and a village party secretary. The party secretary post appears to be largely ceremonial in Vĩnh Thủy though as in practice village party secretaries are not actively involved in the everyday management and administration of the village, which is left to the village head. Many of the village party secretaries in Vĩnh Thủy are in fact commune level cadre, which works to consolidate and extend the control of the commune over the village.

This partly reflects the relatively low levels of party membership in the commune, as party posts need to be filled by party members. In the commune as a whole, as the party secretary explained to me, there are only about 80 party members, which is under 3% of the total commune population. Some of these party members are elderly and thus not active in commune or village administration any more so the remaining active party members must therefore take on a variety of senior roles. In practice then party membership is an important way in which power is consolidated and maintained within a relatively small ruling elite, one that is inherently trustworthy to higher-level officials because of their party membership.

The eleven officially mandated village level officer posts are listed in Table 3.2. All eleven positions come with small government allowances. However, in practice few of the 12 villages in the commune have all of these designated positions filled, and in fact village leaders struggled to list all of these posts when asked. Most only knew of the

most important, such as village leader and deputy leader (who is also head of village security); village party secretary; agricultural extensionist; and head of the Women's Union. The latter two posts are important in the commune because of their close association with the many government and donor-funded projects active in the commune.

**Table 3.2: Official village level positions**

No.	Position
1	Party Secretary <i>bí thư chi bộ</i>
2	Village Head <i>trưởng thôn</i>
3	Policeman/ Deputy Village Head <i>công an viên/ phó thôn</i>
4	Head of the Fatherland Front <i>trưởng ban công tác mặt trận</i>
5	Head of the Farmers Union <i>trưởng chi hội nông dân</i>
6	Head of the Women's Union <i>trưởng chi hội phụ nữ</i>
7	Head of the Veteran's Association <i>trưởng chi hội cựu chiến binh</i>
8	Secretary of the Youth Union <i>bí thư đoàn thanh niên</i>
9	Head of Village National Defence <i>thôn đội trưởng</i>
10	Agricultural Extension Officer <i>cán bộ khuyến nông thôn</i>
11	Nurse <i>y tá thôn bản</i>

Many of the other posts were often not filled in practice in the villages or, when they were, were taken up by people already holding one or more posts in the village administration. This serves to effectively concentrate and consolidate the hold of village elites over decision-making in the village. Two reasons for this were frequently given. First that the salary for these posts is so small that officials had to take on more posts to make their commitment worthwhile. As one village head explained to me frankly:

Many people do more than one job in the village. If they only do the one job, they can only make about 200 – 300,000 Dong per month and that just isn't

enough.<sup>5</sup> When they do more than one job, they get the full salary for the first position and half of the salary for the second position.

In some villages it was not unusual for officials to have three positions and village heads too often take on additional portfolios.

The second common justification for the concentration of political positions within a small group is ‘capacity’ (*khả năng*), or lack thereof. According to this view, there are only a limited number of people in the village who are educated and competent enough (i.e. have enough capacity) to be able to do the work of government. Thus, the village head of Cao Thành B explained to me “we have to do more than one job in the village because, in the whole village, there are only six people who are capable enough. No one else can do the work”. A lack of capacity is thus used as a reason for excluding people from competing for political positions. This was illustrated in the case of an election in Ninh Điền A village for the position of head of the village Women’s Union organisation. The incumbent officer explained to me that at the election two years previously there were two other people interested in the post. One woman was excluded on the basis of being pregnant with her third child, as the Party encourages people not to have more than two children. The other candidate was illiterate, so was disqualified from the election process on the basis that she wouldn’t have the capacity to do the work.

The notion of capacity ties in with narratives of underdevelopment discussed in the previous chapter, and is an important technology of government in building the local ethnic state. It is used to ring fence political office for powerholders and simultaneously exclude others on seemingly technical and objective grounds. Assessing capacity is a difficult and ultimately highly subjective endeavour but technologies associated with ‘capacity building’ (*xây dựng năng lực*) have become integral to both government and international organisations’ projects for development in the northwestern uplands. Consequently, a great deal of money and effort is spent on developing complicated metrics and methodologies for measuring capacity, which are loaded towards what state planners believe to be the appropriate skills and behaviour required of ethnic minority people. Deploying these procedures for capacity building

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<sup>5</sup> About USD 10-15 per month. This is for the lower level village positions: village heads and deputy heads receive two to three times this amount.

enables powerholders to defer granting power to others until such time in the distant future that they have been adequately trained and developed. It is therefore an important component in the modern state's project of governing the uplands, as it serves to reinforce closed circuits of power within the local state system. As with the ethnic classification process, some groups are perceived as more developed (or having more 'capacity') than others, and are thus deemed more suitable to assume positions of power and authority within the local governmental system.

### *The careful regulation of political power between ethnic groups*

Promoting peaceful co-existence and ethnic harmony in the northern borderlands, under the guiding hand of the benevolent state, is a key element in the centre state imaginary for the local ethnic state. In Vĩnh Thủy commune, the concern with ethnic harmony is such an important political project that it has been institutionalized in the organisation of the local state structure, albeit unofficially. The two largest ethnic groups in the commune, the Hmông and the Nùng, are almost equal in terms of population size, with 40% each of the commune population. These two ethnic groups also enjoy almost equal representation amongst the body of commune officials, with nine Nùng officials and eight Hmông officials amongst the 22 commune officers (see Table 3.1). All of the positions that they fill are the important positions in the local political system.

This careful balancing of representation between the two dominant ethnic groups is no accident: rather, it reflects the centre state's concern with ethnic harmony. District officials are responsible for approving positions in the commune government and there is an established convention that political power between these two groups is evenly shared. This precise management of political representation isn't visible in any of the guiding documents relating to personnel management that I could find, either at the provincial or national levels, but is a long-standing practice that was confirmed by many of my commune informants and interviewees. Deciding upon who should be an official is a negotiated process and ethnic balance is an important parameter for both the commune cadre who propose candidates for positions, and for the district officials that approve them.

Crucially, in Vĩnh Thủy commune the two top posts of party secretary and People's Committee chairman are always split between the Nùng and the Hmông. Currently then, the party secretary is Nùng, whilst the chairman is Hmông. Each of the other smaller ethnic groups in the commune are also allocated a position in the commune government: the vice-chairman of the People's Council is Dao, the president of the Fatherland Front comes from the small Pa'Si community, and the head of the Veteran's Association is Kinh. As one elderly resident of the commune explained: "there are seven ethnic groups in the commune and each group picks at least one person to work for the commune. Then, if there are any problems they have their own leaders to solve them".

This ethnic division of power has been the norm in the commune for many years, reflecting the awareness of the sensitivity of ethnic relations in the borderlands. The convention serves to institutionalize a set division of ethnic power in the commune, and places ethnic contestation for formal political power effectively out of bounds. On the surface at least then, the state mandated system of power sharing ensures that a form of ethnic harmony prevails. This is illustrated in the working relationship between the two senior commune officials, the chairman Mr. Võ Văn Bình and the party secretary Mr. Lê Thanh Hải. They work closely together at all times on official commune business and always appear careful to discuss enquiries and requests for information or support with each other, and often defer to each other. An example of this was my request during fieldwork to undertake a household survey in six of the villages in the commune. As I was staying in the house of Mr. Bình and interacted with him on a daily basis I sought his permission first. He carefully referred me to Mr. Hải, saying that if the party secretary agreed then he (Mr. Bình) would also approve my request. In the event, Mr. Hải said exactly the same thing, deferring to Mr. Bình.

### *Village leaders as gatekeepers of the ethnic state*

The post of village leader is critical in the process of making the ethnic state manifest in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Village leaders act as the gatekeepers to the village and are often the conduits through which villagers engage with commune officials, or the higher-level state. Village leaders receive a salary of around 800-900,000 Dong per



month, which increases marginally each year.<sup>6</sup> As with commune officers, they receive more money if they achieve additional education or qualifications. Many of the village leaders (particularly the older and more experienced ones) complained that this salary was insufficient given the amount of work they have to do, and the trouble they encounter. Some of the older village leaders also complained that they no longer wanted to do the job, but were being kept on in the position against their will by commune officials.

The position does though provide significant opportunities to benefit personally through channelling state resources to family and kin, particularly from state poverty reduction and rural development projects. Village leaders are at the vanguard of the state, expected to demonstrate new crops and act as model citizens, and as such are the first to receive subsidies and inputs from state programmes, participate in study tours to other communes, and attend training events. The village head of An Trĩ 2 village for example had prospered significantly from participating in the commune's project to develop black pigs, and is also pioneering the growth of tea in the village for which he receives significant subsidies from the government. His position as village head enables him to access a range of resources and training opportunities, and he and his household benefit significantly as a result.

Village leaders in Vĩnh Thủy often recited to me a long list of tasks that they were responsible for. Their primary political task is the dissemination of commune directives and information on political campaigns announced at the weekly commune meeting, which they have to attend in the commune office every Wednesday morning. Each village head subsequently holds a village meeting in their own home on Wednesday night, to which every household must send a representative. One village leader explained: "the higher level tells us things that we have then to tell the villagers at our own meeting. I don't always understand everything that they tell us but I'm the middleman so I always pass it on".

Other important tasks include mobilization of the village for public works, important meetings and special party occasions; conflict resolution in the village; village

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<sup>6</sup> Approximately USD 40-45 per month.

discipline and security (along with the deputy village head, who is also head of village security); and the monitoring of births and deaths. They also have to attend a large number of training sessions for the many projects and programmes run by the government or the international non-governmental organisation operating in the commune.

By far the largest and most onerous task is collecting the financial contributions (*khoản đóng góp*) expected from each household, for a variety of commune funds. The village leader of Thạch Liêm village described this as his “most important work” and related the long list of contributions that people had already had to make by the middle of 2013: for the ‘New Rural’ programme of the government which was constructing new commune roads, for the education encouragement club, the Farmer’s Union, Red Cross Union, Charity Union, Elderly Union, and for the fund for poor people. The size of the contribution required for each of the funds was small (a few thousand Dong per household) but the contribution required for the New Rural programme was substantial, and had to be made even by residents of villages that were not receiving new roads under the programme.<sup>7</sup>

At the weekly commune meeting the village heads’ progress on collecting contributions is always the first item discussed and takes up a considerable amount of the meeting time. Village heads are assessed based on their ability to collect these contributions, with the village head of Thạch Liêm proudly reporting that he had managed to get the money “from all except the very poorest three households in the village”. There is no formal taxation on household agricultural production in the commune but these contributions appear to operate as a local tax in all but name.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Households in the villages that were set to directly benefit from the roads had to contribute 500,000 Dong (about USD 25) and all the other households in the commune had to contribute 400,000 Dong (about USD 20). Although this was a one-off payment, it was substantial and was hard to make for poorer households outside of the beneficiary villages who were not offered the opportunity to labour for the contractor undertaking the work.

<sup>8</sup> There is nothing new in the levying of these contributions. Pamela McElwee notes how they were a prominent feature in the villages in Ha Tinh province where she conducted fieldwork in 2000. She notes: “The largest number of local protests have been against state requirements for household ‘contributions’ to local budgets; these contributions are essentially taxes (collected in either labour days, cash or kind) which are levied on a per capita basis for development projects” (McElwee 2006:208).

Village leaders are elected every two and a half years and although many of these officials in Vĩnh Thủy had been in the position for quite some time, the post is attractive when commune officials deem it is appropriate to have a change in village leadership. This is often the case when the commune authorities decide that village leaders are becoming too old, or when a public controversy arises which makes the continuation of an incumbent untenable. An example of the former case came in early 2013 in Bình Yên village, where the former village head was replaced by a much younger man, who was brought back from the army in order to take up the post. This younger man had not, he claimed, actively sought the post, but had been nominated, subsequently elected and thus required to return to his home village. The elderly leader whom he replaced explained that the post was becoming too onerous: he was finding it hard to attend all the training sessions at the district town, and he didn't read or write Vietnamese well: "It was better to get in a younger man who can read and has numbers" he said.

An instance of replacing a village leader because of a public controversy occurred in 2013 just prior to my arrival in Vĩnh Thủy. The village head of Ninh Điền A arranged for the marriage of his son to a 16-year-old girl, when in fact the legal age for marriage is 18. This placed the commune in a difficult position, particularly as the village is the home base of the most important Hmông political clan in the commune. In the event it was resolved amicably, with the village leader replaced by his brother in a carefully orchestrated transfer of power, with only one candidate in the election. As we saw in the case of the woman disqualified from standing for office because of her illiteracy, senior party state officials in the commune are adept at stage managing elections to ensure their preferred candidates are elected.<sup>9</sup>

### *Village mentors and the attempt to discipline local ethnic power*

Another position that is pivotal in consolidating the control of the commune over villages and regulating the ethnic state is the post of 'village mentor' (*cán bộ đỡ đầu thôn*). Under the mentor system, each village is assigned a senior commune officer

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<sup>9</sup> Where the commune has no strong preference between potential candidates, elections can occasionally be competitive. This was the case in Suối Đông village, where three candidates stood at the last village head election. Two of the candidates were relatively prosperous corn traders but they were defeated by a third candidate from the Tu'Si ethnic group in the village. All had been carefully vetted by the local party first though, before they were allowed to stand.

who works closely with the village head in all aspects of village management, in implementing government directives and in enforcing government regulations. One experienced commune officer described his role as mentor in the following way:

My job as mentor is to oversee all of the work of the government and party in the village, and to help and advise the village head as he goes about his tasks. My job isn't to conflict with the village head, but to work harmoniously with him, and make sure that he does his job correctly.

Of course village heads do not always perceive of the mentors role in such a benign way, as the village head working with this particular mentor observed:

I've been a village head for some time now and have worked with quite a few mentors. They all carry out their role differently. Some let me get on with my job without too much trouble. Others though want to be involved in everything and can make my job really difficult.

However, as he observed, mentors are important too, as "they provide a connection to the commune and can decide whether the village gets things or not".

For many village leaders the presence of the village mentor acts as a significant restraint on their ability to act autonomously, with village mentors able to exert considerable control through their seniority as commune officials. The nature of village administration thus depends heavily upon the character and attitude of the village mentor, and crucially upon the relationship between the mentor and the village head.<sup>10</sup> There is also an important nurturing and paternalistic rationale underpinning the role, with mentors often describing how villagers are in need of support to overcome their backwardness or lack of capacity and understanding. One village mentor described his task as "showing the village the correct way" and another as "helping the village leader to better understand what the Party and the government expects".

The village mentor system is deployed in other ethnic minority communes in Lào Cai province and I have also seen examples of the system used in other upland communes in northern Vietnam. As with Vĩnh Thủy, the system elsewhere also appears to be

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<sup>10</sup> This will become apparent in Chapter 6 when I discuss the annual poor household census, the key process in the commune for identifying poor households. The role of village mentors in this process is key.

rooted in convention, for whilst the position of mentor is present in commune level documentation and in some instructions from the district to the commune in Vĩnh Thủy, it is not apparent in government regulations or instructions issued by the state agency with primary responsibility for the management of ethnic minorities, the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA) in Hanoi. Tellingly, CEMA officials in Hanoi with whom I regularly spoke were unsure about the status of the position of mentor, which suggests it is a locally evolved convention rather than a fixed position in the state apparatus.

**Table 3.3: List of commune party state officers as village mentors**

No.	Position in the commune	Ethnic Group of the current incumbent	Mentor Village for which they are responsible
1	Cultural & Social officer <i>Văn hóa – Xã hội xã</i>	Nùng	Cao Thành B (Hmông)
2	Cultural & Social officer <i>Văn hóa – Xã hội xã</i>	Nùng	Bình Yên (Hmông)
3	President of the Women’s Union <i>Chủ tịch hội phụ nữ xã</i>	Hmông	Cao Thành A (Hmông)
4	President of the Veteran’s Union <i>Chủ tịch hội cựu chiến binh xã</i>	Kinh	An Trí 2 (Nùng)
5	Cadastre & Construction officer <i>Địa chính – Xây dựng xã</i>	Hmông	An Trí 1 (Nùng)
6	Secretary of the Youth Union <i>Bí thư đoàn thanh niên</i>	Hmông	Ninh Điền A (Hmông)
7	Justice & Civil officer <i>Tư pháp – Hộ tịch xã</i>	Nùng	Ninh Điền B (Mixed)
8	Military Commander <i>Chỉ huy trưởng Quân sự xã</i>	Nùng	Thạch Liêm (Nùng)
9	Cadastre & Construction officer <i>Địa chính – Xây dựng xã</i>	Nùng	Trần Trà Bông (Dao)
10	Chief Policeman <i>Trưởng công an xã</i>	Hmông	Suối Đông (Hmông)
11	President of Fatherland Front <i>Chủ tịch mặt trận tổ quốc xã</i>	Pa’Si	Ninh Căn (Dao)
12	Justice & Civil officer <i>Tư pháp – Hộ tịch xã</i>	Hmông	Tràng Tôn (lead) (Nùng)
13	Office – Statistics officer <i>Văn phòng – Thống kê xã</i>	Kinh	Tràng Tôn (support) <sup>11</sup> (Nùng)

The list of mentors and the villages they are responsible for can be seen in Table 3.3. Interestingly, village mentors usually work in villages that are not populated by people from their own ethnic group. In cases where mentors share ethnicity with the village

<sup>11</sup> Tràng Tôn is the largest village in the commune and therefore has two village mentors.

residents (one Nùng village and three Hmông villages) the mentor doesn't usually work in their 'home' village, or villages where they have intimate family and kin connections.<sup>12</sup> Thus the post of village mentor appears designed to offset the power and influence of village heads in their own villages, and to act as a check upon the exercise of power by dominant village lineages. Village mentors then seem to embody some elements of a Weberian bureaucratic ideal, of the disinterested and independent exercise of authority and the neutral arbitration of village and clan interests. As neutral brokers and paternalistic nurturers, the village mentors embody the centre state imaginary for the ethnic state.

Local political practice intercedes in this centre state idealized imaginary, as we shall see in the following sections. Suffice to say at this point, the mentor assigned to each village is not usually the only commune official that takes an interest in village affairs. Commune officials are intimately embedded in their home villages and ensure that their kin and associates in their networks are well connected to political power and are the recipients of state largesse. In fact their ability to do so is integral to sustaining their power and status, as the commune operates according to both political economy and moral economy precepts: self-interest and communal perceptions of justice and reciprocity intersect in a complicated political brew that renders the notion of a disinterested bureaucratic state redundant. Village mentors appear powerless or indifferent to the practice of other senior commune officials interceding in village affairs, though they also benefit through exerting influence in their own home villages. As one village head wryly observed:

There are other people in the commune that know everything that goes on here [in my village] and they often give me advice about what I should do. I can't really ignore this advice, it wouldn't go well for me.

### **Elite families and commune politics**

The careful regulation of local party state office that I have described has enormous consequences for the local operation of political power. Within the commune, two

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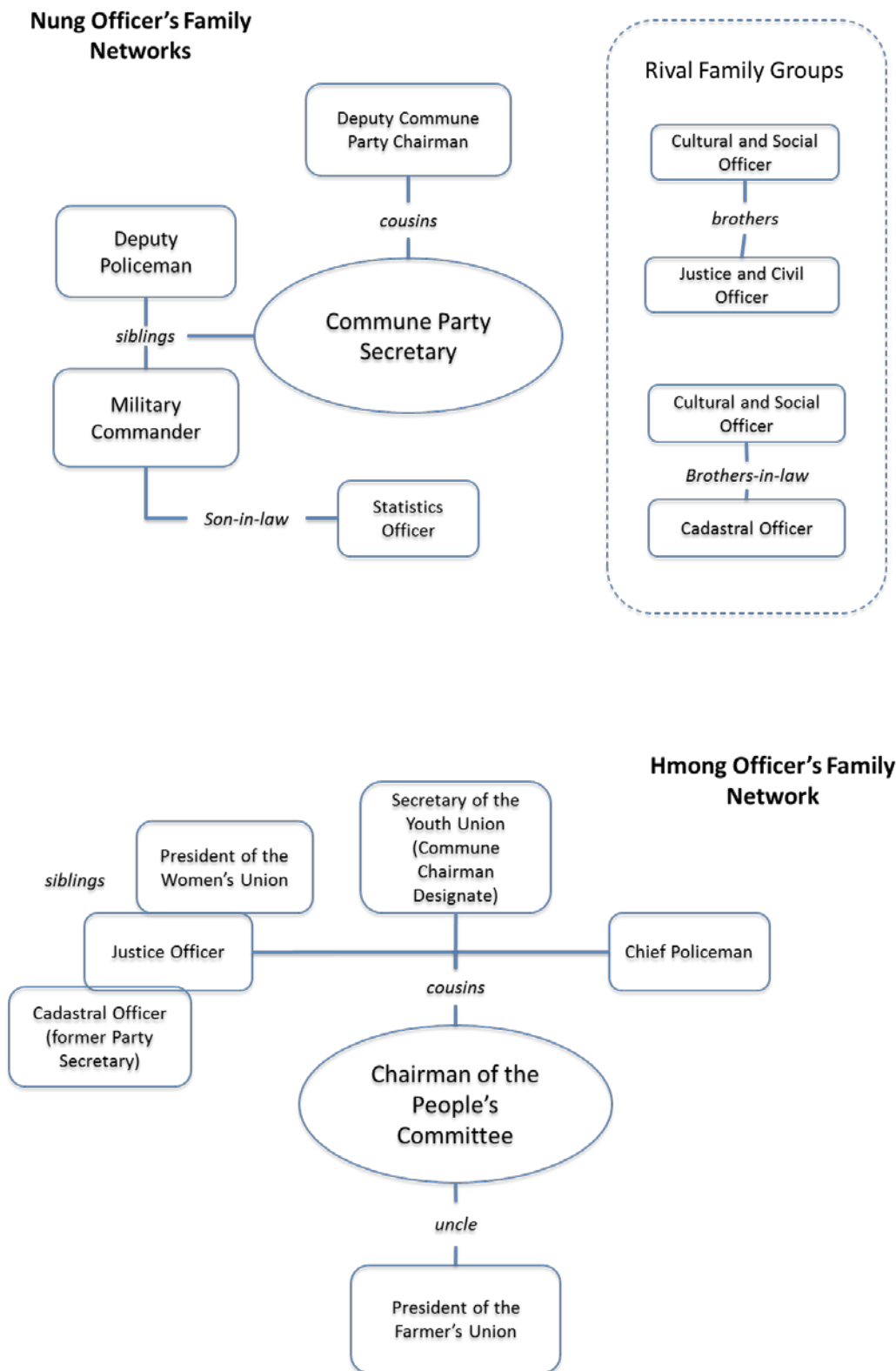
<sup>12</sup> The one exception is Ninh Điền A, where the village mentor is a Hmông from that village. He is also the village party secretary, cousin to the current commune chairman, and in line to become the next commune chairman himself. It may be that the dominant Hmông lineage in the commune deemed control of the village too important to cede to centre state regulations, even superficially.

important family groups have largely dominated politics for generations, one Nùng and one Hmông. The dominant Nùng family group is headed by the commune party secretary, Mr. Lê Thanh Hải. He is a rather taciturn and moody man who has been involved in commune politics for decades through holding a number of key posts in the commune administration before becoming party secretary. He was president of the Farmer's Union, then the head of civil defence, and then the chairman of the People's Committee. He has therefore held the two most powerful and important positions in the commune party state structure. Mr. Hải's father was previously the People's Committee chairman.

The current commune people's committee chairman, Mr. Võ Văn Bình, is the head of the dominant Hmông family group. He is an outgoing and charismatic figure who commands enormous respect in the commune, because of his position as patriarch of the commune's most powerful and influential Hmông family, and also because he previously held an important post in the Fatherland Front at the district level, and was set to return to work in the district government shortly after I completed my fieldwork. Like Mr. Hải, Mr. Bình follows in a long line of family members who have held important positions in the commune party state structure of Vĩnh Thủy. His paternal uncle was previously the party secretary and his cousin, the current secretary of the Youth Union, was Mr. Bình's designated successor as commune People's Committee chairman at the time of my fieldwork, a post he was set to assume once Mr. Bình returned to work at the district.

The chairman and party secretary sit at the apex of two established dynasties that hand on political power from generation to generation. Mr. Hải and Mr. Bình and their close relatives dominate commune politics today, just as Mr. Bình's father (as commune chairman) and Mr. Hải's uncle (as party secretary) had done before them. The extent of the family network's domination of the party state system in Vĩnh Thủy is shown in Figure 3.2. The two networks, and the satellite networks of two small rival groups in the case of the Nùng officers, encompass almost all of the important commune positions.

**Figure 3.2: Commune family networks and their domination of political office**





Within the Nùng political family network of Mr. Hải, the party secretary and his two brothers are extremely powerful, with the brothers filling the posts of military commander and deputy commune policeman. The deputy commune chairman is also a close relative of Hải's and the commune statistics officer is married to the daughter of the military commander. Among the Nùng in Vĩnh Thủy there are two other minor family groups with some political power: the cultural and social officer and the justice and civil affairs officer are brothers who in the past have challenged the political dominance of Mr. Hải's family in commune politics, as we shall see. Another cultural and social affairs officer and his brother in law, a cadastral officer, form an alternative Nùng powerbase in the commune government, albeit a smaller and less significant one that is loosely aligned through more distant family connections to Mr. Hải's political network.

Relations amongst Hmông commune officers in Vĩnh Thủy are even closer, with Mr. Bình closely related to seven of the eight Hmông officers who are all close members of his political network. The president of the Farmer's Union is Mr. Bình's uncle (and brother to the former party secretary) and Mr. Bình has five close cousins all of whom hold senior party state positions (see Figure 3.2). Indeed of the cousins, the current secretary of the Youth Union is the new commune chairman designate and another cousin, the current cadastral officer, is himself a former party secretary of the commune.<sup>13</sup>

The case of the one remaining Hmông officer, a commune vice chairman, is a little different. He shares a family name with the chairman but comes from the neighbouring district and is not a close relative. His situation is further complicated by the fact that he was appointed (and is directly paid for) under a central government programme to place well qualified graduates in the deputy chairman position in remote, rural ethnic minority communes around Vietnam. He is therefore an outsider in commune politics, despite originally being from the area and being Hmông. His outsider status is clearly apparent through the everyday work he is assigned in the commune government. Despite having the role of vice chairman he is kept away from the important activities

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<sup>13</sup> This officer, Mr. Võ Văn Nam, was demoted from his position of party secretary after he divorced and remarried. Divorce is contrary to the morality imposed upon members by the Party, as discussed in Chapter 3.

and responsibilities through which commune officers cement their political control, principally decisions over the allocation of funds for village projects, and particularly the annual poor household census process, which I examine in detail in Chapter 6. He is disconnected from the allocation of resources and benefits to the clients of the respective family networks of political power and therefore has little power of his own. Instead he is left with the task of disseminating district pronouncements and directives at the weekly commune meeting, a task deemed suitable for him as he is considered to be a representative of the higher-level bureaucracy in the commune.

Of the remaining commune officers not directly engaged in these close family-based networks, three are ethnically Kinh. The head of the Veterans Association, Mr. Thăng, is a long term resident of the commune who owns and runs the best stocked store and noodle shop in the centre of the commune.<sup>14</sup> His son runs a small mobile phone and electronics repair shop but Mr. Thăng's main source of income comes from catering for the numerous commune lunches that take place after supervision visits by district and provincial officials, and after training events run by the international non-governmental organisation active in the commune. He therefore assiduously cultivates good relations with all commune political networks in order to preserve this important stream of income, and appears careful not to become embroiled in the political intrigues of the commune government. The other two Kinh members of the administration are appointees from outside of the commune who have 'technical' roles in finance and administration which doesn't require them to engage too closely with the important and contentious commune business of determining who will receive government largesse.

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<sup>14</sup> Although the commune is overwhelmingly populated by ethnic minority groups, there are a handful of Kinh people that have lived in the commune for decades, exclusively in the central village of Ninh Điền B. The case of one Kinh woman, Ms. Giang, is illustrative of the pattern of Kinh settlement in the commune. She came to the commune in the late 1980s to work on road construction when the area was first being connected properly to the district centre, and subsequently married a local man and stayed on in the commune. Her husband had a job with the post office but after the retrenchment in state employment following the reforms of the early 1990s he lost his job, and they had no capital or land to sell to be able to relocate to the lowlands. They have struggled through with support from the commune government, who housed them for a time, gave her work as a cleaner in the commune office, and eventually gave them a small patch of steep land upon which to build a house. They were heavily reliant on support from her Kinh relatives in the lowlands in order to educate their children. Her case shows how not all Kinh migrants to the commune are necessarily as successful as Mr. Thăng, the shop owner and government official.

There is also one Pa'Si representative on the commune government who is the president of the Fatherland Front, and a Dao representative who holds the largely ceremonial position of vice chairman of the People's Council. Neither exerts much influence in commune decision-making and like the Kinh members, both are careful to maintain good relations with the two major power blocks in the commune.<sup>15</sup> Both the Nùng political network of Mr. Hai and the Hmông network of Mr. Binh embody the ethnic state idea, as they are ethnic people from the commune operating power on an everyday basis, on behalf of the centre state.

### **State crafted ethnic harmony, and its occasional rupture**

The centre state's carefully crafted public illusion of a harmonious, balanced ethnic state is periodically shattered as local elites use the system to pursue their own projects of power in the local state space. The regulation of political office between the two dominant ethnic groups in the commune serves to entrench a division between them, as each has their defined areas of operation and influence, in terms of the government positions they hold. They also have their own respective villages over which they exert influence, as outside the central village of Ninh Điền B the villages are fairly homogenous with either Nùng or Hmông majority populations.<sup>16</sup> There is consequently little material incentive or reward for either group in working collaboratively with the other, beyond the public exercise of their responsibilities of office. This became apparent to me during my residence in the commune, when I was able to contrast the workings of formal commune government activities with the informal workings of political discussion, gossip and intrigue that were prevalent in the commune, and which appeared to be the important mechanism through which

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<sup>15</sup> Interestingly the only Pa'Si commune government member is building a very large and elaborate two-storey house in the very centre of the commune, on the main street. When it is finished it will be by far the most ostentatious and expensive house in the area. His wife is a teacher and her family are government officials outside of the commune, demonstrating how important a government job and salary is for wealth accumulation. His brother is also reported to have done very well in business in the district centre as a result of the family's political connections.

<sup>16</sup> The exception to this rule are the two villages of Trần Trà Bông and Ninh Căn, which are almost exclusively populated by the Dao ethnic group, and the largest village of Tràng Tôn which, although a Nùng village, has a significant Dao population (about 20% of the village total).

consensus was generated in commune decision-making within the respective political groups, in the local state space.

The weekly commune meeting held every Wednesday morning is the preeminent example of the operation of formal governmental power. During the meeting commune officials exchange information on their respective areas of responsibility, and information is disseminated to the village heads who in turn are then expected to brief the people in their respective villages. These weekly commune meetings are conducted in a brisk and professional manner and are highly formalised, with long speeches by the party secretary extolling village heads and commune officers to impose party thinking and discipline upon the people of the commune. However, substantive discussion on issues doesn't actually take place during these meetings. Rather, decisions made by higher commune level officers or the higher-level party state are announced and disseminated down the chain of command. These meetings are also marked by a notable lack of the joking, irreverence and general chatter that usually marks the day in the commune office. It is a highly stylized and ritual event, officious and rather sombre.

In contrast much of the real discussion, speculation and planning on political matters takes place in the ground floor lobby area of the commune office, next to the administration office and meeting room, where officers like to sit and spend the day smoking and drinking tea. Few sit upstairs in their offices unless they have an important letter to write, or urgent piece of work they need to attend to. Close observation of this area during fieldwork showed how different groups convened at different times, with commune officers much more likely to sit for extended periods to discuss commune business with those in their ethnic group and close network, than with others. When the group was mixed, the discussion was generally perfunctory, about a particular circular from the district that had just arrived for example, or jocular, involving the retelling of anecdotes from time spent outside of the commune. When the participants in the discussion were of the same ethnic group, the discussion was always more likely to be either substantive, around commune business and resources, or intimate in the sense of gossiping about particular aspects of commune government and politics.

The propensity of ethnic groups within the commune political structure to conduct substantive business largely amongst themselves was illustrated in the case of private parties and celebrations. Parties to celebrate professional achievements are frequent in the commune and are an important means through which trust is built and social ties are reinforced. They are also events at which the business of commune government is discussed and decisions often made. Who is and isn't invited to these celebrations therefore provides insight into the landscape of commune alliances and political networks.

The secretary of the Youth Union and designated next Hmông commune chairman, Mr. Võ Văn Thành, held such a party at his house one day, to which I was invited. He was celebrating his recent graduation from university in Hanoi, where he had been studying by correspondence for a degree in management. Completing such a qualification is important for a commune official, as it guarantees a higher salary and demonstrates a higher level of perceived competency and capacity to be a leader. It is important both as a personal and professional marker, and the party was therefore an occasion to celebrate both a personal and a professional achievement. It was also an occasion through which Mr. Thành could establish his credentials as the next commune chairman, given that he had recently been put forward for the position.<sup>17</sup> The attendees from within the commune government would demonstrate who he and his patrons considered to be important people to whom his credentials should be presented.

In the event, all of the attendees were members of his family-kin network, as well as some representatives of Hmông families and kin groups from the five overwhelmingly

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<sup>17</sup> Candidates for the position of commune chairman are supposed to be nominated and then elected by members of the commune People's Council. However a single candidate is usually put forward unopposed and election by the People's Council is a formality. In Vĩnh Thủy commune, the selection of a candidate is a negotiated process between powerbrokers within the commune, and senior district officials as I learnt through the case of Mr. Thành. He explained to me that he had been "chosen by the commune and the district also wants me to be chairman". What this meant was that he had been put forward by his kin group as their designated candidate and the appointment is now subject to endorsement by the district. Explaining the selection of one of the youngest commune officers to be the next commune chairman Mr. Bình, the current incumbent explained: "he is young but he is a member of the most important family and it needs someone from that family to tell them what to do, otherwise they won't listen!"

Hmông villages in the commune. There wasn't a single attendee from amongst the Nùng officers in the commune, or from any of the other ethnic groups. I confirmed with Mr. Thành that it wasn't the case that they simply hadn't turned up. Rather, they hadn't been invited. This confirmed for me that ethnic groups within the commune tend to build their political networks primarily according to intimate family connections. As a consequence, the politics within ethnic groups can be far more important, and contentious, than the formalised interactions that take place between ethnic groups in the local state arena, which are subject to surveillance and close regulation by the higher-level party state.

The primacy of intra-ethnic group competition over competition between different ethnic groups results from the centre state's careful calibration of political power between ethnic groups, in the interests of promoting ethnic harmony. The centre state's efforts at ensuring ethnic balance in political representation are successful in so far as the terrain open for political competition between the two ethnic groups is restricted and clearly delineated, and officials accept that any explicit or overt attempt to exert control over other ethnic minority groups or attempt at making an ethnically based claim upon power would be dealt with very severely by higher levels of government. There is therefore no 'all or nothing' struggle for domination of the ethnic state between the two dominant ethnic groups.

In the case of the Hmông, the domination of political office by the lineage of the commune chairman is comprehensive and unchallenged. There is no lineage to rival that of Mr Binh and so no intense rivalry between different Hmông family groups. But in the case of the Nùng a bi-product of the arrangement of carefully allocating political positions to ethnic groups is to deflect political competition back within the ethnic group itself, intensifying competition amongst Nùng families and clan groups for a share of the limited power and influence available to them. One important recent episode, enacted in the local state space, illustrated this vividly. A dispute between Nùng commune actors became serious enough to involve other commune officials and set people against each other, which paralysed the workings of the whole commune government. The district was forced to intervene in 2010 by resetting the configuration of political power amongst the principal groups and sending a trusted official (Mr. Bình, the current commune chairman) back to the commune to restore order. On this

occasion competition within the Nùng precipitated the crisis, which subsequently engulfed all of the political groups in the commune and upset the illusion of harmony that centre-state planners had carefully created. Everyday politics thus exploded out beyond the carefully imposed governmental categories of the higher state.

Early in my fieldwork commune officers would tell me that Mr. Bình was sent back to the commune because there needed to be a senior Hmông official in one of the two prominent commune positions, as part of the policy of balancing offices between the two ethnic groups. This was certainly true, but doesn't explain events preceding this move, and in particular why it was necessary to shift the then incumbent, Mr. Hải, and place him in the party secretary post. Mr. Bình's wife cryptically revealed that they had to return to the commune "because some people here don't know the law" and Mr. Bình himself described the circumstances as involving "a big political conflict in the office that eventually involved all of the three big ethnic groups" (The Hmông, Nùng and Dao). Mr. Bình explained to me that he hadn't wanted to return at that time as he was happy working at the district but that he was forced to, "because the district decided that only I could settle the conflict as I was from the commune and from the most well-known family".

There are different versions told within the commune of the exact circumstances and events that precipitated the crisis and subsequent return of Mr. Bình. Tellingly though, they are all variations on the common theme of intra-Nùng political rivalry, specifically competition between the current party secretary Mr. Hải and his two brothers on one hand, and the family of the current cultural and social officer, Mr. Lê Quốc Minh, on the other. Mr. Minh and his brother I previously described as rivals to the political domination of Mr. Hải's family group, as an important Nùng family group in their own right. By all accounts there was significant discontent during Mr. Hải's period as commune chairman, and allegations of the arbitrary exercise of power by him and his brothers. Mr. Lê Quốc Minh had a bad relationship of long standing with the three brothers stemming from their rivalry for political office. The allegation is that when Mr. Minh was vice chairman of the commune People's Committee the brothers accused him of stealing from the commune office, and after an investigation he was subsequently demoted. Mr. Hải was then said to have intervened after the death of Mr. Minh's brother, when his brother's ex-wife was in conflict with the family over the

inheritance of land. Mr. Hải apparently decided in the wife's favour and forced Mr. Minh's father to sign a blank piece of paper in resolving the case, enabling Mr. Hải to dictate the terms of the land settlement.<sup>18</sup> The conflict between the Nùng spread to involve other members of the commune government, from other ethnic groups, who also disliked the way the three brothers operated. A story was related to me of how one Hmông officer took a gun from the commune office as a warning to the Hải brothers, as they were responsible for the weapons store.

Whether the events said to involve Mr. Hải and his two brothers actually occurred is almost impossible to independently verify, at least for me. But the details of the case are perhaps less important for understanding the workings of political power in the local state arena than the fact that prominent Nùng political actors (Nùng commune officials and residents of An Trí 2 village, the home village of some of the protagonists in the story) said that they did. This demonstrates how intra-ethnic rivalry in the commune can be intense, and how personal animosities and rivalry are features of the political landscape that the carefully crafted ethnic state idyll cannot always disguise. Mr. Hải was eventually moved on (albeit to a similarly powerful position) because the tumult in the commune had become too big for the higher state to ignore. The behaviour of commune officers was distorting the carefully crafted imaginary of commune ethnic harmony and balance that the centre state is keen to disseminate at all times. Real personal politics and personalities had interceded to shatter this illusion and it required the return of a Hmông patriarch from the most powerful political dynasty in the commune to restore equilibrium.

### **Inequality and exclusion from political power and state resources**

Elite domination of political positions has been a historically constant feature in the northern uplands. The configuration of elite political power and control along family and kin lines in Vĩnh Thủy commune is reinforced through the centre state's continuing preoccupation with ethnic harmony and the consequent allocation of political office according to a strict ethnic formula. Local elites are adept at ensuring

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<sup>18</sup> Mr. Hải is also divorced and has remarried, which would usually preclude him from taking a senior party position. As other commune officers have been demoted for divorcing and remarrying there was also animosity towards him and allegations of favoritism, though Mr. Hải had divorced prior to attaining high office.



this allocation of political office favours their continued rule, effectively using the ethnic categories of the higher-level state to pursue their own projects of power, through lineage based domination of local state politics. The centre state ultimately also benefits from this arrangement, despite the impotency of their a-political ethnic state imaginary of ethnic harmony in the uplands. The system of elite rule envelops the preeminent leaders of ethnic groups and large swathes of their associates and clients into the state project, and the distribution of poverty reduction and rural development resources through these elite networks further consolidates this process.

An important consequence of this arrangement, however, is that those Hmông and Nùng who are outside of the dominant family groups or lineage networks are unable to lay strong claim to the benefits which flow from the control of local state positions. Other ethnic groups and villages without well connected networks of political patronage also remain outside of the circle of power, and suffer relative neglect when it comes to the allocation of commune funds and projects in the local state arena. They are less able to exert political influence and thus receive fewer resources and attention from the state, though this neglect is offset by their inclusion in a local biopolitical, moral economy schema that prevails in the commune, whereby officials are expected to provide some succour to all commune residents, and ensure for the common good of the commune generally.

The Dao are the ethnic group within the commune most noticeably outside of the prevailing networks of political power. They are the third largest ethnic group in the commune, representing about 10% of the total population. They are also generally acknowledged in the commune as being the poorest group. The Dao villages of Trần Trà Bông and Ninh Cấn are both furthest from the commune centre and noticeably poorer in terms of the quality of housing and investment in public infrastructure. Ninh Cấn village is also one of only two villages in the commune that doesn't yet have electricity, despite being relatively close to the main road to the district centre.<sup>19</sup> Both Dao villages have the ramshackle feel of being resettlement villages, though both have been in existence since the modern demarcation of the commune, indeed Dao

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<sup>19</sup> The other being the Nùng village of Thạch Liêm, which is the most remote of all the villages in the commune and where establishing a connection to the electricity grid would be logistically difficult.

settlement in Tràng Tôn (the other main settlement area of the Dao in the commune) actually predates the now much larger Nùng group in the village.<sup>20</sup>

The status of the Dao as political outsiders in commune politics is an important factor in accounting for their relative poverty, in terms of the comparison between the two Dao villages and other villages, and in comparing the situation for the Dao in Tràng Tôn village with their Nùng neighbours. The village head of Ninh Căn village bluntly explained why he thought the village had yet to receive electricity, despite being so close to the main road: “because the people here don’t know how to ask”. By implication then, villagers lack the confidence that comes from having good political connections, and are consequently unable to compel the commune government to address their needs. As one Dao resident of the mixed ethnic village of Tràng Tôn explained to me one day:

Actually, we don’t have any Dao representatives in the village government. They are all Nùng people. There is a Dao person in the commune government but we don’t see him often because he is from another village. Dao people are very poor and don’t have money to send people to school: they’re not educated so they can’t get a position in the government, and so we remain poor. The Nùng are much richer and can send their children to school and can enter the government, so they continue to be better-off.

Relative backwardness also results for those Hmông and Nùng villages that do not have strong connections to the dominant lineages of commune officials. For whilst the state’s pre-occupation with ethnic harmony entrenches the position of elites within the Hmông and Nùng groups, family and clan alliances in the commune generally trump any wider sense of ethnic solidarity. This is apparent if we contrast the two Hmông villages of Ninh Điền A and Cao Thành A. Ninh Điền A is the home village of the commune chairman and his close relatives. The village receives all of the government and international non-governmental organisation projects and programmes operating in the commune and is frequently visited by district, provincial government and donor monitoring missions. It is close to the commune government offices and people from

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<sup>20</sup> This was confirmed through interviews with elderly residents in Tràng Tôn commune, both Dao and Nùng. One elderly Nùng resident of the village described how, when her parents first came to the commune, there were “only a few” Nùng households in the village, but that Nùng in-migration quickly led to the Nùng outnumbering the Dao.

the village are well represented in the women's and farmer's groups active in the commune.

The situation in the village of Cao Thành A is quite different. Connections to the chairman's family lineage are more distant and, like the Dao villages of the periphery, Cao Thành A village has a notably more run-down and ramshackle feel than the four core villages in the centre of the commune. Few donor or government supervision missions make it to Cao Thành A village for, despite being situated on the main paved road dissecting the commune, it is five kilometres away from the centre on a steep road and high in the mountains. The village is often shrouded in cloud and has a colder microclimate to the commune centre. Residents claim that they receive little support from the commune or the government in comparison to other villages and the village leader is noticeably less confident and knowledgeable about government programmes and benefits than the village leaders of the four 'core' villages of the commune.

A further significant indicator of the 'outsider' status of Cao Thành A village is the involvement of several Hmông residents in a high profile drugs case. Whilst I was resident in the commune a provincial level trial took place of two village residents for drug trafficking. It was the lead story on provincial TV news channels and was the second case in a year of a significant drug trial involving village residents. The first case involved the trafficking of one kilogram of heroin, the more recent case involved 1.2 kilograms.<sup>21</sup> Commenting on the case, the commune chairman observed that Vĩnh Thủy is considered to be fourth (out of twelve) in the list of communes 'at risk' of drug trafficking in the district. He also observed, with both exasperation and an element of pride, that "only the Hmông dare to be involved in drug trafficking" and that those people involved in the case "can't even speak Vietnamese", cementing the view of the village and its Hmông residents as political outsiders.

### **State employment and the perpetuation of closed networks of power**

The system of recruitment of commune party state officials is critical in perpetuating the system of domination by elite families in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Having a

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<sup>21</sup> There is of course a long history to the involvement of the Hmông in opium production and trading in the Southeast Asian uplands.

household member employed in the commune is, in many ways, the ultimate aspiration for many ambitious families. Becoming an official is a guaranteed way of ensuring a degree of economic security for the household, through granting access to a regular income. As the head of the Women's Union in the commune pointed out, the 10-15% of households in the commune that are noticeably better-off than the majority are usually households in which at least one person is working for the government. Positions within the commune level party state are thus keenly sought after, and contested.

State employment in rural and remote areas of Vietnam is also important because of the lack of alternative sources of employment that exist. State employment is literally one of the only games in town, particularly for well-educated ethnic minority youth, who often lack the outside networks in urban areas upon which Kinh people are able to rely to secure employment. Without these networks, seeking employment outside of the commune is seen as a highly risky (though exciting and desirable) endeavour and I was told countless stories of commune people having been tricked out of money when trying to secure a position in an outside company or enterprise. One Nùng household in An Trí 2 village had the following story to tell:

In Lào Cai City my son met the agent of a manufacturing company from Hai Phong [a booming northern coastal city] who said that they were recruiting workers on long-term contracts. The agent said that if we paid 5 million Dong [about USD 250] in advance then he [the agent] would take care of everything, including the contract, arranging transport, food and accommodation for the first three months. We believed him and I paid the money, all of the savings that I had as well as money that I borrowed. Once we paid him we never heard from him again. His mobile phone number no longer works and nobody has heard of the company when we ring the other numbers that he gave us.

How common such experiences are is hard to say but cautionary tales such as this are prevalent in the commune and contribute to a strong perception that ethnic minority people are easily cheated by those outside, making commune residents more reluctant to seek employment in the outside economy.

Securing a state job in the commune (or district) is therefore seen as a safe and lucrative alternative, and is a big prize. Competition for the positions available is consequently intense and is increasing as more and more ethnic minority students from

Lào Cai are able to attend regional universities, or study at universities in Hanoi, and are looking for employment after graduation. Two examples from amongst my informants in Vĩnh Thủy commune illustrate the difficulties involved for those seeking employment with the state.

Kiên is a single young Nùng man from An Trí 1 village. At the time of my fieldwork he lived with his widowed mother, having returned the previous year from Hanoi where he studied water management at university. It is unusual for young people from the commune to study in Hanoi: they usually study in a regional university like Thai Nguyen where the entry requirements are lower. However, Kiên is bright and was able to take advantage of the lower entry requirements for ethnic minority students. He has a distant relative in the commune government but despite this connection, he was unsuccessful in securing a position in the government recruitment round. He explained that although he understood that he had to make a payment to someone after sitting the exam in order to be considered, he didn't know "which door to knock on" or "how much money to put in the envelope". Kiên was aware that those who are successful in being recruited usually have a knowledgeable mentor who is able to talk to the right people at the district level to ensure the process is smooth and that they are selected. Unfortunately his family's minor political connections didn't extend that far.

Kiên's friend Nam also went to university and was hoping to secure a government position. Like Kiên he attended the district recruitment exam but was told that it would cost between 150-200 million Dong (approximately USD 7,500-10,000) to secure a district position. He has no relatives in the government and no mentor able to steer him through the recruitment process. He was therefore unsuccessful and returned to the commune disappointed. He was not planning on reapplying. Nam claimed the practice of paying for office is widespread and says he witnessed a current serving commune officer pay 20 million Dong (about USD 1,000) some years back to secure his position.

State employment is seen by many in the commune as the ultimate aspiration for their children's future. However, investing in children's education, which is necessary to ensure they are academically qualified for state employment, is something of a gamble, or dilemma. The deputy head of Tràng Tôn village explained how he had spent 7 million Dong per month (approximately USD 350) over the past years on his

children's education. But he reported "there was no point in my daughter studying hard as it didn't make any difference to her future prospects". He lobbied hard for a commune position for her with the district chairman of the People's Committee but his connections weren't strong enough, he said, despite paying 100 million dong (which was later returned to him). There were more than 40 candidates "and it was like an auction" he complained, and he wasn't sure how much he should pay. But he will try again next year. "These days there is a lot of competition for state posts" he observed, "and people want a state job for the security".

What the current system consequently does is reinforce the existing networks of power in the commune, as it is only those powerful people with existing positions and thus the necessary connections and capital who can continue to successfully place their relatives and associates in government positions. As one senior commune official explained to me, the process starts with selection for the elite district boarding school (*trường phổ thông dân tộc nội trú*):

In one year they take less than seventy people from the whole district. To be able to attend there are three criteria. Firstly, you must have good grades, secondly, you must have a 'clean' family profile, and thirdly you must be the son or grandson of someone who already holds a big position in authority. Once you enter this school you're guaranteed a place at university as you don't have to take the entrance exam. And you don't have to worry about getting a good job in the government after graduation.

The system thus perpetuates elite family domination of local state politics. It starts at an early age, making it extremely difficult for anyone without the requisite connections and family history to break into the system and acquire a position of power.

## **Conclusion**

Vĩnh Thủy commune is almost exclusively populated by people who are not ethnically Kinh, a common situation in communes throughout the northwestern borderlands. The centre state is therefore dependent upon local people to staff the state bureaucracy in order to realise the ongoing project of power, of incorporating the uplands into the nation state. This project requires passive and cooperative local officials prepared to pursue centre state planner's imaginary of a harmonious and productive 'periphery' striving to become model Vietnamese citizens. In pursuit of this goal the formal

institutions of local state power in Vĩnh Thủy are reinforced by the long standing convention of carefully dividing up local political office between ethnic groups, and regulating the distribution of power between the two most powerful ethnic groups, the Hmông and Nùng.

In common with the experience of past regimes seeking to incorporate and control the uplands, this centre state project of power in Vĩnh Thủy has not unfolded in the way imagined. Local ethnic minority officials embody political power in the local state, but are adept at deploying *metis* in and through state categories for the ethnic reservation of political power, or ‘mentoring’ deficient village populations, to secure their particular family and lineage based interests and to strengthen their own networks of power. The state resources that flow from controlling the levers of power in the local state in turn lubricate wide networks within the commune and therefore perpetuate the existing, entrenched system of elite family domination of local state structures of power.

The idealised ethnic state imaginary, of solidarity, ethnic harmony and the pursuit of Kinh-centric modernity, is subverted in the local state space. But the system of elite control and political patronage that results does paradoxically serve the centre state’s wider project of power. Politically powerful and important elites and their extensive networks in the commune participate in the system and through this participation the centre state’s claim to rule is endorsed, albeit tacitly, as these elites have no interest in overturning the existing system. The projects of power of both local elites and the centre state are mutually dependent then, feeding off each other in the local state space to preserve a delicate equilibrium.

There are losers in this process. Although the state is formally structured along ethnic lines, family and kin affiliations trump any wider sense of ethnic solidarity. Some households are not included in the lineage or kin groups of either the dominant Hmông or Nùng families and therefore lack the legibility to access power, state resources and opportunities. Similarly, the politically unconnected Dao also appear to be losers in this process of competition: they lack significant representation in the political bodies of the local state and therefore also suffer relative neglect.

The ethnic state appears then to be far from the ideal imagined. Rather, the local state space is riven with local politics and contestation, and as a consequence the local ethnic state is partial in its inclusiveness and ambiguously positioned in relation to the centre state's wider project of power, of national incorporation. Local political actors and the people of the commune themselves are the principal actors in this drama and many skilfully exercise political *metis* in negotiating the governmental processes of state in pursuit of their projects of power. Their success in doing so is contingent upon the ability to feed off the very governmental processes designed to regulate and control the people of the commune.



## CHAPTER 4

### **Governing the Everyday. Bureaucratic Practice, Cynicism and Desire in the Local State**

#### **Introduction**

The idea of the state is made real through the thousands of humdrum and routinized practices carried out in the state's name, what Akhil Gupta describes as the 'micro markers' of state power (Gupta 2012, 59, also Mitchell 1991, Cruikshank 1999). These practices permeate all aspects of life in Vĩnh Thủy commune today. Public celebrations, commemorations and burials, official documents, meetings, training events, propaganda, party discipline, and state education are all powerful mediums through which the idea of the state is made powerfully salient for people in the commune. In this chapter I discuss how governmental technologies and processes contribute to projecting a particular bureaucratic idea of the state in Vĩnh Thủy, and how this state idea is reimagined and reworked in the local state arena.

Many of these routine bureaucratic practices prevalent in Vĩnh Thủy can be described as ritualistic. Rituals are, by their very nature, embedded in the everyday repetitive practices and beliefs of local people and so bureaucratic action is no different from any other type of ritual behaviour in this regard (Hinton 1992). In Vĩnh Thủy commune these bureaucratic rituals manifest as the everyday official practices that local state agents enact, and which local citizens participate in. These practices are commonplace and routine: they are the things that are said and done over and over to the point that they become habitual. In this chapter I discuss how the routine practices of government agents both within and outside the commune attempt to construct and sustain a stable state imaginary.

In what follows I also analyse how these attempts in turn are refracted through two prevalent attitudes of local people towards state power: a widespread cynicism, and a strong desire for development. Both cynicism and desire are important constituent parts of an intensely intimate political culture that permeates the local state space and which intersects in this space with the micro markers, or routine effects, of state power

through which centre state planners attempt to establish a singular order in the commune.

The undercurrent of cynicism that clouds local people's engagement with state agents in Vĩnh Thủy was illustrated well in the case of Mrs. Giao, an older resident of the commune whom I got to know well over the course of my fieldwork. When talking one day about the distribution of state resources to support households in the commune she gave a shrug, sighed deeply and said:

We all know who will get the things from the government in this village, it's the same people every time. If you have good relations with people [i.e. state officials] then they will look after you. For the rest, we struggle on. It has always been the same.

She said this with a tone of resignation, not of complaint. In our subsequent discussion I asked her if her circumstances were different, and she was in a position to better influence officials, what she would do. She laughed and answered: "of course I would do it! Anyone would do the same!" She went on to explain that this is why she didn't bear ill feeling towards the people who successfully manipulated the system for distribution of state resources for their own ends. The people whom she felt were responsible for the unequal allocation were the commune officials who made the decisions, and the higher-level officials (their superiors) who were responsible for the system, people whom she had never met. What people in the village were doing was just playing the system for whatever advantage they could get, which she considered to be a proper course of action. Her view of the system and state officials within it was therefore coloured by cynicism and this cynicism was widely shared in Vĩnh Thủy commune.

However, this cynicism doesn't generally extend to rarefied ideas of the state in the abstract, particularly notions of the 'good state'. As Sikor (2013:210) notes, centre state agents in Vietnam are adept at constructing the image of a good state and can defend its institutional authority against "the everyday practice of dispossession and abuse of power taking place by state agents" (see also Navaro-Yashin 2002). The idea of the good state in Vĩnh Thủy is linked to local people's desires and aspirations for betterment, as they imagine the possibilities that open up through engaging with the state. It is the prevalence of this hope and desire that continually resurrects and sustains

state ideas, despite an often widespread disaffection with the grubby, everyday operation of power in the local state space. The promise of the state is a powerful force around which passionate engagements and fantasies congeal on the part of the people of Vĩnh Thủy.

Holly High (2014) too frames the engagement of people in her field site in rural Laos with the state in terms of fantasy and desire: that despite the scepticism and fear of the state she observed, her village informants continued to engage with the state because of the promise it holds. I concur with High when she surmises that “the state is reified as the repository of not only disillusion and distrust, but also hopes for a better future” (High 2014:105). The prevalent notion in Vĩnh Thủy was often of a bountiful and munificent state, with largesse to bestow upon those well connected to political power. Villagers therefore sought to cultivate connections to the state, and state vehicles like the ‘project’, in the hope of benefitting, and in pursuit of modernity as it was locally understood.

Both cynicism and desire are central elements of what Navaro-Yashin (2002:16) identifies as “the phantasmatic forces that effect and the psychic work that regenerates the state”. She aptly observes how the state “lives on in the fantasies of its subjects who would regenerate and re-erect it after its multiple crises”. Fantasy, she concludes, “does everyday maintenance work for the state” (Navaro-Yashin 2002:4). Writing in reference to secularism and piety in modern day Turkey, Navaro-Yashin draws upon the work of Slavoj Žižek to show how the continual process of state deconstruction and reconstruction through cynicism and desire reflects an inability to conjure up an alternative imagining of what the state could, or should be. In the process of deconstructing the state, people always come back to recreating it in past forms, which paradoxically strengthens the state system itself. Through this constant demolition and reproduction the idea of the state becomes self-reproducing (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Žižek 1989).

In Vĩnh Thủy commune local people participate in the ceremonies and everyday events that are so important in constructing the idea of the state in the local state space. They maintain a belief in the idea of the state at an abstract level and continue to participate in state routines and rituals, even whilst criticising the way the state system operates

and expressing cynicism about state official's motives. Within the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy, state ideas are continually being deconstructed through cynicism, but simultaneously reconstructed through local people's aspirations and desires for development in the way that Navaro-Yashin describes.

### **The death of the General and the spirit of the good state**

On 4 October 2013 state television announced the death of one of Vietnam's greatest war heroes and an icon of the liberation struggle, General Võ Nguyên Giáp. General Giáp was widely recognised as the military architect of the defeat of the United States backed southern Republic of Vietnam regime in 1975 and had a long and distinguished career as a military commander in both national wars for independence, and as a politburo member and government minister. He was also a prominent critic of the government's decision to allow Chinese state companies to mine bauxite in the central highlands region in 2010, a decision which he opposed on both environmental and national security grounds. This opposition tapped into a strong current of anti-Chinese feeling at the time and perhaps contributed to the popular outpouring of grief that met the news of his passing.

General Giáp's death appeared initially to take state managers in Hanoi somewhat by surprise, and there was a painful silence in the national media for a day or two following the announcement, as party leaders struggled to gauge the popular reaction to the news. Following the brief hiatus however, state television rolled-out almost round the clock coverage of the preparations for the General's funeral and recycled endless documentaries about his wartime service, and the national wars for independence. The coverage of course dealt largely with his war service to the nation, and not with his later criticism of government policy. State propagandists skilfully utilised television coverage to turn the General's death into an opportunity to cement popular nationalism through linking Giáp's life inextricably to the independence struggle and the emergence of the modern party state. They used the occasion of his death to reaffirm the idea of the good state, tying the current regime to the glorious past and reaffirming the centre state project of power, to foster harmony, integration and national development.

The projection of these ideas of the good state through state media were of course received and processed by people in Vĩnh Thủy in complex ways. My impression of local people's feelings towards the General at the time was of genuine reverence, and of sadness at his passing. In Hanoi too, the long lines of well-wishers who queued for hours at the General's home, where he was laying in state, to pay their respects also suggests that reverence for the General was widespread and genuine: there were simply too many people for the crowds to have been stage-managed by the Party, with state media estimating hundreds of thousands of people queuing to file past his body in the week before his funeral. What was also striking from the television images and interviews was the wide range of people who came. War veterans and the elderly, replete with medals and full dress uniforms, but also young people and young families, many of whose members would not have been born at the time of the final fall of Saigon in 1975.

The scenes transmitted on television reminded me of the crowds that still regularly line-up to pay their respects to the body of Hồ Chí Minh, lying in state in his white marbled mausoleum in the very heart of the government precinct in Hanoi. The lines of wellwishers are particularly long on state ceremonial days, with army veterans, factory workers, ethnic minority and rural people all bussed in on these occasions as a part of a kind of morbid state tourism, albeit one imbued with genuine reverence and awe for the body (and memory) of Hồ Chí Minh.

The veneration and manipulation of both Hồ Chí Minh's body and that of General Giáp evokes Taussig's description of a similar attempt by the state to possess the body of a national hero, as "the foundational act of spirit possession by the new state" (Taussig 1997:100). The body of Taussig's liberator became sacred only in death, or "stronger in death than he was alive" as:

the continuous coming-into-being of the state rested, in other words, on the continuous passing away of the body of the Liberator into the body of the people, and this constant passing-away itself depended on a capacity not merely to continuously resurrect his image, but to be possessed by his spirit by virtue of that image (Taussig 1997:101-102).

General Giáp was of course already a national icon before his death but through the funeral process the General emerged anew as a focal point for the centre state idea as

the General's spirit was seamlessly fused with that of the state in the way Taussig describes.<sup>1</sup>

Despite Vĩnh Thủy's distance from Hanoi, and its location as spatially far removed from the centre of state power, commune residents followed the news and the preparations for General Giáp's funeral closely, possessed by the spirit of the state. As the day for his funeral approached all of the television sets in the commune were tuned to the national channels as commune residents followed events in Hanoi with a close fascination. I often joined groups of commune residents who were gathered round television sets during the days before the funeral, and was struck by the sophistication of their knowledge of Giáp's life and of the wars for independence generally.<sup>2</sup>

Reverence for the departed General Giáp and the idea of the state that he embodied did not stop villagers commenting critically upon the state occasion of his funeral, however. The General was first driven through the streets of Hanoi to the airport, where he was flown to his home province of Quảng Bình for burial. Watching the slow procession of motorbike outriders and party dignitaries, along with the hearse bearing the coffin, the villagers with whom I was watching the event kept up a steady and irreverent alternative commentary on the state dignitaries, their spouses, and the extravagance of the occasion.<sup>3</sup> They were highly critical of how lavish the

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<sup>1</sup> This process of ideological legitimacy making has always been integral to the Vietnam Communist Party's project in Vietnam, as Ken Maclean has shown in his careful deconstruction of the propaganda campaigns to 'build socialism' in the north of Vietnam in the 1950's, through large scale public works schemes. As he shows, these campaigns "helped make socialism manifest – first by representing it as already existing, and second, by demonstrating its superiority to other ways of organising socioeconomic life" (Maclean 2007:28).

<sup>2</sup> The knowledge of recent Vietnamese history displayed by commune residents during the funeral preparations for General Giáp is testimony to the effectiveness of state education in projecting a centralised and uniform notion of the state. Charles Keyes, writing on the transformation of Lao villagers in northeastern Thailand into what he describes as Thai "cosmopolitan villagers", highlights the critical role played by state education whereby "the government school literally created the Thai nation-state as a meaningful framework for villagers" (Keyes 2014:63).

<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, Yael Navaro-Yashin has observed the important role television plays in "the production and reproduction of thralldom for the Turkish state" (Navarro-Yashin 2002:130). Despite the low levels of household ownership of a television set in the Vĩnh Thủy, it is an increasingly important state technology in the northwestern borderlands too. On the occasion of the general's funeral local residents crowded around neighbour's sets and the coverage served to shrink distance and make commune residents feel much closer and more involved

arrangements were, and critical of the high state officials too whom they felt were just trying to piggyback upon the reputation of General Giáp, for their own political gain. They demonstrated a deep cynicism of senior party leaders and their motivations for attending the funeral, the enormous expense involved, and were critical of how the funeral brought the whole of central Hanoi to a standstill, even while they avidly followed the events and were clearly deeply caught up in the ceremony and symbolism of the day. Special opprobrium was reserved for the local state officials in Quảng Bình who had organised the burial. We all looked on aghast as the General's coffin appeared unable to fit into the grave, and the pallbearer's ropes became stuck in the restricted space. It was placed aside as soldiers quickly adjusted the grave, and villagers bleakly joked that even war heroes had to make sure they paid enough in bribes to ensure they were buried properly.

General Giáp embodied the twin legacies of resistance to foreign aggression and socialist egalitarianism that remain foundational forms of moral capital for the party state in Vietnam today. These historical legacies and the associated symbols and narratives contribute to what Katherine Verdery describes as the 'regimes of legitimation and control' which are central elements of rule in modern states (Verdery 1996). The production of regimes of legitimacy is ongoing, for as Verdery notes:

efforts to introduce new symbols, redefine old ones, and monopolise their definitions are ... integral to both building political capital by aspirant political elites and to producing new regimes of legitimation where the old ones have collapsed (Verdery 1996, 106).

Regimes of legitimation in Vietnam today are constantly built upon the historical memories and enduring symbols of the old: the legacy of socialist values of equality and welfare intersecting with bourgeois notions of prosperity and personal initiative, all over laden with patriotic ideals of nation and anti-imperialism.

Through carefully manipulating the presentation of the General's death and his legacy, party state officials inextricably tied the General's popularity to the state idea,

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with the unfolding events in Hanoi. Television projects an imaginary of the state and the world beyond the commune for local people. And for the handful of the better-off households that can afford satellite television, a globalised imaginary of the world beyond the commune is possible, through western movies with Vietnamese subtitles, western and Asian music channels, and most popular of all, Korean and Taiwanese dramas.

bolstering the idea of the good state. Local people avidly followed the unfolding events in Hanoi and appeared seduced by the spirit of the state, literally embodied in General Giap's body and the rituals and ceremonies of state, but they were also critical of the arrangements and cynical of current state officials. Narratives that eulogized this national hero were absorbed and processed in the local state domain through both a reverence for the General and the idea of the good state that he embodied, and an underlying cynicism of state agents and their motives.

### **Revering the state through local state ceremonies**

State rituals abound in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy commune too, and are similarly integral to projecting ideas of state. Local people also process local state rituals and effects in complex and often deeply cynical ways. One cold early autumn morning I arrived at the secondary school in the commune to attend one of the important state occasions in the commune calendar, the 'Teacher's Day' celebration (*Ngày Nhà Giáo*). Teacher's Day is observed nationwide in Vietnam as an event for students and parents to honour their teachers. It is also a ritual occasion through which teachers symbolically affirm their importance and status within the hierarchies of state and, in the process of carrying out the celebratory rituals of Teacher's Day, publically reinforce the very idea of the state itself.

The secondary school in the commune is a large, two-storey structure that conforms to the standard design of school buildings all over the country. But in Vĩnh Thủy commune the school is supplemented by two additional, spartan blocks that serve as dormitory buildings to house teachers who do not permanently live in the commune, and students from the outlying villages who cannot commute in to school every day. I arrived at the school shortly after dawn and well before the time at which school normally begins, but already the students were lined up in their class groups, on the sports field in front of the school (see Photos 4.1 and 4.2). It was chilly at this early hour, with the sun only just emerging to illuminate the morning mist sitting heavy upon the mountain tops surrounding the commune, and the students were huddling close together in their lines, with jackets and hats on, and with the red scarves and badges denoting their membership of the Youth Union prominently displayed. Two lines of benches were set out beside the waiting lines of students, for the senior teachers and the commune officers who were to be the dignitaries for the event, and



amongst whom I was invited to sit. As we waited for the speeches to begin we were served cups of green tea by the school office staff and I watched as the school public address system was tested. The headmaster nervously shuttled to and fro, badgering the administrative staff, greeting commune officials and ensuring everybody was in the right place.

Once the commune party secretary and commune chairman had taken their seats the headmaster gave the signal for everyone to rise, and the national anthem was sung, accompanied by loud music played through the public address system. We all remained standing as part of the ceremony to salute the flag, as the students chanted the slogan:

*Vì tổ quốc xã hội chủ nghĩa, vì lý tưởng của Bác Hồ vĩ đại, sẵn sàng! sẵn sàng!*  
(For a socialist fatherland, for the ideals of the great Uncle Ho. Ready! Ready!)

Students in the northwest have been chanting this same slogan for decades, just as all of the rituals around the Teacher's Day celebrations remain largely unchanged from year to year. The parents of the children present went through a similar experience in the past, as friends in the commune later informed me. And as the headmaster emphasised in his opening remarks, children in other mountain schools throughout the district (and indeed throughout Vietnam) were participating in similar ceremonies to celebrate Teacher's Day. All of the assembled participants; students, parents, teachers and commune officers, were consequently imbued with a sense of being part of something bigger and more consequential, despite the relatively modest state of the rituals that this poor commune was able to organise.

Following the opening formalities and the headmaster's greeting speech, the commune chairman stood up and spoke at length about the important duty of teachers and students to the nation state, with many references to the spirit of 'Uncle' Hồ Chí Minh. Evoking the memory of Hồ Chí Minh of course lends both substance and continuity to the mystique of the state, projecting a tangible sense of historical continuity, purpose and destiny to the state's mission. Seven young female students were then called up in front of the school to perform an elaborate dance with brightly patterned parasols (see Photo 4.4). The young girls were dressed in colourful ethnic minority clothes and sang a traditional Vietnamese song. The performance appeared to symbolise the

boundedness of the local within a wider state project: the ethnic diversity and distinctness of the commune beneath the benevolent and guiding hand of the Vietnamese state. The students danced beautifully and had clearly been practicing hard, and the twirling colours of their outfits and parasols stood out incongruously from the mud of the field and the drizzle that was falling in the grey early morning light, again projecting and reinforcing a sense of mystique and higher purpose to this state ritual.

Following the dance it was the commune party secretary's turn to stand up and make a speech and to congratulate the teachers and headmaster. The secretary and commune chairman then began the process of awarding certificates to the teachers, in clusters according to the age groups they taught. Following each presentation, the teachers stood together with the commune chairman to have their photo taken, clutching their official framed certificates (*giấy khen*) closely. The importance of the ceremonial photo to the teachers only became apparent to me when one of the senior teachers became very upset as he realised that the camera was not working properly, and had not taken a number of the previous photos. Both the certificate and the photo were important validatory symbols for the teachers, affirming their status in front of the students and parents, and recognising them within the wider schema of the state officials present.

The Teacher's Day ceremony was impressive, representing the full ceremonial power that the commune authorities were able to muster. A full range of state symbols and rituals were deployed, including speeches by high ranking commune party state officials, banners, certificates of state, singing and dancing, and the evocation of the mystique of the higher state, in the form of the memory of Hồ Chí Minh and the association of the day's events with similar ceremonies taking place all over Vietnam. All this was intended to project an overwhelming sense of state power and importance.

However, despite this impressive performance, the assembled students, parents and state officials were by no means seduced by these demonstrations of state power. Instead many yawned their way through the long and rather tedious ceremony. As the award giving proceeded both students and state officials paid less and less attention, and the announcements of awards for the teachers became harder and harder to hear

over the drone of voices. As the ceremony unfolded more and more of the parents and observers not directly involved in proceedings slipped away. Critically though, people had attended and participated in the event, despite their seeming disinterest and lack of seduction by the state intended effects on display. These kinds of events are important markers in the everyday life of the commune and their prevalence, and people's participation, contributes to making the state a pervasive and everyday reality, accepted as something that just 'is', even though perhaps it is not the revered and hegemonic presence that the architects of state ceremonies envisage.

### **Supervision missions, meetings and training**

The party state system in Vietnam is predicated on the imposition of rigid control over subordinate layers of the system, as I discussed in Chapter 2. The institutional system of state is arranged in a hierarchical fashion, with each tier of government responsible to the tier above (commune – district – province – national) and the Party operating a parallel system to that of government, with the party organ or official at each level outranking the corresponding government agent. In order to realise (even partially) the regulating intentions of the party state, the careful supervision and vigilance of the everyday work of local cadre is necessary. This takes place through routine disciplining practices in the local state space, which are an important part of the everyday work of party state officials.

One such regulatory practice is the supervision mission, which makes the idea of the party state real in the local state space. In Vĩnh Thủy commune such supervision missions are commonplace, with delegations from the district and province levels coming through at least weekly, along with (less regular) donor missions from the international non-governmental organisation and the World Bank who operate projects in the commune. Another key ritual is the training event, often described as 'capacity building' (*xây dựng năng lực*), which is an important means of regulating behaviour and imposing state norms upon the commune, for both local officials and local people. Supervision missions and training events carefully reinforce hierarchies and provide a regular opportunity for centre state cadre to project critical aspects of their state idea and project of power upon local state officials and local people. I would like now to describe two events that I witnessed to illustrate this point: one a supervision mission, the other a training event.

The first occasion was a visit by a senior delegation of Women's Union representatives to the commune. The delegation was composed of two members from the district branch and two from the province. The purpose of the visit was ostensibly to review Women's Union activities in the commune, and the supervision mission arrived in the commune by car promptly at nine in the morning. They spent the first hour of their visit with the commune chairman, in his office. They met with the commune vice chairmen, and with other members of the commune staff including the cadastral officers, agricultural extensionist, the head of the commune Women's Union and head of the Fatherland Front.

Throughout these meetings the language the delegation used was highly formalistic, citing a range of regulations and instructions from the centre state which the commune was expected to adhere to in implementing Women's Union projects and activities. During the meetings the members of the delegation did almost all of the talking, with commune officers invited only to respond briefly to questions over whether particular activities had been completed, and when. After these meetings, all the participants went off to Mr. Thăng's small restaurant in the commune where official lunches are conducted and after an hour they returned, with the delegation then climbing back into their car and departing to return to the district centre.

Despite the visit nominally being to review implementation of Women's Union activities in the commune, the delegation did not visit a single household or village during their visit, and instead stayed in the commune office the whole time. The visit then appeared to be less about inspecting commune Women's Union activities *per se*, and more about imposing the higher-level state's authority and ways of working upon the commune officers. As Ferguson and Gupta (2002) note, such supervision missions are important in creating a sense of verticality and hierarchy for the state, "the central and pervasive idea of the state as an institution somehow 'above' civil society, community, and family" (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:2) and by extension, the central state above local officials.

This impression was reinforced when, before departing the commune, the head of the delegation made a point of holding a loud and public conversation in the office foyer

with the commune chairman. The chairman, Mr. Binh, is himself a former district official and therefore someone whom the delegation considered to be a peer. “We really sympathise with you and the work you have to do in this commune” the head of the delegation began. “There is no one here to help you. The deputy chairmen are so weak and you have to do everything yourself. You are the only one capable in this commune”. This speech was clearly performative, carried out in a loud voice in the very centre of the commune office, with all of the officers in attendance. It was designed to assert the authority and higher level competency of these officials, their ‘verticality’ over local state officials, but also to reinforce a tangible sense of superiority and a corresponding insecurity amongst the local state officials, ensuring that state hierarchies were maintained. In this sense then it was emblematic of the role of meetings between different levels of the state hierarchy in rural Thailand that Peter Hinton (1992:111) observed, which he saw as an “enactment of the rites of hierarchy”.

The following month another Women’s Union delegation visited the commune, this time to deliver ‘capacity building’ to members of the commune women’s group, in leadership and management skills. Like the supervision mission, training events too appear designed to reinforce state hierarchies and impose particular norms of behaviour upon local state officials and members of the semi-official groups increasingly mobilised in the commune to do state work. These training events too are performative and ritualised, as higher state officials assert their competency and sophistication in ‘leadership’ and ‘management’, two key technical skills of statecraft. The two cadres who delivered the training were from the provincial Women’s Union office and were immaculately dressed, in conservative and well-tailored jackets and skirts and black high-heeled shoes. They exuded big-city sophistication both in their dress and in their comportment, with a kindly but rather officious manner intended to show their seniority in the state hierarchy (see Photo 4.5).

The training was highly literate and required the commune women first to write their names and something about themselves on the paper, despite many of the women present being unable to read or write Vietnamese. This immediately placed them at a disadvantage, reinforcing their lack of skills and sophistication. The women delivered their training over the course of the day through two young men from the commune who were engaged as translators for the (primarily Hmông) women who did not

understand Vietnamese well, furthering the sense of distance and detachment between the trainers and those who were being trained and equipped with these ‘modern’ skills. Despite the communication difficulties the training preceded according to the standard pattern for such an event, with break out groups, note taking on hanging butchers paper sheets and ‘reporting back’ to the plenary group under the watchful gaze of the trainers. It was a highly ritualised and performative event.<sup>4</sup>

The use of supervision missions and training events in the local state space in fact entangles all levels of cadre into a complex, hierarchical web of state. During my fieldwork almost all of the village heads and deputy heads at one time or another remarked upon the amount of time they spent either meeting with higher-level state delegations, or attending trainings outside of the commune. For example, in one week that I earmarked for conducting interviews in a particular village, the village head was absent for three days at a training event for the World Bank project that is active in the commune, and the deputy head was absent for three days attending police training at the district (the deputy head is also the village policeman). The village head reported that he spent ten days in that particular month attending trainings at the district centre, and that “this is not unusual, in fact it is fairly normal”.

Older village leaders in the commune in fact lament their lack of time now and resent the way that more and more of their time is required for state work. Cynicism and resignation permeates their language about the work that they do. As the commune becomes increasingly linked into wider governmental circles, they find the travel required exhausting. They are also more likely to be illiterate and thus struggle with the increasingly literate, numerate and formalised requirements of the role. As one village leader whimsically reflected one afternoon over green tea in his house:

It was different in the past, life was slower and we didn’t always need to be available for government work. We could enjoy life, spend time with our

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<sup>4</sup> This Women’s Union training was targeted at eight interest groups across five ‘pilot’ villages in the commune, which were the four most developed villages in the centre of the commune, and another village close by which also receives a significant number of projects from the state. These villages get the majority of state resources allocated for the commune. During a break in the training I asked the provincial trainers when the project would be rolled out to include all of the villages in the commune. The trainers were non-committal, stating that the ‘capacity’ in the other villages is too low and must be raised before they could consider extending the scope of the project further, into these villages.

family and neighbours, and if we went to the commune office more than once a week it was unusual. We almost never went to Cao Xuyên. Now there are so many demands from the government, and local people expect so many things from us too. I would like to give up but the commune people haven't let me yet.

The most important official ritual for commune officers and village heads is the weekly meeting, held every Wednesday morning in the main meeting room of the commune office. This is followed by a village meeting in the house of each village head on Wednesday evening, where the village head is expected to disseminate all of the information and pronouncements from the morning meeting to the people in his village. Each household in the village is required to send a representative to this village meeting. These weekly meetings are a key ritual through which the higher order idea of state is asserted, and the village level meetings in particular serve to reinforce the spectral presence of the state, a sense that although the state may not be physically present at this time, its essence is everywhere.

I often attended village meetings and following one such meeting in An Trí 1 village, I wandered back from the village head's house with two young men from the village I knew well, Kiên and Nam. Both were key informants of mine during fieldwork and were people whom I had spent a lot of time with getting to know about village and commune politics. I frequently consulted with them to verify or cross check information I had heard from other people. On this particular evening they were accompanying my research assistant and I to the main path that lead down the hill and back to the central commune, to the commune chairman's house where we stayed. As we paused at a junction in the path they lit up cigarettes and reflected on the meeting that we had just attended. They were keen to impress on me their view that the village meeting was a waste of time, that they always had to listen to the same pronouncements from the commune authorities, and that the meeting didn't serve any useful purpose. "Why do you attend, then?" I asked. "Is it because every household has to send one person?" They considered for a moment and Kiên answered that, yes, that's part of the reason. But he went on to say that they attended because "we want to know what's going on". The village meeting is an important way to get information in the commune and therefore neither of them could imagine not attending. They needed to participate in the state event in order to be able to talk about how useless it is.

## **State documents and bureaucratic writing**

One of the most important mediums through which state power is conveyed in the local state space is state writing. As Akhil Gupta (2012:36) contends, writing is “constitutive of the state; it is not a substitute for action but is itself a form of action” (See also MacLean 2013, Rose 1999, Messick 1993). State writing is central to projecting the idea of the state in the local state space, as through state documents, certificates, permits and statistics officials set out to construct a particular image of reality and thereby regulate everyday behaviour in Vĩnh Thủy commune.

State bureaucracies are machines for the production of writing, and the local party state in Vĩnh Thủy is no different in this regard. Officials in the commune spend an inordinate amount of their time writing and reading directives, guidance manuals, instructions, and in filling out forms. Forms and bureaucratic reports though are notable as much for what they exclude as for what they include: they allow only particular kinds of information to be recorded, which then shape the narratives that permeate the practice of government in the commune. Forms and other bureaucratic writing allow for standardized communication over distance and the storage of generalized information, ensuring bureaucratic continuity across the northern uplands.

State documents govern everyday interactions between the state and citizenry, and between officials themselves. Writing sustains state hierarchies, with reporting from the commune level up to district and provincial level officials an important task of commune officers, and something which takes up a great deal of their time. Bureaucratic writing also presents the state in a particular, tangible form that serves projects of power in the local state arena, as state writing facilitates the orderly rendering of social relations and groups people into distinct categories, two critical state effects Trouillot identifies as being important in (re)producing the idea of the state itself (Trouillot 2001).

Writing is critical to the state’s project of governmentality in the uplands, the ongoing attempt to “shape human conduct by calculated means” (Li 2007, 5). However, bureaucratic writing is not simply a repressive tool of control. Rather, state writing is productive of power, creating social worlds through the stories that are presented



(Gupta 2012). State writing also provides another avenue through which *metis* can be exercised in the local state space, through producing, manipulating, or reworking written instructions or regulations.

The prescriptive intent of state documents and their importance to local official's projects of power is apparent in the case of 'village regulations' (*huong ước thôn bản*). These regulations establish norms of behaviour that the residents in each of Vĩnh Thủy commune's twelve villages are expected to follow. They are supposed to be drawn up by the residents of each village in a public meeting, but in practice commune government officers draw them up with little input from villagers themselves.<sup>5</sup> These written regulations are frequently cited by village and commune officials as a kind of social contract determining how people should behave, which enables them to prescribe how relations between the different ethnic groups in the commune should take place.

The importance of these documents to village officials' attempts to regulate village life was illustrated to me one day in late summer, when I was sitting in the house of the village head of Tràng Tôn village. We were discussing how he went about resolving conflicts in the village between households, and over what issues disputes commonly arose. He went over to the wooden cabinet that sits against the wall of the main room, and removed from the glass case in the centre of the cabinet the prominently displayed village regulations. He carefully removed the document from a plastic dust jacket in which it was kept, and proceeded to flip the pages, pointing out each paragraph which stated what villagers were and were not allowed to do. He pointed out the paragraphs that clearly prescribed exclusions on the free grazing of livestock, which is seen by the majority Nùng population of the village as a problem amongst the minority Dao with whom they live. The document also contained prohibitions on collecting timber, as the chopping down of trees is another common source of conflict between neighbours in the village. The village regulations were therefore a detailed attempt to regulate the messiness of village life through carefully prescribing the parameters of what

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<sup>5</sup> This was confirmed during village interviews, but is also clear from the documents themselves. I examined the village regulations of almost all of the commune's twelve villages and they are all clearly drawn from a single template, with the identical photocopied page numbers of a central manual clearly visible at the bottom of each set of village regulations.

appropriate behaviour in the village should be, which local officials could then interpret and use.

Another example of the way state writing attempts to codify behaviour is the annual process in the commune of assigning the status of ‘cultural households’ (*hộ gia đình văn hóa*). This classification is intended to reward and recognize particular households that are seen to behave in a ‘model’ way. This includes keeping the area around the house clean and orderly, participating in village activities, sending their children to school regularly and not having what officials consider to be an excessive number of children.<sup>6</sup> All of the criteria, as well as the process through which the status is assigned, are carefully mapped out and regulated in an instructional document, which the responsible cadre should follow. A similar process is laid out in a state document for allocating the status of ‘cultural village’ (*làng văn hóa*), which is similar to that of ascribing cultural households.

State writing attempts to depersonalize social interactions and connections, reducing the diversity and complexity of personal relations into set, pre-prescribed modes of behaviour. As Li and others observe, this process of ‘rendering technical’ is a critical element in the state’s wider project of governmentality (Li 2007, Rose 1999, Scott 1998, Dean 1994, Ferguson 1990). Through state documents situations and social relations are problematized in certain ways, ways that lend themselves readily to being solved by experts through the technical tools and approaches they have to hand. The process of ‘rendering technical’ involves practices which demarcate domains to be governed as particular fields with limits and carefully prescribed boundaries. The identification and presentation of problems in state documents are consequently intimately linked to the availability of expert solutions. Critically, as Li observes: “questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered non-political” (Li 2007:7). That is to say, the underlying structure of political-economic relations is

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<sup>6</sup> The state decrees that families in the lowlands should have no more than two children. Ethnic minority people are not subject to the same control, but are highly unlikely to be chosen for any official position, or for party membership, if they have more than two children. Ethnic minority people who do have what the commune government considers to be an excessive number of children without a good reason, are heavily censured.

ignored by expert knowledge, often through ignoring the historical precedents for why structures of power and ownership are as they are.<sup>7</sup>

State writing is certainly used by the centre state to attempt to regulate the citizenry in Vĩnh Thủy in the ways Li describes. But as with other governmental technologies applied in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy, state writing is also manipulated and used by local officials and local people to pursue projects of power. Local people deploy political *metis* in working with state documents, so that state writing is often deployed in the local state space to validate outcomes completely at odds with the governmental objectives prescribed in state documents, as we shall see in Chapter 6 in regard to the poverty census process.<sup>8</sup>

In one of the weekly commune meetings that I attended, I witnessed the way that local officials bypass centre state requirements for state writing. During the meeting the party secretary was discussing with the commune officers higher-level requirements to prepare end of year reports. This reporting included party reports on member's behaviour, and administrative reports for the district and provincial level governments:

Many of you here are also village party secretaries so you should start preparing your reports on the party members, on whether they have been good or bad party members this year. For this and the other reporting that the district requires, Ms. Sen [the commune administrative officer] has all the reports from last year and she just needs to change some of the numbers, and put in some different strengths and weaknesses, so you should help her to do this.

State writing is important for the content and substance of what is written about, establishing norms and regulations and determining the parameters of agency for state actors, institutions, and the citizenry. But state writing can't simply be reduced to the

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<sup>7</sup> Li goes on to argue that the state schemes for improvement of subject populations which she examines can be described (following Ferguson) as a form of 'antipolitics': "the design of programs as a deliberate measure to contain a challenge to the status quo" (Li 2007, 8).

<sup>8</sup> State writing can be an effective tool used by people against the state, or specifically against particular branches of the state, most commonly through the 'official complaint' (*đơn khiếu nại*). This has particularly been the case with complaints over land acquisition for development in Vietnam (Kerkvliet 2015, Luong 2003). Sidel too describes how higher levels of the state also attempt to address mis-governance by lower levels through state writing, in his case through the 'official letter' (*công văn*) (Sidel, 2013).

content of what is written. State writing also has a deeply symbolic and ritualized function in both reinforcing and embodying the power of the state. It is integral to rituals of state power in the local state space, as writing comes to embody the mystique of the state: projecting through relatively mundane and everyday prescription the sense of a higher order power at work. In the process the regulating documents themselves come to assume enormous symbolic and ritual power.

The symbolic importance of state documents was vividly illustrated to me one afternoon in the commune office. It was a normal day and I was sitting in the lobby, sipping tea and chatting with the commune officers and some commune residents that I knew who were visiting the office. In the entranceway several villagers whom I hadn't seen in the commune office before were waiting, nervously but expectantly, for the commune legal officer to emerge from the administrative room where he was busy preparing documents. After some time he called these villagers in and, keen to sate my curiosity, I followed. The legal officer carefully placed three certificates out on the table, one for each of the villagers, and asked them to produce their household registration books. He then carefully checked off the names in the books against the names on the certificates he had prepared. The moment was heavy with expectation, and there was a palpable sense of relief as the legal officer nodded and presented the certificates to each of the villagers. They left the office smiling, and carefully placed the certificates in clear plastic folders before jumping on their motorbikes to return home.

The certificates were household poverty certificates (*giấy chứng nhận hộ nghèo*) recognising the households as legitimate 'poor households' (*hộ nghèo*) in the eyes of the state and thus entitled for a year to claim the state resources that a poor household was eligible for. The occasion was akin to a religious ceremony, with the high priest of the state (the legal officer) administering the rites of passage to ensure the supplicants were granted access to the other world of state largesse, through the medium of the poor household certificate.

The symbolic importance of state certificates holds true for state officials too, as we saw with the certificates awarded to teachers during the Teacher's Day celebrations, which affirmed their quality and status, and thus their membership in the exclusive and

privileged group of state employees. The symbolic and ritual importance of state documents helps explain the reverence towards these documents routinely displayed in the commune, a reverence often out of keeping with the mundane benefits or status such documents usually confer. State writing is important not only for what it actually says, but for the connections to state power, in the local state space, which it represents.

### **Propaganda and party state morality**

The dissemination of propaganda in the local state space is also central to the regulatory designs of the centre state and the everyday projection of power in the commune. The centre state has a well-established propaganda system, perfected over decades of rule, which permeates all aspects of life in Vĩnh Thủy. State propaganda activities are most visible in the banners and billboards that line the major roads of the commune, and the commune centre in particular. Billboards and banners extoll the virtues of the Party and Hồ Chí Minh's political thought, support state campaigns and important memorial days (like National Day, *ngày quốc khánh*, and Reunification Day, *ngày thống nhất*), and emphasise the importance of ethnic harmony within the overall framework of developing the borderlands into a safe and prosperous region (see Chapter 2).

State propaganda and pronouncements are also a constant audible presence as, like all communes and wards throughout Vietnam, Vĩnh Thủy has a system of loudspeakers in almost every village through which state news and announcements are disseminated twice every day, in the early morning and late afternoon.<sup>9</sup> Each village head is responsible for playing these announcements, as village heads have the public address system installed in their houses and are given a compact disc every week which has been prepared by the district. State news, announcements and campaigns are therefore a sensory constant for Vĩnh Thủy residents, contributing to the projection of a pervasive state presence.

Local officials appear, in public at least, to take their propaganda duties extremely seriously and none more so than the commune cultural officer, who is responsible for

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<sup>9</sup> The exception being the two villages without electricity.

disseminating party state propaganda and regulating the social life of commune residents. The cultural officer in Vĩnh Thủy, Mr. Dũng, is a young and earnest man, a Nùng from the commune who has been educated in the provincial party state system, attending both the district and provincial party schools. One morning he showed me a recently arrived directive from the district government. This document instructed him to undertake a careful and thorough review of all the propaganda activities in the commune, to assess their effectiveness and to gauge the receptiveness of the people of the commune to these propaganda efforts. Mr. Dũng explained:

The higher levels are always very interested and concerned about how we disseminate their words to the local people here. They regularly come to talk about this and ask us to make reports like this all the time. Given the importance of this kind of cultural work, I have to be very serious in giving them the information they ask for.

As part of his role in policing the good citizenship of commune residents the cultural officer is responsible for assessing which households can be rewarded as model 'cultural' households in the commune, and is also regularly involved in organising commune events to encourage solidarity (like commune and village 'ethnic solidarity' days) and to celebrate important party anniversaries. Like other commune officers, he is constantly engaged in cajoling the population to conform to the moral and social norms expected by the party state.

Local officials and party members are expected to personally adhere to this powerful moral party code, and set a good example. Party members are prohibited from having more than two children, and party officials that divorce whilst holding a senior post are demoted, as happened with the current commune cadastral officer who was previously the party secretary in the 1990's. As the current party secretary explained to me one day:

We [party members] have to set a good example for people to follow. We have to be very proper in everything that we do, so that there can be no criticism of us, as that would reflect badly on the Party too. Consequently, we can't just let anybody join the Party. That person has to be very carefully selected and trained.

The secretary of the Youth Union explained just how rigorous the application and assessment process is for prospective party members, and the lengths to which the Party goes to ensure future members have an exemplary background:

If a Youth Union member wants to get on then the next step is to join the Party. If they are enthusiastic they make a request to the committee of the Youth Union, and if the committee feel they're qualified they will recommend that person to the Party. The Party will then allow that person to join a training course, to learn about the Party and party policies and if they're considered to be qualified after that then they become a provisional party member. Their family profile in the commune is checked very carefully then, to make sure that they are suitable. Once they are a provisional party member they are monitored very closely for three to six months and then, if they're considered to be qualified after that the Party in the commune will hold a meeting to further consider that person, and if they're accepted then the request goes to the district who will certify if that person has a clean background and history and only then will they issue a decision.

Moral standing and a clean political background feature prominently in the process of attaining party membership. This clean background essentially means prospective candidates have not been involved in any activity deemed to be politically contentious, that they are not from a family that were significant landholders prior to the revolution and that their family is not involved in any criminal activity. Of course, there are powerful material incentives too for becoming a party member. As the party secretary explained:

Most of the government officers are party members but they don't have to be. We treat them [non-party members in the commune government] in the same way that we treat all other officers but when it comes to getting a promotion, of course it helps if you are a party member because you have a much stronger network of support and people whom you can call upon. The higher levels can also see that you are reliable.

Once a prospective candidate is accepted as a party member, they are expected to attend all the regular commune party meetings and play an active role in organising party events. They are also expected to carefully enforce and propagate the Party's dictats on what constitutes good behaviour in the commune, such as keeping their household plot orderly, working hard on government propagated agricultural crop campaigns, making timely contributions to village and commune funds, and supporting the village head and village mentor in their everyday work. Party functions and party

morality permeate the local state space and are an important part of the duties to state that local officials undertake.

At party meetings in the commune, the party members discuss circulars and instructions that come from the district and province, and are informed of all the latest party campaigns and central party thinking. Party members are also periodically invited to attend training and information dissemination events at the district level, and sometimes at the provincial capital too. These training opportunities provide party members with the opportunity to receive travel expenses, which usually exceed the actual cost of expenses incurred, but more importantly they give party members the chance to travel and network outside the commune, to pursue other business opportunities whilst away and also to hear first about new crop campaigns and projects, which they are then able to benefit from as key demonstration farmers. In return they are expected to be loyal and active advocates for the Party, and for the state, encouraging other villagers to follow regulations and support government pronouncements, campaigns and projects.

Among the officers in the commune who I got to know well, particularly the younger and more junior officers, there was recognition of the importance of party membership, and all had in fact joined the Party. For many of them their reasons for doing so appeared to be purely utilitarian, and had little to do with political or ideological motivation, or the aspiration to be a model citizen and role model for others. Rather, they saw clearly that the Party is the only route to a successful career. Mr. Hoang, one of the commune officers, explained this to me in very clear terms one night, as we walked back to the centre of the commune after a village meeting:

I first joined the Party because it was important to my family that I got an official position, and we recognised that there was no way I could do this without being a party member. A lot of the talk at party meetings is things I wouldn't be able to hear otherwise. I also have better connections to important people, and I can call on them to help when I need it.

Senior party members in the commune were much more guarded or circumspect in discussing their reasons for taking up party membership, but almost all of the junior commune officers whom I knew well and spoke with about this appeared to have



similar views to Mr. Hoang. They expressed a determination to make their party membership work for them in furthering their careers, or in accessing opportunities.

Among other young people in the commune cynicism underlies most discussions about the Party. This was the case even for those who are party members. One of my key informants was a party member and accepted that there are benefits to party membership but exclaimed: “But the process was so long, and the training so boring! Our hardest task was always staying awake.” He pointed out too that certain party members received more benefits than others and confided that he expended the minimum amount of effort on party business, sufficient only to ensure that he did not attract censure from the more senior commune party state officers.<sup>10</sup>

### **The state, education and desires for development**

Ideas of state in Vĩnh Thủy are projected and established through the everyday bureaucratic practices and effects that I have described, of periodic ceremonies and events; supervision visits, meetings and training; state writing; propaganda and party state morality. These activities are ubiquitous in the local state space and structure public life. People participate as a matter of routine but there is a strong undercurrent of cynicism that clouds local people’s engagement with these everyday bureaucratic practices. Through their participation and their cynicism, they both make and unmake the state idea in the realm of the local state. They are ambivalent about state practices but, as the case of General Giáp’s funeral shows, there is a mystique to the idea of the state, and particularly the idea of the ‘good state’, which also shapes people’s everyday encounters with bureaucratic practice.

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<sup>10</sup> These attitudes were reflected amongst those of my friends in Hanoi who were also party members. As one friend observed, “party membership doesn’t mean anything like it did in the past. Now it’s just a badge, an empty token: becoming a party member means you won’t be hassled any more to join. There are hierarchies in the Party too and it is only the people at the very top who are able to really make their party membership pay”. This friend had been pressured to join at university, after he’d returned from studying overseas, and now ran his own successful private business. Interestingly he resisted the pressure to join initially, as his grandfather had been wrongly executed as a landowner during the forced collectivisation campaign in the 1950s. He had been a loyal party servant but had not yet been officially pardoned at the time, and my friend refused to omit this in his family history statement. In the event, the party senior at his university took over his application and wrote it himself, to ensure my friend was accepted into the Party. When I asked my friend why the senior would have done this, he shrugged and said: ‘I guess he had targets to meet too. And if he gets good students to join the Party, then he also gets a lot of credit with his superiors’.

Through the spirit of the good state, a current of hope is in constant articulation with the cynicism that I have described and this too shapes local people's imaginings of the state, and their everyday dealings with local officials in the local state space. Hope and desire crystallize in particular around desires for development in the commune. The government has an enhanced capacity to deliver material benefits to local people in Vĩnh Thủy, in the form of poverty reduction support, credit, and a host of projects ranging from assistance for cash crop production, to livestock rearing, vocational training, labour opportunities overseas and support for high school and college education. Although frequently frustrated, desires for development through these forms of state assistance serve as an important countervailing force to what would otherwise be a debilitating cynicism about the operation of state power.

State development discourses are powerfully reimagined in vernacularized forms in the local state as local people and local officials exercise political *metis* to rework and adapt the discourses that circulate in the commune according to their own cultural values and projects of power (Dove & Kammen 2001, Keyes 2014, Quan 2015). This vernacularisation and local desires for development are explored extensively in Chapters 6 and 7, in regard to state poverty reduction support and agricultural marketing projects in Vĩnh Thủy commune. In this final section of the chapter I would like to consider another critical governmental technology around which desires for development crystallise in Vĩnh Thủy, that of state education.

The commune has a national standard primary school, a kindergarten, and a secondary school, all located in the central village of Ninh Điền B. Outlying villages have their own, more basic primary schools, which teachers from the central schools visit on a daily basis. There has been a marked improvement in the physical infrastructure of these schools over the past decade and a significant increase in the level of school attendance, as noted by commune officials, school teachers and local residents. Importantly, many residents of Vĩnh Thủy seemed keen for their children to attend school and to learn Vietnamese. "If our children are better educated, it helps us because they might get better jobs outside of the commune" one Hmông woman remarked to me. In fact, this woman's household was amongst the poorest in this particular Hmông village, and the women went on to explain why in the past

households like hers have not sent their children to school: “It’s not because we didn’t want to, but because we needed the children at home to work and help with other things”. With the general improvement in household wellbeing in the commune over the past ten years, and particularly the absence now of chronic hunger, more children are able to go to school.

The willingness of Vĩnh Thủy residents to send their children to school seems to contradict the findings of other scholars working amongst the Hmông in Lào Cai (Bonnin and Turner 2012, Turner 2012, Michaud 2012). Sarah Turner observes that in her Lào Cai field sites “education in the Vietnamese language (enforced in local schools) is not commonly seen as central to the well-being of Hmông children” (Turner 2012, 7). However I found that most young Hmông people in Vĩnh Thủy whom I got to know well were keen to learn and to participate in school for as long as they were able, and many expressed frustration that their families lacked the money to be able to send them to board at one of the two district high schools outside of the commune. Without education there were few opportunities for local young people, other than working their parents land. Land inheritance usually passes to the eldest male child meaning that there was little chance to farm for themselves for younger siblings in the commune.

Local Hmông and other ethnic minority people in Vĩnh Thủy were more likely to express cynicism about the way that the education system in the commune worked, rather than be critical of the notion of state education itself. They were critical of the teacher’s frequent absences from the satellite schools, which are hard to reach when it rains, and of the frequent informal payments they were required to make to teachers. But both parents and young people also expressed an intense desire to participate in education as a means of improving their household’s material circumstances in the future. For most young people education was the key to unlocking a world outside of the commune, a world they usually saw as full of hope, excitement and potential, though also one in which they could be cheated and where they would be looked down upon due to their status as ‘ethnic minority’. Even if they saw their long-term future in

the commune, they wished to spend a period away to experience the world outside and for this, they recognised that education was key.<sup>11</sup>

Education has been theorised as an important tool for liberation, in promoting critical awareness and thus equipping dominated people with the tools to be able to question powerholders and hold them to account (Freire 1970). Conversely, education has been seen as a means of subtly enforcing state ideas amongst the educated, creating statist cultures which have powerful homogenising effects and which reproduce existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1986). This view perhaps best characterises the role that central state planners envisage education playing in the northwestern uplands, with standardised state curricula and lessons taught to ethnic minority students only in the Vietnamese language.

In Vĩnh Thủy education plays a role in both fostering the incorporation of educated classes into a universal state idea, but also in providing an avenue through which local people can express and realise their desires for development, through navigating the governmental processes of state in particular. In the past state writing was deployed by bureaucrats against illiterate and powerless people in the highlands, as a means of intimidating them and rendering them subject to rule. One old man in Bình Yên village related how, in the past, state officials would ask them to sign documents that they couldn't read, and that this was a source of great embarrassment to them, making them reluctant to go to the commune office or interact with any form of state authority. "It's different now", he said:

Now, in every household there are at least a few people who can read Vietnamese, and the children in particular can read and explain everything to us. We don't have to sign anything without understanding it first, and we also know what we're entitled to. We have more confidence at the office and at the market, as our children aren't easily cheated by them [specifically Vietnamese traders] like we were in the past.

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<sup>11</sup> The other gateway to the outside world for local young men was the army. Every ex-soldier in the commune that I spoke to had fond memories of army service and expressed nostalgia for the camaraderie and excitement that army life offered. Like education then, army service is an important medium through which ethnic minority people are imbued with a sense of nationalism and belonging to the nation state.

Both the promise of development through education, and the role of education in incorporating elites into universalising centrist projects, are embodied in the person of Mr. Võ Văn Bình, the commune chairman. In many ways Mr. Bình represents the aspirant modernist ideal for commune residents, of a local son made good. He is the archetypical modern man, fluent in Vietnamese and indeed prepared to speak Hmông only with elderly members of his family group, and with his wife. He is always smartly attired in 'Vietnamese' clothes (i.e. leather shoes, smart shirt, trousers and jacket) and is disparaging of those in the commune who don't make the attempt to speak Vietnamese. His everyday official language is identical to that of local officials I have come across throughout the lowlands, peppered with impatience with the poor in not being proactive in addressing their own poverty. He is an urbane and supremely smooth operator, comfortably traversing the different worlds in the commune and beyond, both formal and informal.

Mr Bình seems to illustrate well Bourdieu's notion of centralised education reinforcing a bureaucratic and statist *habitus*, and educational achievement reproducing existing social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1986). He loves to relate stories of how he managed to graduate from university in Hanoi by means of his own hard work and sacrifice (again, a common theme amongst state cadre throughout Vietnam), conveniently overlooking the enabling role his family connections and privileged background played in opening up this opportunity for him. As a member of the most powerful Hmông lineage in the commune he attended the exclusive district ethnic minority boarding school, and afterwards managed to gain a position in the district administration as a result of his family's connections with the then district chairman. Once installed as a district employee, he had access to further education as at that time (the late 1980's and early 1990's), it was only state cadre in Lào Cai who could access a college or university education. Even today, it is unusual for ethnic minority people from the district to study in Hanoi. Mr. Bình's story highlights how important education is in fostering personal development, and the example of Mr. Bình fuels the desire for education in the commune, which in turn ensures local people remain engaged with the state idea, for the promise of development it holds.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the ways in which centre state authorities go about the routine business of projecting state effects in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Many of the micro-markers of state power that I have identified enact and reinforce the meta-effects that Trouillot (2001) identifies as being key in creating ideas of state: effects of isolation, identification, legibility and spatialisation. These localised state effects are productive of political power in the local state space, as they tie both local officials and local people into everyday state practices, and reify state ideas in the popular imagination, particularly ideas of the good state which is able to provide succour, and nurture the dreams and desires for betterment of commune residents.

Much of the everyday work of building the state idea and projecting the centre state's integrative project of power in the commune involves routine and relatively mundane practices, technologies and bureaucratic rituals. Everyday state making in the commune usually goes on in a very unremarkable way. State practices and events form part of the fabric of commune life and are constitutive of a political culture in which everyone in the commune participates. The local state is a *habitus* in Bourdieu's sense, in that local people neither consent nor refuse to take part: rather participation takes place routinely and because that is what people are accustomed to doing. In Bourdieu's memorable terms, in the *habitus* "discourse continuously feeds off itself like a train bringing along its own rails" and the everyday actions of local people become "automatic and impersonal, significant without intending to signify" (Bourdieu 1977, 79-80). This everyday participation in the routines and rituals of state bolsters state power.

However, local people are not necessarily seduced by these state effects. There is a strong element of cynicism too that runs through local people's imaginings of the state, and which colours their everyday dealings with commune officials, and the state system for which they are responsible. On their part local officials too can also be cynical about the state, as we have seen in relation to their membership of the Communist Party. There does remain, however, a powerful aura that surrounds the idea of the good state, a mystique that gives the state idea continued potency in the commune, and which offsets this under-current of cynicism. The image of the good

state was strikingly apparent in the case of the funeral of General Giáp and the spirit of nationalism and noble struggle that he personified. It was also apparent in relation to the desirability of state education and the future promise it seems to offer young people in the commune.

The state is the focus for many of the aspirant dreams and desires for betterment that Vĩnh Thủy residents hold, at the same time as being a source of intense disappointment and frustration. Local people in the commune are therefore both hopeful and cynical about the state at the same time. They participate, in the local state arena, in the routines and rituals surrounding everyday state practices, even whilst ridiculing them, or complaining about them. Local people's affective ties with the local officials that embody state power in the commune, which I discuss in the next chapter, serve to exacerbate these tensions. Cynicism, desire and affect forge a politics of intimacy that pervades the local state, and through which the people of the commune imagine particular localised ideas of state. These ideas in turn validate and sustain the vernacularized operation of politics and power that takes place in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy.



**Photo 4.1:** Students lined up for the Teacher's Day ceremony





**Photo 4.2:** Students arranged in their class groups, listening to the Teacher's Day ceremony



**Photo 4.3:** The flag ceremony and ceremonial opening of Teacher's Day



**Photo 4.4:** Seven female students performing a dance during the Teacher's Day ceremony in the commune



**Photo 4.5:** A training event in Vĩnh Thủy, conducted by provincial government staff

## CHAPTER 5

### Intimacy and Affect in the Local State

#### Introduction

State planners and government officials attempt to project a stable state imaginary in Vĩnh Thủy commune through routine bureaucratic practices and rituals. Commune residents of Vĩnh Thủy participate in these practices and rituals on an everyday basis and in so doing help to make them real, but they also process them in locally specific ways: through cynicism and desire, manifestations of a particular politics of intimacy in the commune which shapes state imaginaries in the local state space. This politics of intimacy in turn shapes the outcomes of the projects of power pursued by the different vectors of the local state.

In this chapter I discuss how emotive and affective ties too shape the intimate political culture of the local state, through discussing a number of affective and intimate episodes in the local state space that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Affect, as well as cynicism and desire, is a product of the close encounters that take place in the local state in Vĩnh Thủy and shapes a state imaginary quite different to the uniform bureaucratic order dreamt up by officials in Hanoi and Lào Cai City. Local people share all kinds of intimate and emotive ties and connections with each other, and with state officials in Vĩnh Thủy commune. These ties can be either harmonious or conflictual, but they serve to ensure that politics is intensely local and personal. Intimacy serves to tie local people into the reified idea of the state more closely, even as they reimagine it.

Holly High (2014) discusses how people in rural Laos communicate their own particular private stories of the state, which embody their own understandings of it, and they consequently have an “ambivalent, even physical, intimacy” with this “reified and reviled entity” (High 2014:22). In her seminal article on *Affective States* Ann Laura Stoler (2004) also highlighted the importance of sentiments, emotions, private feelings and their public expressions in shaping past colonial state building projects. It is these private feelings that I refer to as affect, the propensity to move a subject emotionally or touch the feelings in a manner beyond rational calculation.

Stoler highlighted the conflicted emotions of Dutch colonial administrators and the subsequent attempts by the colonial state to regulate emotions and affections to safeguard colonial rule. As Stoler observes, the colonial state was centrally concerned with understanding “what sorts of domestic and pedagogic environments could instil loyalty to Dutch rule, and what sorts would nurture affective arrangements dangerous to it” (Stoler 2004:16). This regulation of affection mirrors the project of the Vietnamese state in the northwestern uplands today, where the children of ethnic minority elites are sent to elite boarding schools to receive their state training, in the process attempting to sever existing affective ties to ethnicity, lineage and community.

Intimacy is important in shaping shared statist values and beliefs in the local state space. Michael Herzfeld (2004) has described ‘cultural intimacy’ as a set of shared symbols and narratives that link the public and private and which frame values and modes of behaviour in the nation state. In even the most oppositional of contexts, Herzfeld argues, actors draw upon a set of shared cultural understandings and beliefs that make even the most bureaucratic and formal interactions deeply intimate. This kind of cultural intimacy saturates local people’s political dealings in the local state in Vĩnh Thủy. Local officials and local people are bound into the state through their intimate engagement with state routines and rituals, but they also have emotive and affective connections derived from living within their local communities and are subject to local perceptions of duty, reciprocity and obligation to lineage and to the community as a whole. These too shape local state imaginaries in the local state, as much as the reified projections of centre state planners.

For those who are politically unconnected and suffer relative neglect as a result, feelings of hurt and frustration abound and are expressed through the cynicism I described in the previous chapter. Affective ties though also serve to soften the unequal exercise of power in the local state, and ensure that the unconnected are not alienated. Personal connections serve to both bolster and soften state power, making its exercise more relevant, more nuanced and conditional, and thus also more palatable to the populace. The unconnected remain engaged with state ideas, and particularly with the future promise of the state, even when this promise goes largely unfulfilled.

### **Public-private ceremonies as intimate and affective encounters**

I return first to the Teacher's Day celebrations discussed in the previous chapter. Once the official ceremony had ended the parents and pupils drifted off and I was invited up to the teacher's room at the school, where I had sat chatting and drinking tea on many past occasions. I played table tennis with some of the teachers while preparations went on downstairs for the celebratory meal for state officials that always follow such events. Mr. Thắng, the head of the commune Veteran's Association and proprietor of the small restaurant in the commune centre, along with his wife and extended family, were busy ferrying plates of food, crockery and locally brewed corn spirits from his restaurant to the large downstairs classroom that had been cleared for this post ceremony feast. Eventually we all sat down to eat, with the participants encompassing all of the commune officers, most of the village heads and deputy heads, and all of the teachers from both the secondary and primary schools in the commune.

It was a raucous event with a great deal of toasting and large quantities of the corn spirit consumed. Like the official ceremony of state that had preceded it, this feast was clearly an important ritual too, where officials within the commune sat down to celebrate and get drunk together. The teachers largely sat together, though in the Vietnamese state tradition the senior teachers sat with the commune chairman at the first table, as the teachers were the reason for the assembly and were thus honoured on this occasion. Otherwise, the tables formed largely along ethnic kin and village lines, through familiarity rather than design. After many rounds of toasting and drinking much mixing of the tables had taken place, with people taking turns to sit with others and issue toasts. The feasting went on long into the afternoon, after which many of the younger teachers and some of the commune officers went off to sing karaoke together in one of the commune officer's houses.

Peter Hinton notes in regard to a similar state occasion in rural Thailand that the feasting and socialising that follows official state meetings and events is at least as important as the formal state ritual itself (Hinton 1992). On the occasion of Teacher's day in Vĩnh Thủy the ritual feast served to confirm to the participants their privileged status of being state officials, part of the elite group of custodians of state power within the commune. The intimate occasion helped to build and sustain sociality and shared

values amongst the officials and renewed and reinforced their shared connections, identity and sense of mission. Periodic state ceremonies and the feasting and ritual drinking that follows are important in perpetuating state rule, and in consolidating the very idea of the state in Vĩnh Thủy commune in that officials embody state power through their persons.

The importance of political intimacy in state ceremonies was further reinforced for me on the occasion of another event that took place in Vĩnh Thủy a month later. It was a Sunday afternoon in late autumn and I was invited by the commune chairman to join him in the central village of the commune (Ninh Điền B) on the occasion of Ethnic Solidarity Day, perhaps better translated as the ‘festival of ethnic solidarity’ (*Ngày hội đại đoàn kết dân tộc*) which is held in the commune once a year. Unlike Teacher’s Day, this day is not observed nationwide, but is prevalent in upland ethnic minority communes in the northwest of Vietnam.

The previous day I had seen villagers busily preparing tables and chairs in the field next to the central market place, and when we arrived for the event we were greeted by the pungent smell of roasting horsemeat, which was being cooked for the occasion. Ten women from the village, all active in the commune Women’s Union organisation, were busy washing vegetables and preparing rice, whilst men smoked and chatted around the tables that had been laid out with bowls, chopsticks, glasses and the ubiquitous small recycled plastic water bottles, filled with corn alcohol. Looking around the field I saw that almost every household from the central village was represented, and the commune chairman later informed me that three households from each of the other eleven villages in the commune were also invited to attend. The attendees from other villages were all prominent and important villagers, either party members of some standing or members of the political aristocracy of the village: households where successive generations had held important village positions.

The commune chairman and party secretary briefly discussed proceedings and then the party secretary stood up to greet everyone, and delivered a long speech about the importance of ethnic solidarity, the residents’ duty to work hard and to follow the teachings of the Party, to avoid the dangers of unspecified ‘social evils’ (*tệ nạn xã hội*) and the importance of households striving to get rich legitimately. The chairman then



stood up to read from a party document which set out criteria through which households should be recognised and rewarded as having become model ‘cultural households’ (*hộ gia đình văn hóa*) for the commune. He called out the names of six households from different villages that were to be recognised as model cultural households, and the heads of these households sheepishly came forward to receive a certificate from the party secretary. All of the participants in this drama were of course well known to each other and regularly interacted in a number of registers: as relatives, as friends and acquaintances, as patrons and clients, and as rivals of different lineage groups vying for power in the commune. The public ceremony and public roles of the people involved was therefore something of a superficial façade, overlaying complex and long-standing relations of sociality amongst all of those assembled for the occasion.

Once the speeches and awards ceremony had taken place the assembled villagers sat down to feast on the roasted meat, and corn wine. As with the Teacher’s Day celebration, there was much mixing of the tables as villagers went off to toast neighbours and the commune officers also circulated around the assembled groups to drink and talk with the villagers and with member of their extended kin groups. After some time, once everyone had eaten their fill, the public address system was turned over to the village head of An Trú 2 who became the self-appointed compere for a commune karaoke session. The singing and drinking went on long after dark, with both men and women taking turns to sing Vietnamese ballads and traditional songs of their ethnic groups in what was an enjoyable and convivial occasion for everyone involved.

The two episodes I have described, of Teacher’s Day and Ethnic Solidarity Day, demonstrate how the official and unofficial, public and private are intimately entwined in the local state space.<sup>1</sup> The public and private rituals associated with such events together constitute part of the dense tapestry of effects that gives the state idea meaning in the commune. Both the public ceremonies and private feasting that followed were saturated with political intimacy. Meta-narratives of state and the

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<sup>1</sup> Another important, intimate state event held in the commune during my residency was Village Solidarity Day (*Ngày đoàn kết làng*). On this day prominent villagers, household heads and commune officers came together to review progress of village projects and discuss plans for village development efforts in the future, along of course with feasting and heavy drinking afterwards.

biopolitical designs of centre state planners for control of the uplands require local enactment and embodiment in order to have meaning and relevance to the people of the commune, as both of these episodes clearly demonstrate. Political intimacy expressed through public, performative rituals and the private encounters of officials with each other and with the citizenry are critical in building regimes of legitimacy and in continually recreating the state idea in Vĩnh Thủy.

### **A family tragedy as both a private and public event**

One night, a couple of months in to my residency in Vĩnh Thủy commune, we were finishing dinner in the house of Mr. Bình, the commune chairman, with whom I lived during my time in the commune. We had an established domestic routine at this time of day, with the chairman and his wife retiring to the wooden sofa in the centre of the room to watch the news on satellite TV, followed by their favourite dubbed Taiwanese dramas, whilst I washed up the dishes from the meal in the kitchen hut outside and then sat down to write up my day's field notes. On this particular evening however, Mr. Bình received a phone call whilst we were still sat on the low stools around the dinner table and I watched as his relaxed demeanour instantly changed, and a look of dread crossed his face. After receiving the call, he turned back to us and quietly related the news that the commune party secretary's son had been involved in a motorcycle accident on the treacherous, winding mountain road between the commune and the district capital. It was raining heavily and the road was slippery, with unpaved sections turning to mud. "He hit a truck coming the other way and his chest is crushed" he explained. "They're taking him to the district hospital now. His friend who was travelling with him went off the road and down the side of the mountain but he is fine, he's not hurt". Shortly after, he received another short call. When he hung up he turned to me and simply said "*chết rồi*" (he's dead). He pulled on his waterproof jacket and trousers and left immediately for the district hospital.

In the days that followed the full story of what happened that night gradually emerged from the swirl of commune rumours, along with a picture of the boy that died, who I hadn't met. He was the twenty-year-old only son of the powerful commune party secretary, himself the head of the most powerful Nùng political family group in the commune. As such the boy was guaranteed a senior position in the political hierarchy of the commune in the future, as the only son of this Nùng patriarch. The young man

was well known in the commune as a tearaway, part of a group of privileged boys who were the offspring of the commune political elite who had received all the benefits that their family position entitled them to, including being educated at the exclusive district ethnic minority school. His father's relative wealth meant that he wanted for nothing and he had a powerful, late model Honda motorbike. He was known as a gambler and a drinker, and in fact on the night he died he had been drinking heavily and was racing his friend on the road to the district capital when he had crashed head on into a truck coming the other way.

Over the next week the full affective machinery of the commune swung into action. In the second house of the party secretary, on the main road through the central village, a traditional Nùng funeral shrine was built and relatives and friends of the boy were in constant attendance, playing cards with the dead boy's spirit to keep him entertained. But the death and mourning was also a very public event. Two women went from door to door in the central village of the commune, collecting money from each household towards the cost of the funeral ceremony and meal that was planned for a week after the boy's death. Members of the Women's Union and friends and relatives of the dead boy's family spent two days preparing and cooking an enormous amount of food, and on the day of the funeral ceremony, the central market building (usually only used for the weekly market day) was turned into a huge open air dining area. Throughout the day, people came to pay their respects to the party secretary, and to eat and drink in memory of the dead boy.

The attendees of the feast were not just the dead boy's kin from his Nùng home village of Tràng Tôn, but were from all of the villages in the commune, and included representatives from all the ethnic groups: Hmông, Dao, Pa'Si and Tu'Si people, as well as representatives from the handful of Kinh and Tay households. All the village government officials from each village attended, along with many other commune residents. Throughout the day hundreds of people came to pay their respects and the central market area, and the whole of the centre of the commune in fact, became a swirling kaleidoscope of colour, sound and smell: the vivid traditional outfits of the different ethnic groups, the smell of roasting meat, the loud funerary music played through the commune public address system and the roar of motorbikes ferrying people back and forth from the feast.

The death of the party secretary's son was both a highly private and a public event, a public performance almost, played out in the full view of everyone and with commune residents playing the role of supporting cast. The young man was deeply mourned, but it was unclear whether this was a private or public mourning. Many of the women who cooked and collected money for the funeral were Women's Union members, but were also kin and neighbours of the dead boy's family. Although many of those mobilised during that week were commune and village officials, they were indistinguishable from others who came to pay their respects, who stayed on in the house playing cards with the dead boy's spirit or consoled his family. They wore the same clothes, they engaged in the same activities, they laughed and sang and swore and cried like everyone else.<sup>2</sup>

Undoubtedly people attended the feast because he was the party secretary's son, with the secretary himself a big man in local Nùng politics and an important and powerful man in the commune. The state was always there in the background then, a spectral presence. But the state was not necessarily an overt or central character in the drama. The boy that died was, by all accounts, not particularly well liked. He had a sense of entitlement and was described to me as being "drunk on power and privilege", but the commune still mourned him fully and publically. When I asked why this was one informant shrugged. "We have known him since he was a child, he grew up in the commune with our children too. So he was a part of the commune like everyone else, even if his father is an important man".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Tragically, another terrible motorcycle accident occurred towards the end of my stay in Vĩnh Thủy, again involving the death of a young man on the road to the district capital. This time the victim was from the Hmông political dynasty: the adopted only son of the head of the Women's Union, Mrs. Giang, a cousin of the commune chairman Mr. Binh. He too died in a night time collision on the road whilst driving his motorbike recklessly. In this case, coming so soon after the death of the party secretary's son, the public mourning and funerary ceremonies were eerily familiar.

<sup>3</sup> As a postscript to the story, in the months that followed the accident the party secretary agreed a sum of money to be paid by the truck owner as compensation. The amount paid was 80 million Dong (approximately four thousand US dollars), a substantial amount for this part of northwestern Vietnam but a relatively modest figure for such an occurrence, I was told. This was because Mr. Hải, the party secretary, had acknowledged that his son was at fault too in the accident, as he was not wearing a helmet, was drunk and was driving too fast.

What this sad occasion showed is how state officials and their families are intimately bound up in the life of the commune. The passing of the young man and the subsequent mourning that took place highlighted for me how permeable the line between the public and private is in the local state, with political actors deeply embedded in the local community. The operation of political power is necessarily shaped by close and intimate everyday relations, and state officials are viewed simultaneously as representatives of the government, and as village residents with close and complex social ties to those around them: ties of ethnicity, kinship and neighbourliness. Official relations are conducted between officers as duty bearers with the citizenry, but also between relatives (close or distant), between neighbours, between old school acquaintances, between friends, between business acquaintances. There is thus an intense and affective intimacy to the everyday operation of political power, which shapes the political culture of Vĩnh Thủy in ways far removed from the disinterested bureaucratic state ideal embodied in the documents and universalising rituals and practices that are projected in the local state space, that I described in the previous chapter.

### **Political intimacy and moral persuasion**

Political intimacy ties ethnic minority cadre and the people they govern into all sorts of relationships of reciprocity and mutual obligation. The local state is an intimate state, full of close and intricate family and community ties that cement authority and reinforce political power, but also soften the exercise of power and render it extremely personal. It is a particular kind of disciplinary power, which relies upon moral persuasion to exert influence rather than any kind of overt regulatory force. Such manifestations of force are notable by their absence in the everyday in Vĩnh Thủy.<sup>4</sup> Instead local officials adept use of moral persuasion, an intimate form of political *metis*, proved to be an extremely effective instrument of rule.

This was clearly evidenced in the sensitive case of education and the unwillingness of some households in the commune to send their children to school, which I discussed in the previous chapter. Jean Michaud (2012:13) contends that Hmông children and their

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<sup>4</sup> Overt demonstrations of disciplinary power and force are reserved only for the most extreme cases, drug dealing in particular which is a major concern of the state in relation to Hmông people in the province.

parents in Lào Cai province are compelled to participate in education by “disgruntled state representatives”. However, I believe this view downplays the intimate and highly affective relations that prevail between local state officials and local people in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Local officials have the power to fine households heavily when their children don’t attend school, but in practice this appears never to happen. Rather, local officials are more likely to cajole and encourage households, visiting them constantly and subjecting them to a form of moral and psychological persuasion. This constant, low level pressure is the key feature of how power is exercised in the commune, an extension of the party state morality we discussed in the previous chapter, but also an expression of sociality embedded in local cultural ties and understandings.

Mrs. Minh, an elderly resident of Son Kỳ A village, described how persuasion and this constant, low level pressure works. She was talking about a neighbouring poor household, which I had been told by the village head was ‘difficult’ because they didn’t always send their children to school. Mrs. Minh explained how the village and commune authorities went about addressing this problem:

It’s difficult for them [the household] because they don’t have a lot of land and they have to travel far to look for firewood and things from the forest. The husband is often away looking for work so they need the children to help around the house. Of course the commune people know that. If they wanted to, they could make the children go to school by fining the household. It’s in the regulations that they can do that. But I can’t remember a time when anyone has been fined for that. Instead, the village head and the people from the village and commune Women’s Union come round almost every day to talk to the mother. They sit with her and explain that the children have to go to school. They also threaten that they will fine her. It goes on like that for weeks. In the end, she has no choice, she has to send the children to school.

Persuasion and pressure exerted by local officials was often successful because of the intimate ties that exist between village or commune officials and local people. In the case of An Trí 2 village the village head told me that seventy percent of the village has the same name as him, and of this seventy percent, half are directly related to him, and a further thirty percent are more distant relatives. He therefore has a kinship connection to at least half of the households in the village and he was adept at using these connections to apply pressure to recalcitrant households where necessary, he explained.

The use of persuasion as a form of disciplinary power over more coercive methods further illustrates the melding of public and private spheres in the commune. The intimate connections which permeate all social relations makes the exercise of coercive power highly unlikely and ultimately, unnecessary. Officials are able to play on these personal and intimate connections to exert subtle pressure, but likewise local people can play off the same connections in order to strengthen their own position and interests. This was most visibly and consistently apparent in the case of lobbying for poverty reduction support and state resources which I discuss in the next chapter.

### **Local officials and their intimate projects of power**

Local party-state officials are positioned as critical intermediaries and mediators between governmental power and village life. They stand at the apex of the local state and indeed embody state power through the exercise of the responsibilities of office, but they are also intimately embedded in the local communities of which they are a part. They have a foot in both worlds, switching between them constantly, and effortlessly.

These village and commune officials are constantly engaged in enacting ‘projects at the margins of power’ for whilst they work in the shadow of the larger governmental project of power of the centre state in the northwestern uplands, to manage ethnic minority people in the uplands, they also have important projects of their own. These projects can be individual and family projects of accumulation, but extend also to providing for a wider circle of kin and village associates, and also to providing for the commune as a whole, for their claim to power hinges on their ability to bring outside resources in to the commune and ensure a level of provision for all commune residents. In what follows I describe these intimate projects of power of local state officials: in looking after their own kin, but also in pursuing the common good for the commune as a whole.

#### ***Local officials looking after their own***

Commune officials are often senior figures in the prominent lineage groups that dominate politics in Vĩnh Thủy. They are adept at using their positions in the local

bureaucracy to channel state resources to their lineage networks, ensuring they meet their obligations to look after their own relatives. This is an important manifestation of the politics of intimacy in the commune. A simple example illustrates how this takes place. In late autumn I was waiting outside the commune office for a particular commune officer who had promised the day before to meet with me to talk. When he arrived he saw me and sheepishly offered an apology for not being able to spend time with me that morning, as he had important 'family' (*gia đình*) business to take care of. As he remained at the commune office I was curious to see what this business was.

He went out to the old meeting hall beside the commune office where several other officers were busy distributing packets of hybrid corn seed to villagers that had been affected by hailstones a few months previously, which had spoilt the newly planted corn crop. I watched as he spent an hour greeting a steady stream of relatives from his home village, whom he helped negotiate through the bureaucratic process of checking their eligibility for the seed on the official form, completing the required paperwork and ensuring they received the right amount (see Photo 5.1). He later explained to me that he had initially registered their claims to the assistance months earlier, even though the responsibilities under his portfolio do not include registering such claims. Having such a champion within the commune system, able to help negotiate and interface with the state bureaucracy and establish claims of eligibility, is very useful in securing access to state resources.

Many of these lineage leaders are village mentors, a position which is given to the most senior and experienced officers in the commune government. As we have seen, the mentor system as designed by the higher state is intended to ensure that village mentors are appointed to villages where they have no ethnic connection. However this does not stop powerful officials from interceding in the business of village government in those villages where they have a family interest, in pursuit of their projects of power. This is done without interference from the designated mentor, who will often similarly involve themselves in their own village's politics on a reciprocal basis with other mentors.

Family patriarchs exercise *metis* through this collusion to subvert the centre state's attempt to regulate and exercise surveillance over the practice of village and commune



politics. The higher state's regulatory intent is further compromised by the parallel party-government structure that operates. Patriarchs are often also village party secretaries and thus exercise influence over village politics in the local state space through this route, further short-circuiting centre state designs to dilute familial and lineage-based power.

### *Local officials pursuing the common good*

Local people are of course well aware of the partial, private operation of power in Vĩnh Thủy and express disaffection and cynicism about the state system and the local officials that run it. As one elderly resident of Lâm Trạch B village stated matter-of-factly to me one day:

Officials are all in it for themselves. Why else would they do it? They have to pay a lot for their positions and they want to get as much back as possible. There are all kinds of opportunities to make money once you have a government job.

But whilst there are undoubtedly opportunities to leverage state positions to accumulate both legitimately and illegitimately, it is not quite so easy to make money from the commune as popular imagination suggests. Vĩnh Thủy is a poor upland commune, remote from the district centre, poorly served by infrastructure and unsuited to developing the kinds of cash crops that have fuelled accumulation in other parts of the district and province. Pineapple for example is lucratively grown in the lower altitude communes of Cao Xuyên district, and cardamom is grown elsewhere in Lào Cai province. The commune is well suited to producing tea, but tea production is only just beginning. The main resource of the commune in the past was timber but much of this was logged in the 1970's and 1980s, and replanted only in the 1990s and on a limited basis. There are strict rules over the cutting of the remaining forests around the main settlement areas in the commune, which are watershed reserves, and this is carefully enforced.

The difficult conditions in the commune in fact make it a relatively unattractive place for contractors to work as I witnessed in relation to a village road construction project that the commune chairman, Mr. Bình was trying to initiate. The project set out to cover in concrete the existing mud road from the commune centre to the high mountain village of Bình Yên. It was part of the government's flagship 'New Rural' scheme,

under which the commune is required to provide funds of their own, in the form of both cash and commune labour, to match the funds provided by the central government. The government regulations on what the commune could spend on contractors under the scheme are limited and, because of the difficult terrain and the remoteness of Vĩnh Thủy commune, it is difficult to get construction companies interested in taking up small contracts like Vĩnh Thủy's road construction project. Mr. Bình nevertheless set out to undertake the project as part of his responsibility as both a political and community leader, and deployed all of his considerable negotiation skills and political capital in order to get a contractor involved in the construction of the road, for the greater good of the commune.

Over a series of weeks Mr. Bình was in constant telephone contact with the owner of a small construction company in the province whom he knew. He would call him regularly to cajole and persuade him to take the contract for the road, and invited him to the commune to further negotiate at his house, over a lavish dinner and copious amounts of corn spirits. On this occasion, Mr. Bình made much of the shared connections they had with various people in the district and provincial party state system, and he would call these people during the meal so that they could reminisce and recreate the feelings of friendship and intimacy that they shared from previous encounters. When the time came to start the work on the road, Mr. Bình made the open loft of his large house available to the workers from the construction company to sleep, stringing up hammocks. Mr. Bình's house is the only one in the commune with a flush toilet, which was attractive to the workers who all came from Lào Cai City, and Mr. Bình arranged with Mr. Thăng's noodle shop in the commune centre to cook meals for the contract workers three times a day.

Once work on the road had started a number of commune residents, who watched the work carefully, were critical of the workmanship and complained that the concrete was being spread too thinly at the edges of the road, but Mr. Bình was quick to stifle this dissent and careful to ensure that criticism was not fed back to the director whom he had persuaded to take up the project. Mr. Bình and the contractor could of course have been colluding together to gain personally from the project, but having followed the process carefully, it appeared to me more likely that Mr. Bình had deployed his own

political capital and considerable powers of persuasion to make the reluctant director, his friend, accept this difficult and unrewarding contract.

In his management of the concrete road, Mr. Bình operated as a kind of regulatory entrepreneur, ensuring the designs of the central state were carried through whilst ensuring at the same time a good outcome for the commune, which came in the form of daily wage work offered to commune residents as labourers on the project, and of course the road itself (see Photo 5.2). He was also careful to ensure that good relations and social harmony prevailed throughout the process. This problem-solving, intermediary role of senior officials in the local state appeared to be a recognized and accepted part of their duties, straddling as they do the higher-level state and local society. As regulatory entrepreneurs local state officials ensure flexibility in the system and get things done, ensuring at the same time that they meet the intimate expectations and obligations on them as leaders and power-holders in the commune. This regulatory role illustrates another important dimension to the politics of intimacy in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy.

In Thạch Liêm village I observed another notable example of local official's role in meeting their intimate obligations to the wider community. An important part of the village leader's role is to collect monetary contributions from each household. The village head in Thạch Liêm spent a great deal of time collecting these funds from households but he also attempted to leverage the difficulty he had in collecting these contributions to convince commune officials of the need to ensure future investment in his village. The village head explained how he often lobbied his superiors in the commune government by arguing that the village's poor infrastructure results in the subsequent inability of people to make the financial contributions required of them:

The teachers can't come to the village when it's raining because the roads are too bad. They also don't want to stay in the village overnight as there is no electricity, so the children don't get a full day of schooling and so don't become clever. With a poor road it's hard too for people to sell their produce, so they don't make a lot of money. The bad road and no electricity affect all of these things: the people aren't clever and can't sell their crops outside so they are poor, so we can't contribute a lot of money to the commune. That's why we ask all the time for a better road and electricity.

In making this claim, the village head was skilfully exercising political *metis* through flexibly navigating categories of state and entitlement in pursuit of a project of power that encompasses the wider good of all village residents.

As I observed in Chapter 3, a generational change is occurring amongst village leaders, with older leaders gradually being replaced by younger men who have experience in the world outside of the commune, often through having served in the army. Mr. Thân from Ninh Cãn village is a case in point: he replaced the former village leader two years before and was well regarded amongst commune superiors for his sober and serious nature and his willingness to work hard. He was also well respected by local people in the village for the success he has had in advocating for the village in regard to projects, and the connections he had to commune leaders. The village had recently been the recipient of a state project for livestock development, the first project they had received for five years, which villagers attributed to the intimate connections Mr. Thân had with commune officials. His skilful use of *metis* in negotiating the political processes of the commune was recognised by village residents. As one village resident remarked approvingly:

He can talk to the people in the commune office in a way that the previous head couldn't. He always seems to be working hard for the village and we expect more projects to come to the village soon.

This case illustrates again how politics in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy is shaped by long-standing perceptions of obligation and a duty of care officeholders bear towards the community they represent, a community to which they are intimately tied. This intimate politics that prevails in the local state ensures that local officials' behaviour is not straightforwardly predatory, and instead that projects of power result in a range of beneficial outcomes for individuals, family and commune.

### **Local officials as intimate neighbours**

The intimacy of government in the local state space and the neighbourly connections local officials shared with local people in Vĩnh Thủy was always particularly apparent when I walked back from the commune office to Mr Bình's house in the late afternoon. Next to the commune office is an old stone building, a remnant from the time when the district government was located in the commune following the invasion

of Lào Cai province by China in 1979. The block has been split into single rooms in which the handful of commune officers from outside the commune live during the week, before returning to their homes outside the commune at the weekend. Next to the block they have carefully cultivated an extensive vegetable garden and walking past, they would be there tending their vegetables, with wide sun hats and bare feet, trousers rolled up to the knees like all of the other villagers working in their gardens or fields. They were indistinguishable from other villagers in the commune once their official duties were over. Similarly I would often wander past village houses and come across commune and village officers that I knew, relaxing outside of working hours in the same casual way that other villagers do. They would be wearing shorts and a singlet, reclining in the doorway of their houses, playing with infants or chatting with visiting neighbours and relatives just like all of the villagers around them.

The melding of the official and unofficial, the public and private in the local state space extends to business too. The young and dynamic secretary of the commune Youth Union, Mr. Thành, lived next door to the commune chairman and operated a sawmill business from his home. When the mill was operating, I would always be interested to know who the timber was being processed for. In fact, by my rough estimation, the mill was used as often for communal or family purposes as it was for commercial business. Better off commune residents would pay Mr. Thành to process their timber for house construction, or for making furniture. In these cases he was a businessman like any other. At other times his sawmill would be used for communal purposes.

An example illustrates this point. The central village of Sơn Kỳ B had funds from the government to construct a permanent house for one of the poorest households in the village. Villagers, led by the village head, donated their labour to construct the house and Mr. Thành processed timber for the house construction, free of charge from what I could gather. On another occasion, a Hmông kinsman in his home village of Sơn Kỳ A was constructing a new house and the whole of his extended kin group was mobilised to carry timber from the sawmill to the site of the house construction, two and a half kilometres away. Again, Mr. Thành's sawmill services were provided free of charge, as was the labour of those that carried the timber, though they were fed throughout the day by the grateful family whose house was being constructed. Business then, like

government in the local state, appears to be an intimate affair, with projects of power enveloped by relationships of reciprocity and obligation, to family, kin and to the community.

Party state officials in Vĩnh Thủy are deeply entangled in intimate connections and these connections are in turn integral to the everyday operation of political power in the local state, which shapes the outcomes that result. Local officials live amongst the local people, and have in most cases grown up alongside commune residents. The close family and kin based connections amongst people in the villages also means that there are familial and kin based relationships that further serve to render government an intensely intimate and affective affair. Consequently, formalised state power can best be understood as being episodic in nature: it is always there, but is often in the background and emotive and affective ties are often more prominent instead, as projects of power are negotiated through the local state.

### ***Rượu ngô: lubricating local state intimacy***

Alcohol plays a central role in the intimate politics of the commune. Many of the episodes that I have described, which took place in the local state space, had the locally distilled corn spirit (*rượu ngô*) as a central element in the drama. *Rượu ngô* is ubiquitous in the commune to the extent that the spirit, and the rituals that surround drinking, are central to the process of ideational state making in the local state. The presence of *rượu ngô* at every public and private event means that it can aptly be described as a lubricant of local state power: it is used as a prop to smooth relations and social interactions, as a medium through which to engage in ritual bonding for social connectedness, and provides the mind distorting effects necessary to enable compromises and agreements to take place, often over difficult or contentious issues. Alcohol transcends the public and private and is central to the intimate everyday production of power in the local state.

*Rượu ngô* is carefully prepared locally, with households having their own particular distilling methods and ingredients, all subtly different and often handed down from generation to generation. There is a lot of pride involved in being complimented for the quality of the household's corn liquor in the commune, and the spirit is also often ascribed with medicinal or magical properties. Households consequently brew alcohol

to address a range of afflictions, including rheumatism, heart problems and most popularly of all, impotence. It is also prescribed, usually in combination with other treatments, as a cure for less physical maladies such as family problems, marital conflict, spirit possession and bad luck. In Sơn Kỳ A village one Hmông villager was a particularly famous apothecary, lauded throughout the district for the power of his corn wine. He would have several patients at a time living in his house to undergo treatment, from all over the district and province, and occasionally from other provinces too. His cures would involve the use of a range of medicinal herbs and concoctions but his extremely strong corn spirit was central to the treatment plan of his patients.

One episode from Vĩnh Thủy in which I was involved illustrates how important *rượu ngô* is to the ritual ceremonies of state, in putting participants at ease and facilitating social interaction around state business. The occasion was the visit of the district vice chairman of the people's committee, an important political figure who plays a key role in decision making over the allocation of projects, programmes and budgets to the commune. The visit occurred relatively early on in my residence in the commune and, as the only foreign resident in the district (so I was told) I had considerable novelty value, and was invited to join the vice chairman at the official lunch in Mr. Thăng's restaurant.

The vice chairman was clearly ill at ease through the opening formalities of the lunch, as we sipped water from the plastic bottles provided. After several minutes a hushed conversation took place between the district officials who accompanied the vice chairman, and the commune chairman Mr. Bình. Eventually Mr. Bình announced that, because I was present, they could ignore the usual rule that forbids state officials to drink alcohol during working hours, as this was a special occasion. In fact, as I knew well, this regulation is widely ignored in any case but the officials present had clearly wished to make a favourable impression on the vice chairman. Once the corn spirit had been poured and several toasts were made the vice chairman visibly relaxed and became much more talkative and animated, and the lunch passed in a convivial atmosphere, more in accord with how the vice chairman clearly intended the lunch to be. Drinking gave him and the other officials present something to do which they were familiar with: it gave them the opportunity to display their virility in being able to

consume the strong spirits, and opened up a range of ritual practices (toasting, shaking hands after each round) in which they could comfortably engage. Drinking thus appears to be a medium that enables officials to negotiate difference and awkwardness through reference to a common set of ritual practices.

At the Teacher's Day celebration that I described earlier in the chapter, drinking alcohol together was the central element in the ritual of conviviality and union between the teachers and other state representatives that were present, much more important than the food itself. Getting drunk together to 'celebrate' on this occasion therefore appeared to be an important rite and social marker. It also appeared to operate as a levelling device, to illustrate how all of those present at the feast were one under the state, with no one too good or too important not to get drunk and share in the ribaldry and intimacy. It thus became a sort of sealing process for the state ceremony itself, a release from the duties of state but also a marker of completion of duty to the state.

Drinking was a central part of almost every state event that I participated in. During village solidarity day in Ninh Căn village, part of the festival of ethnic unity (*ngày hội đại đoàn kết dân tộc*) that I described earlier, the formal business of the day was brought to a close mid-morning by the appearance of the ubiquitous small recycled drinking water bottles, filled with corn liquor. Participants in the meeting, including commune officials, village officials and the invited villagers, proceeded to go through endless cycles of toasting and drinking, pausing periodically to dip into the plates of meat and vegetables that had been laid out. The village mentor and commune officials vociferously toasted the village head and the village representatives and they in turn reciprocated. The discussion was light hearted and jovial, full of anecdotes and gossip from the village, and the commune officials eventually left in the early-afternoon, wobbling back up the track on their motorbikes, still yelling loudly to the assembled villagers waving them off. Again then, an event important in the marking out of the presence of the state in the remote corners of this upland commune had been lubricated, softened and made tolerable by alcohol.

*Rượu ngô* is also central to the process of negotiation and resolution of difficult or contentious issues in the commune. I was witness to one such occasion in the house of the commune chairman when the village head from Tràng Hải village, one of the most



remote in the commune, came to visit one evening accompanied by two male villagers. Trảng Hải is a Dao village and the Dao in the commune are political outsiders, with little representation in the commune government. The village head explained that they had been reluctant to come to the commune office during the day and preferred to come to the chairman's house at night instead to 'seek his advice' on a 'difficult' subject. It transpired that the two villagers had a long-standing dispute over the sale of a buffalo, which the village head had been unable to resolve. Conflict between the two men and their respective households had become inflamed and tempers were clearly running high.

After listening to both of the parties in the dispute the commune chairman proposed a compromise, involving the payment of a reduced sum of money but on terms more favourable to the vendor. Mr Bình then called over to his wife to bring cups and a bottle of his *rượu ngô*. The deal was sealed over many cups of wine, with Mr. Bình graciously encouraging the two men and the village head to drink copiously. After much drinking they eventually left, all three riding unsteadily on the motorcycle of the village head. The corn liquor had been central to sealing the compromise, softening the blow for all parties and ensuring that sociality prevailed, despite the difficult circumstances.

Drinking in the northwest of Vietnam is intimately linked to notions of masculinity, and the ability to consume large amounts of alcohol without losing control is seen as a key virtue (Vu 2013). There is consequently enormous pressure on state cadre and attendees at any social or state event to drink a lot, to demonstrate virility and manliness. This pressure is intensified in interactions between Kinh lowland officials and ethnic minority people. I have seen on countless occasions how lowland Kinh cadre have preconceived notions of ethnic minorities spending all their time drinking, and visits to village houses often quickly turn into a competition to see who can drink the most. Of course these competitions are also a means of overcoming the awkwardness of difference and build and maintain harmonious social relations (*quan hệ*) as Phuong Vu recognises (Vu 2013). I would also contend that although alcohol is central to much of the social life of the commune, both official and private as I have shown, ethnic minority people sometimes play up to the stereotypes held by lowland

Kinh officials, as a kind of performance in the process of overcoming social difference, though they are also more than willing to engage in the competitiveness of drinking.

For women, and women cadre, the relationship to drinking is more complex. On the one hand they are encouraged to drink heavily with men, but they are also expected to be demure and protest at being forced to drink and in fact overt and enthusiastic drinking by women, particularly younger women, was frowned upon by men in the commune. It seldom happened during my fieldwork, except amongst older, married women in their own homes, where they would engage in heavy drinking with guests as a sign of hospitality. Generally speaking though, women were largely excused the excessive consumption of corn spirits that marked out all social and state occasions, though this also excluded them from the networks of sociality and bonding that drinking rituals are intended to cement, and thus reinforced women's relative political marginalisation in commune networks of power.

Few officials in the commune appeared to actually enjoy the excessive drinking involved in state ceremonies and events, a fact which appears to endorse a view that they are a performative practice intimately connected with the regeneration of the idea of the state itself. Drinking for state cadre is a necessary but not particularly enjoyable (at least not all of the time), element in the ritual of state. In the case of the commune chairman Mr. Binh, he would complain constantly of the necessity to drink *ruou ngô* on every occasion: be it meetings in the villages, or meals with visiting delegations from the district or province, or in resolving simple disputes as in the case I have just described. Indeed it was only after he stopped offering me alcohol with every evening meal that I truly felt comfortable living with him and his wife as more than just a passing visitor. Mr. Binh and the other commune officers deployed subtle strategies to limit their exposure to excessive drinking, as I came to understand through observing them through many such events. In the case of the dispute I just described, Mr. Binh had no choice but to get drunk, as the situation was extremely fraught, but on other occasions that I observed control of both the bottle and the toasting process enabled Mr. Binh to dictate the rate at which alcohol was consumed.

## **Conclusion**

Intimate ties shape the everyday encounters of the people of the commune, local state officials and residents alike. The political intimacy of everyday life in Vĩnh Thủy is particularly apparent in the three registers I have discussed: the everyday cynicism local people express towards the motivations of state officials, the powerful fantasies and desires that arise from the utopian promise of the state and the material largesse that is increasingly available, and the affective and emotional ties that bind people together, resulting from the proximity of everyday life in the commune and the intimate connections that result.

This intimacy moulds the projects of power that local people and local officials pursue through the local state, as these projects involve affective ties to family, lineage and community, and are not simply about personal accumulation. Political intimacy is productive of power in the local state space, as the effects projected by centre state and translocal vectors are refracted through the intimate projects of power of local people. The political outcomes that result are highly vernacularised, as the centralising and universalising project of power of the centre state is reworked, softened and made more locally appropriate in the local state.

State ideas too are reworked and become localised and domesticated in this intimate local state space. State ideas remain as reified abstractions, particularly ideas of the good state and the promise of development it holds, but state ideas also become deeply embedded in the local, and derive from the operation of political power in the local state. The state then is seen as partial and imperfect, subject to the whims of local officials and their pursuit of their own projects of power. But it is also imbued with ideas and expectations of mutuality, sociality, sharing and the wider community good.

Affect and the politics of intimacy help form these distinct local state ideas which resonate and achieve potency in Vĩnh Thủy precisely because they have been formed in the local state space and are therefore locally recognisable, and relevant. These state ideas are quite different to the singular, integrative, bureaucratic ideal projected through centre state discourses and effects. They remain integral to the state making process nevertheless, as it is through these local state imaginaries, embedded in and

infused with the politics of intimacy, that local people engage with the wider governmental designs of the centre state in the northwestern uplands. Like the projects of power that are enacted in the margins of state power, local state ideas are similarly formed in the shadow of the wider project of power of the centre state, and feed off this project.



**Photo 5.1:** Local officials distributing hybrid corn seed to villagers



**Photo 5.2:** Villagers working on a rehabilitated commune road under the ‘New Rural’ programme of the government

## CHAPTER 6

### The Struggle to be Poor

#### Introduction

The state is a pervasive presence in the everyday lives of the people of Vĩnh Thủy commune. State owned companies dominate business and underwrite agricultural production, and state cadre attempt to comprehensively regulate social life through projecting myriad routine state effects. But the state's presence is felt most keenly in the commune through providing poverty reduction support to the people of the commune. This support increased enormously through the 1990s and is now a defining feature of the relationship between the centre state and the people of the northwestern borderlands. Consequently centre state processes for defining the poor, and the programmes to deliver this material support, are the preeminent governmental technology around which the projects of power of local state vectors are pursued, contested and reworked in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy.

Katherine Verdery (1996) notes how what she describes as the “problematic legitimation” of states in the Former Soviet Union was embedded in both extraction and distribution: stockpiling things at the centre was critical for the accumulation of power under state socialism, just as redistributing them was critical to constructing state legitimacy. This resonates strongly with the experience of state socialism in Vietnam through the 1970s and 1980s, and the redistribution of assets continued to be important in Vietnam in the *đổi mới* era too, as state legitimacy was being remade. Today this redistributive project is embodied in the attempts to foster ‘poverty reduction’ (*giảm nghèo*).

The party state's success in reducing rural poverty has been rightly lauded but the poverty problem has never been ‘solved’, partly because of problems in how poverty is defined and conceptualised, but also because poverty reduction plays an important rhetorical role in demonstrating the government's continued commitment to egalitarianism and the legacy of the state socialist past. Much contemporary party and government discourse is still framed around equality, and the centre state's ability to

continually demonstrate a commitment to redistribution remains critical in projecting ideas of state in the ethnic minority periphery.

The increased welfare role of the state has contributed to an increasing bureaucratization of everyday life in Vĩnh Thủy. Local people have necessarily become more knowledgeable about the state and have an increased level of confidence in engaging with officials. As a senior member of the state's ethnic minority affairs committee in Hanoi remarked to me: "ethnic minority people are changing, they're making more demands and it's harder to keep them satisfied than it used to be". The ubiquitousness of state programmes has in turn driven the development of a particular kind of politics, whereby local people increasingly seek to engage productively with the state for the resources on offer. Political *metis* is a prevalent form of political agency in this politics, as local people and local officials rework categories of entitlement in the local state space to pursue projects of power.

Inverting James Scott's classic conception of the role of the state and its engagement with the citizenry, Andrew Walker (2014) describes the increasing engagement of rural people with state processes as a shift "from legibility to eligibility". But in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy commune, eligibility relies heavily upon the ability to establish legibility first, through the connections people have to local state powerholders. In Vĩnh Thủy commune, local people are engaged in a struggle to be recognized by the state as 'poor', and thus eligible for critical government resources, and their legibility is determined by the connections they have to the local officials that mediate the distribution of poverty reduction resources in the local state space.

There is a notable lack of stigma attached to being called poor in the commune, in contrast to lowland and more urban areas of Vietnam where the term 'poor' (*nghèo*) has more pejorative connotations. This is perhaps because many people in the commune are classified as either poor or 'near poor' (*cận nghèo*).<sup>1</sup> The status is thus

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<sup>1</sup> For the period 2011-2015 the rural poor are classified as those with an income below 400,000 VND per person per month (about USD 20). The rural near-poor are classified as those with an income of between 401,000 and 520,000 VND per person per month (USD 20 – USD 26). Government decision no. 09/2011/QĐ-TTg.



not exceptional and being ‘poor’ is a classification that is actively sought, as it signals confirmation from the state of a right to access resources.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, the commune is increasingly entangled in market networks and socio-economic differentiation and stratification is slowly but increasingly evident as a result. But it is still fair to say that the vast majority of the people of Vĩnh Thủy have very little, and can rightfully lay claim to being called poor. Indeed a common observation made in the commune during my fieldwork was that it was only those households that had someone employed as a commune or village official (about 10% of households) and who consequently earned a regular government salary who were categorically not poor. Everyone else could credibly claim to be poor according to the prevailing moral norms of the commune.

This chapter explores the coming together of projects of power of local state vectors, in the local state space, around the governmental process to identify who in the commune should be categorised as poor: the annual poverty census process. The centre state projects a technocratic imaginary for poverty reduction, which is adapted and reworked in the local state space in line with local structures of power and locally embedded notions of reciprocity, care and entitlement. Local elites and local people exercise *metis* within the governmental processes enacted in the local state, in pursuit of a local biopolitical project, one that feeds off the wider biopolitical project for poverty reduction of the centre state. This local biopolitical project ensures poverty reduction resources are used to foster life in a relatively equitable and harmonious way for those who are connected to power, though less comprehensively for the unconnected, whose access to state resources is often partial and intermittent and who are guaranteed only the basics of life, and not the potentially transformative benefits available to better connected others.

### **State poverty reduction resources, livelihoods and wellbeing**

From around 2000, state planners in Hanoi have been able to mobilise significant financial resources to invest in the borderlands of the country, a trend towards state munificence that I highlighted in Chapter 1. Many of the government programmes that proliferate in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy are specifically targeted at poverty reduction, with the funds for these programmes provided by both internal government

sources and foreign or multi-lateral donors. This support to perceived underdeveloped areas of the country is of course not new. Critically though, planners in the state socialist and post-socialist eras were seldom able to follow through on the rhetoric of policy with material support. What is new today is the state's improved capacity to provide the poverty reduction resources promised.

During the period 2012-13 government programmes for poor and near poor households in Vĩnh Thủy encompassed the following support: free hybrid corn seed and fertilizer; free rice for the very poor; free roofing and construction materials to build animal stalls (for buffalo and pigs); financial support for education for poor households (with 100% educational support for smaller ethnic groups in the commune, the Pa'Si and Tu'Si); subsidised electricity; the provision of fifty free chickens along with feeders and associated chicken breeding equipment; free ducks; free pigs as part of a revolving fund scheme; subsidized credit for poor and 'near-poor' households; free roof slates to replace those destroyed by hailstones; a Tet (New Year) holiday payment; free health insurance; and subsidized support to key farmers as part of the agricultural campaigns to promote tea and vegetable production in the commune. There were also a number of schemes to support infrastructure improvements, from both central government funds, such as the 'New Rural' programme, through which a number of new intra-commune roads have been built, and a large World Bank project in the commune.

The proliferation of state support for poverty reduction means that local people are increasingly reliant upon the resources of the government for their projects of household accumulation. Government resources for poverty reduction such as seed, fertiliser, credit and livestock are one of the only significant forms of capital available in remote rural areas, and thus represent a critical means through which households can structurally transform their wellbeing and enhance their life chances.<sup>2</sup> The household of Mr. Khang in An Trí 2 village illustrates what a difference these poverty reduction resources can make, and how they are integral to the successful pursuit of household projects of power. His household has been classified as poor in three of the

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<sup>2</sup> The increased provision of state resources to upland areas must be seen in historical context, however. Increased state provision has occurred at the same time as state policies have closed off many of the livelihood opportunities that upland ethnic minority people have traditionally relied upon. This is most notably the case with forestry and shifting cultivation practices.

last four years (in the other year his household was classified as ‘near poor’). Every year he receives several bags of hybrid corn seed and fertilizer, sufficient to ensure he is able to grow hybrid corn on almost all of his family land. As a result he estimates that over the past four years his household has been able to triple their previous income.

He reinvested much of the money he made in his children’s education, sending his son to one of the district high schools as a boarder. The household also receives an educational support grant which further helps offset the cost of his son’s education. His wife is involved in the women’s group of a successful project run by the international non-governmental organisation to improve the breeding of traditional Hmông black pigs. She has successfully increased the number of pigs they have from a single pig to a litter of six and she is now able to sell piglets in the commune market twice a year. The family plans to buy a second hand motorcycle in the next year, with Mr. Khang hoping to be able to use the motorbike to travel to the border gate outside the district town to look for work as a porter during the agricultural off-season. All of the changes the household has experienced he attributes to being classified as poor: “Without the support of the government to us as a poor household it would have been impossible to do any of these things”.

The case of the Nguyễn household in Cao Thành B village also shows the difference poverty reduction resources can make in realising household projects. Over the past five years, the household has been classified as poor (for the first three years) and subsequently near poor (over the last two years). They receive free fertilizer every year and as a poor household they took advantage of the state’s policy of lending money at preferential interest rates and took out a loan. They used the money to make improvements to their house and to buy farming tools. As a near poor household they took out another loan to buy a buffalo to help with agricultural work. They subsequently received money to build a proper stall for the animal away from the house.

Mr. Nguyễn reported having to spend less time now than previously preparing the land and transporting crops from their fields to the house. He is able now to concentrate on his new business, making coffins. This wouldn’t be possible without the buffalo,

which he uses to transport timber from the commune centre to his house, four and a half kilometres away. With the profits from his increased farming yield and coffin making business he plans to extend into furniture making. The household has a satellite dish and recently bought a second hand motorbike. As the grandmother exclaimed whilst we were discussing changes that have taken place in the commune: “what we get from the government now, compared to before, is so different. Before they didn’t have anything to give. But now they help in so many ways. Now, maybe my grandchildren won’t want to be farmers anymore”.

### **The annual poor household census**

Who does and doesn’t get ascribed the status of being ‘poor’ clearly matters a great deal. In Vĩnh Thủy commune the process for determining this revolves around a poor household census, undertaken in October every year, and it is through the manipulation of this census process in the local state space that local officials and local people are able to pursue projects of power. The poverty census is the governmental process upon which local people’s political *metis* feeds, for as with other governmental processes operating in the local state space, political *metis* is most effectively exercised in and through the regulating categories and practices of state, in the margins of state power, in order to pursue local projects of power.

In order to carry out the census, commune officers are issued with a dense 107-page guidance manual by the People’s Committee of Lào Cai province. The manual in operation during the time I was doing fieldwork was issued in September 2013. The front cover states the intended purpose as being “instructions for the investigation of poor and near-poor households in 2013 and health insurance for poor and near-poor people for 2014”. It is an exhaustive, highly comprehensive and technical set of instructions for objectively identifying those people whom the centre state wishes to classify as poor. It thereby similarly fulfils the role of state writing and state documents that I discussed in Chapter 4: to technocratically prescribe and project a process in the local state through which the centre state attempts to pursue the overarching project of power, of ordering and categorising the uplands, rendering the region legible and more amenable to incorporation in the national polity.

The manual contains pages and pages of pro-forma tables and corresponding guidance instructions for the completion of information about poor households in the commune. There are two official resolutions (*quyết định*) at the beginning of the manual, establishing the direction committee for the process, along with ‘plans’ (*kế hoạch*) for the poverty census and nine different sets of guidance instructions (*hướng dẫn*) to complete the 43 different tables of information that the manual contains. For example on page 27, guidance sheet B instructs officials in how to go about estimating a household’s income. There are four pages of detailed instructions on how to do this, along with references for other instruction documents and resolutions of the party state and the formula for determining which poverty band the household should be placed in, according to income. The manual recognizes the difficulties inherent in profiling households in such a detailed way and thus prescribes a checklist of household assets that local officials should value, in order to estimate the income of the poor. This checklist of assets is the primary means through which local officials undertake the annual poverty survey, as we shall see.

The manual also has detailed lists of provincial and district level officials and their allocated tasks and advisory roles in the poverty identification process, and lists the communes in each district of the province which have been classified as ‘disadvantaged’ or ‘advantaged’ areas, the overwhelming majority being defined as disadvantaged. The manual serves an important ritual purpose, through sanctioning both the process and the classification of ‘poverty’ by the state as objective, legitimate and beyond challenge or reproach. It spatially orders and segments areas in order to project the state’s authority and validate the classificatory categories that state planners prescribe, as part of their project of power. The manual thus imbues the whole classification process with higher order sanctity and prescribes ‘experts’ whose status as such comes only from their position as custodians of this technocratic process of deciding who is poor.

### ***Inscribing numbers as a symbolic ritual of statecraft***

Ordering and classifying people into groups and ascribing them the status of ‘poor’ is a ritual now deeply embedded in local state practice in Vĩnh Thủy. Inscribing numbers is in turn a central element in this ritual, as the prevalent and preferred characterization of poverty is through numbers. The use of the poverty census manual embodies this ritual

application in the local state, as the manual reduces poverty to a series of numbers. The anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin observes: “Numbers have a phantasmatic quality; they give a semblance of solidity. They make the tentative appear symbolically more tangible or true” (Navaro-Yashin 2002:29). But importantly she goes on to say that numbers are also very real “because [they] actually and concretely generate (and not only reflect) social practices”. Akhil Gupta (2012:159) too observes that “enumeration is so deeply entrenched as a technique of statecraft that it appears as a neutral technology of government”.<sup>3</sup>

As with state writing numbers, expressed as poverty statistics, are a way of organising and rationalising upland people and rendering them legible to the centre state. The creation of these enumerated communities ensures that everything is reduced to what is measureable, at least in the minds of state planners. In the process people quite literally disappear from state planners’ view under what Hacking (1990) describes as an “avalanche of numbers”. Statistics appear as a critical disciplining technology in that they establish for the centre state what constitutes ‘the normal’ through statistical representations of the population (Foucault 1991), which are then projected back upon the populace in the local state space. Through these representations ‘the poor’ are rendered an inert, generalised category in centre state narratives, devoid of context and social roots. Poverty then becomes a technical problem to be solved by qualified state planners, rather than the result of historical processes of contention between central powers and local groups, or of elite domination of others resulting from local configurations of political power (Ferguson 1990, Harriss 2007).<sup>4</sup> By normalizing poverty in this way and projecting it as a technical (Li 2007) a-political situation (Ferguson 1990), underlying structural inequalities remain disguised and poverty becomes an accepted part of the centre state’s discursively constructed landscape.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Taussig (1997) contends that statistics, and related discourses on economics, are not deliberate manufactured deceit necessarily. But because they have the mark of the state on them they are accorded a status they in no way deserve. It’s reassuring to think there is some design (or someone) behind this, Taussig contends, some secrecy or conspiracy behind the facade, but in fact, “the real official secret is that there is none” (Taussig 1997:144).

<sup>4</sup> John Harriss (2007) argues that statistical approaches to understanding poverty effectively depoliticise poverty. For Harriss, poverty should be understood in relational terms, as resulting from the historical contestation between classes.

Inscribing numbers in this way bolsters the centre state's project of power in the uplands as it enables central state planners to project concepts of progress and development in the local state space, and set statistical targets for economic growth, livelihood improvement and poverty reduction. State planners set themselves a challenge, the parameters of which they themselves control through the narrative and statistical forms they choose to deploy. In remote upland areas of northern Vietnam this particular rendering of the notion of poverty creates a narrative of 'need', which the state can then fulfil through providing material resources, thereby fulfilling their biopolitical mission to nurture upland people and ensure for the peace and security of the borderland region as part of a unified nation state.

Local people in Vĩnh Thủy are not seduced by these narratives of state, and are not blind to the partial operation of political power in the local state space. Poverty, as locally understood, is neither statistical nor apolitical and, as we shall see local people are adept at deploying *metis* within the poverty classification system to pursue their own projects of power. Paradoxically though, local people are bound into the state, both materially and ideationally, through the receipt of state largesse. They strive for and adopt the categories of state, of being poor, in order to access the poverty reduction resources of offer, even as they rework these categories in the local state space and imbue them with local meanings. Akhil Gupta observes that representations of the poor "do more than simply construct a class of people as the poor; they also simultaneously help create an image of the state" (Gupta 2012:58) and in Vĩnh Thủy, poverty reduction resources are critical in shaping these local state imaginaries.

### *Contradictions inherent in the state's poverty reduction project*

Narratives of poverty and poverty reduction are critical to the centre state's project of power in the uplands. However, the need to project the idea of ever increasing wellbeing opens up spaces for the exercise of political *metis* by actors in the local state space, where poverty reduction processes take place. If district and provincial level officials are to be believed, the process of collecting data on the poor and identifying poor households is a rigorously technical process, with each step prescribed in the provincial manual followed exactly and precisely. As the deputy chairman of the district People's Committee confidently asserted to me then, there is no higher-level

interference with the process and data is simply collated and transmitted upwards in the administrative chain.

But in fact commune officials are given very particular quotas for how many poor people they are expected to take off the poverty list each year. This prescription is not apparent anywhere in the poverty mapping manual but commune officials confirmed that they do indeed receive specific targets from the district for how many people in poverty they are allowed to have each year, and I have seen the written instructions confirming this to be the case. These targets in fact drive the poverty identification process much more than the manual itself. Thus in 2013 the poverty target for the commune was 65.13%, a reduction of 8% from the previous year.

Once this annual poverty reduction target has been received the percentage reduction is distributed between the 12 villages of the commune, according to population size. Larger villages in the commune therefore have more poor households removed from their quota. Commune officers usually have to find 2-4 households in each village who they can take off the list, and these targets are rigidly enforced by the commune government. Rates of poverty reduction are therefore only loosely correlated (if at all) with the material state of deprivation, rendering the whole poverty assessment and reporting process meaningless, as the commune reports up numbers for poverty reduction only according to the quota it has been set. In a remarkable contortion, one commune officer sought to explain to me the exact match between the target set by the district, and the 'result' of the poverty census process, by asserting that the district understood the poverty situation so well that the target they set corresponded exactly to the 'reality' that was discovered through the poverty census process!

The poverty mapping manual is therefore a symbolic prop of state power: all actors pay lip-service to the manual and the technocratic process it embodies, but also know that collecting all the data required in the way that the manual stipulates would invalidate the poverty reduction target that government planners set, which must be complied with. There is therefore a public ritual of adherence to the manual by both higher and lower level state officials, whereby the manual's symbolic power is recognised and respected, but where the process it stipulates has little bearing on the nitty-gritty localized work of deciding who accesses state resources, which takes place



in the local state space. Many state actors are complicit in this performance, with higher-level officials content so long as the target is adhered to, and local officials careful to revere the manual and the associated higher-level instructions whilst simultaneously effectively ignoring (or bypassing) them. Both lower level and higher level officials are thus engaged in a process of (mis)representing statistics in particular ways, to suit their own projects of power.

### *The process of administering the poverty census*

Returning to the poverty census process itself, as we have seen on a practical level completing a detailed inventory of each household's income and assets would be an enormous and time consuming operation. What the commune uses instead is a simplified one-page assessment sheet, and it is this sheet that offers local officials the opportunity to rework the process, through political *metis*, in pursuit of their projects of power. The sheet is extremely brief, with no narrative explanation, and simply lists 11 areas for the assessment of a household's assets, with points allocated according to whether the assets are present, and what their value is. At the top of the page there is a space in which the name of the household should be entered, along with the household's registration number. At the bottom of the sheet is a space in which the head of the household is expected to sign, to validate the assessment process undertaken by the commune officer.

The 11 assets against which the household's poverty status is assessed are as follows: the total area of the house (in metres squared); the value of the motorbike; the type and value of the bed the household has; whether they have a cupboard, wardrobe, table and chairs and their respective values; the value of any video player and mobile phones; the presence and value of a colour television; ownership of a buffalo, cow or horse; number of pigs owned; presence of a milling machine or thresher; the amount of corn seed available for the next planting season; and the amount of rice seed. In October every year commune officials undertake the census using this sheet and divide households into one of four categories: poor, near poor, average or better off. The household is supposed to be given a score according to each criterion in the list, and then allocated one of these four categories.

There are only two or three households in the whole commune that are considered ‘better-off’, and only two or three households in each village that have the ‘average’ status. These households are generally well known and are not surveyed in the poverty census process. All the other households are visited, usually at night when residents are typically at home, and an inventory taken of their assets according to the poverty checklist. I was resident in Vĩnh Thủy during the months in which the commune poverty census took place and accompanied local officers in their census work over the course of many nights, in different villages in the commune. I was therefore able to see how the use of the simplified sheet, and the ambiguity it allows for in the process of interpreting and recording assets seemingly ‘objectively’, is critical to the re-working of the state’s poverty classification project, and to the exercise of discretionary power, through *metis*, by powerholders in the local state space.

### ***Local officials and the census process***

In Vĩnh Thủy commune there are a handful of chronically destitute households that are recognized as being ‘poor’. For the remainder of commune residents, the official government assigned classification of being a poor household (*hộ nghèo*) has little to do with an actual state of material deprivation. Rather, being poor or living in poverty is a state-constructed and assigned category. There is consequently intense competition amongst commune households to be recognised and officially designated as ‘poor’ and therefore able to lay claim to the government welfare resources that are so important in transforming household wellbeing and prospects for the accumulation of capital. Those who end up being classified as poor are not exclusively the most needy, as the poverty classification process is shot through with the projects of power of commune officers, their lineages and networks. Officials adeptly shepherd government poverty reduction resources towards family, kin, friends and allies, a very wide and fairly inclusive network, whilst also ensuring for the general wellbeing of the destitute, and ensuring the commune as a whole is seen to prosper.

The key commune party-state officers involved in the poverty census process are the village head (*trưởng thôn*) and the village mentor (*cán bộ đỡ đầu thôn*). They work as a team to visit each household in the village and undertake the census process, using the one page inventory form of household assets. Village mentors enjoy a powerful position in the commune system, as I discussed in Chapter 3. They are senior

commune officers whose role is to supervise and advise the village heads and oversee all aspects of village management and administration. They therefore exert considerable power and influence over village politics and administration. The mentor system is designed by state planners to ensure a degree of independent oversight of village administration, with mentors usually allocated a village with a different ethnic group to their own. As we have seen though, most village mentors in Vĩnh Thủy are longstanding residents of the commune with powerful family networks behind them, are deeply embedded as elites in the system of local commune politics, and use the mentor system to pursue their own projects of accumulation and distribution to their networks.

For their part village heads have complex motivations for taking up their role. Some village heads are also deeply engaged in commune and village politics, with their own extensive networks of patronage and control. There is also a younger generation of village heads being appointed who have numeracy, Vietnamese literacy and some training in the government system, usually through having served in the army. It is these village heads that are most likely to at least attempt to follow the poverty census process as prescribed by the centre state, and who consequently often face difficulties and conflict with entrenched interests within the village and commune.

For those party state officials that do attempt to follow the prescribed process, the first problem they face is that household livelihoods seldom fit snugly into the centre state designated income categories. Poverty isn't the static state that policy architects envisage. Rather, household wellbeing is continually in flux. As a newly appointed village head despairingly commented to me during his first year of attempting to do the survey:

It's very hard to know a household's exact income because it changes all the time. A near poor household might lose cattle to disease and then they quickly become poor, and similarly a poor household may get piglets and then quickly become much better off. The form asks us to record the household's income at the time we take the survey, but their circumstances can change very quickly, often from day to day.

Whilst a handful of village heads, particularly the newer ones, try hard to complete the process with some form of ritual diligence, others see it as an opportunity to build

political capital in the commune and demonstrate their effectiveness to their superiors. The skilful use of *metis* to rework the poverty system was demonstrated in the case of one entrepreneurial village head, who explained to me how he had been highly strategic that year in meeting his quota for the number of poor households he took off the poor list. He boasted how he had kept a few households ‘in reserve’ to take off next year’s list, so that he wouldn’t have to bother too much with the process next year and could demonstrate to the commune leaders that he was quick and effective in carrying out the task. This particular village head is closely aligned to the dominant Nùng family group in the commune administration through marriage and is also from the largest and wealthiest kin group in his village. He is adept at using the poverty reduction resources of the government to lubricate his village patronage network, with most of his close family and associates officially designated as poor and thus in receipt of the full portfolio of government assistance.

Removing households off the poor list in response to the poverty reduction targets set by the commune is a source of considerable angst to some of the village heads. They complained it was extremely difficult to find households to move off the list. One common strategy, and another example of the use of *metis* within the state system, is to rotate households off and on the list every year. This was the case with the household of Ms. Sèng Thị Sáng in Bình Yên village. She explained that the previous year her neighbour had been on the list and she hadn’t been, but that this year she was informed that it would be her turn. Her neighbour had received some asbestos sheeting for her roof during her time on the poor list, but Ms. Sáng gleefully related how upset her neighbour was this year when Ms. Sáng herself had received fifty chickens as part of a poverty reduction programme.

Rotating people off and on the list is a popular strategy for village heads as it ensures their networks can be maintained or even expanded, on the promise that households will receive government support in the future. It is also a means of minimising conflict in the village through ensuring that everyone receives government support at some time, irrespective of whether they are ‘poor’ according to the official classification in any one particular year. Crucially too, it is integral in meeting the expectations of villagers that their representatives have a responsibility to look after them and are able to bring outside resources into the village, and distribute these resources in a way that

everybody gets something. These perceptions appear to have deep roots in highland sociality and continue to be important today.

Conflict between the village head and mentor frequently occurs over who should and shouldn't be included or removed from the list. One long-standing village head related to me how he had withdrawn from the census process last year, in protest at the difficulty in deciding who should be taken off the list. He left the decision to the village mentor, at the same time ensuring that he couldn't be blamed by those who would no longer receive government support. Conflict also occurs when the political projects of local powerholders come up against either the central state's 'technical' project, or local conceptions of justice and redistribution, which are strongly felt.

This was the case in one village where I followed the census process closely. The village head withdrew after a dispute with the mentor over a particular household. The village head had wanted to remove the household from the poor list because he claimed they made his life difficult and "didn't follow village regulations". The mentor however felt the household deserved to stay on the list as they were markedly poorer than many other households in the village. The mentor felt that the village head was being "too emotional" about the process. In this particular case, the mentor responsible for the census process was also the commune officer responsible for the process overall. He had a reputation for being thorough and trusty-worthy, and crucially had no family allegiances in the particular village that he was responsible for. This village was also the central village in the commune, and thus most open to critical scrutiny. In this case then, the attempt by the village head to assert his project of power was unsuccessful, and an alternative conception of redistribution and justice prevailed instead.

### *The poverty census process as an 'exercise of paper only'*

In four of the twelve villages in the commune there was little evidence of the poverty census process actually having taken place at all, though the documentation was completed by the end of October and was filed in the commune office. These villages were among the most remote and poorest in the commune, in terms of the physical infrastructure of the villages and the relative well being of the village residents compared to others in the commune. Two of these villages were also Dao villages,

with the Dao being relative political outsiders in the commune, with little representation in the formal power structure and thus a limited command over government resources. The village mentors and village heads in these villages would give vague answers in response to my questions over the progress of the census, and would always defer my requests to join them on their household visits. When I questioned residents of these villages about the poverty census, they had little knowledge of the process. There was no village meeting to discuss and endorse the outcome of the census process as prescribed in the official manual (though these meetings were not often held in the other villages of the commune either). Shrouding the process in secrecy is therefore an effective strategy, a form of *metis*, used by local powerholders to ensure they can allocate government resources as they please, and also frees them from the obligation of investing time in the lengthy process, enabling them instead to pursue other projects of power.

Most village mentors have little time for the formal census process, describing it as an exercise “of paper only”.<sup>5</sup> After one long evening of visiting households to complete the survey form with the village head and mentor, we relaxed in the village head’s house and after drinking several cups of corn wine, they explained what they really thought of the process:

In fact we already know who the poor households are in the village. We visit the households only to complete the documentation properly and in particular to get the signature of household heads, so that there won’t be any complaints afterwards. If we don’t get the signature, then people will always complain that they don’t agree with the assessment or that they weren’t consulted.

So for some village mentors, particularly the most powerful in the commune, the household assessment process is a formality only. One day late in October I was discussing the poverty census process in the commune office with Mr. Nam, the village mentor for Thạch Liêm village and a highly experienced commune officer. There were only a few days left until the process had to be completed but he had yet to

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<sup>5</sup> This echoes David Dery’s notion of “papereality” (Dery 1998). Papereality describes the widening gap in bureaucratic organisations between what is reported and what actually occurs. The use of official documents is critical in perpetuating papereality. MacLean (2013) argues that papereality has been central to the operation of the Vietnamese state since collectivization, and that the gap between what local officials report and what actually happens contributes to the illegibility of the countryside to central level officials and creates mistrust between levels of government.

visit a single household in the village. When I asked him how he hoped to finish before the end of the month he replied that he had already identified the households who would be beneficiaries and those who wouldn't: all he had to do now was visit the village to get the forms signed. Securing the signature of the household head on the poverty census form meant the process was endorsed and valid in the eyes of the state, irrespective of whether the process had been completed as intended. The symbolic and ritual importance of the form thus imbues the process with an authenticity which in fact disguises the operation of particular projects of power, for individual and network based accumulation of state resources, quite at odds with the 'official' and 'objective' purpose of the census process as prescribed by the higher state.

### **The struggle to be poor: the politics of eligibility to state resources**

Complaints over the allocation of government resources provide a constant source of gossip and intrigue in the commune. Countless examples were related to me during conversations with households about who received what, and on what basis they were entitled. For example Mrs. Hồ Ngân Giang, a poor resident of Ninh Điền B village, could not understand why her household did not receive an educational allowance intended for very poor households, when a household in a neighbouring village did receive it, despite the household in question not being poor (at least in her view). Mrs. Giang's concern reflects the important reality in Vĩnh Thủy commune that state resources nominally intended for the genuinely poor often find their way to those who are substantially better-off.

Local party-state officials play a critical role in determining the allocation of these government poverty reduction resources as we have seen, principally through deciding who will be on the poor list. But local people are also actively engaged in the politics of the process, lobbying these local officials hard and doing all they can to render themselves legible to state decision makers. Once legible, they can go about establishing claims for entitlement, or eligibility, to government resources through being classified as poor. All of this competition and manoeuvring takes place in the local state space.

Partha Chatterjee (2004) has described how engagement with the state requires political literacy on the part of the citizenry: an understanding of how the distribution

process works and the rules of the game that surround entitlement and laying claim to resources. This is certainly true in Vĩnh Thủy, but the ability to exercise this political literacy is predicated on first having connections to local powerholders. Without these connections, securing entitlement is difficult, no matter how performatively competent a household is. In their struggle to be recognised as poor in the local state space, Vĩnh Thủy residents exploit any connections they have to local officials, including through kinship, obligations, business connections and friendship. As one village head observed:

I get many visitors to my house once people know that the [poverty census] survey is going to start soon. People come and tell me all about their problems and their hardships. They also remind me of the times that they've helped me or my family in the past. They really put me under a lot of pressure.

Pressure comes from both above and below, as he went on to explain:

I also have to think about people in the commune government too, and what they think. They watch the [survey] process very carefully, particularly if they've got some interests in the village.

During the poverty census process in Vĩnh Thủy I observed a range of *metis*-infused strategies that households used in attempting to establish their credentials as being poor. These can be categorized as follows: concealing and misreporting resources; leveraging utility, position and status; manipulating government categories; and exploiting the ambiguity of government eligibility criteria. Local officials are intimately complicit in these strategies, in the process ensuring that the state remains relevant to the Hmông and Nùng in the commune and that long-standing practices of inclusion and expectations of mutuality and obligation are met.

### ***Concealing and misreporting resources***

Concealing resources in the intimate environment of a village, where everybody knows everybody else's business, is very difficult. It is particularly difficult to conceal assets from village heads, who make it their business to know what is going on in the village and who has what. Concealment therefore requires a degree of complicity on the part of village officials, either through fear, through a vested interest in benefitting from the concealment, or through a sense of doing right according to prevailing norms of fairness, obligation, and community cohesion.



One night during the census process I visited a household along the main street in Ninh Diễm B village, in the centre of the commune, with the village head and village mentor. One of the questions in the checklist asks the household about the amount of hybrid corn seed they have. The household head reported a minimal amount. There were, though, a large number of corn sacks stacked in the front room. The household head claimed he was keeping these for a neighbour. Once we left the house I asked the village head about these sacks and he reported matter-of-factly that the household was engaged in corn trading, a highly lucrative endeavour in the commune. But he had written down the minimal figure that the household head told him, despite knowing it wasn't true. "What can I do?" he said with a shrug. The household, as I later discovered, was closely related to a senior commune official.

On another occasion I was visiting Cao Thành A village during the census process. I went to the household of a close relative of the village head, Mr. Nhã, in the company of the village head himself and the village mentor. Cao Thành A is one of the more remote villages and the people are relatively poorer than in the central villages of the commune, but this house was of sturdier construction and the beds were relatively new, with a cabinet, table and chairs and even floor tiles overlaying the mud floor in the main room, which was unusual in this village. Despite this, the household was marked as poor in the census, as minimal corn seed and household assets were recorded.

I returned to the village several days later and wandered past the house, and noted a new motorbike in the front yard, along with a number of bags of fertiliser inside the front door, which hadn't been there on my previous visit. Casually discussing the household with a neighbour, she wryly noted that two of the sons were currently working in a timber mill in a commune close to the Chinese border, and that they sent back significant remittances every month. These were not recorded during the census process, though the village head (and presumably the mentor) would have been well aware of these contributions to the household income.

Later that month I was participating in the survey process in Ninh Cấn village when we arrived at the house of the Hải brothers. Their house was situated on a small plot

beside the main path through the village and was in an extremely run-down condition, almost derelict. There was only an old bed and cupboard in the room in which the boys lived, which was littered with dried corncobs used to feed the cooking fire. The elder brother was 18, the younger brother 15, and the commune officers related approvingly how they were both extremely hard workers, working their small piece of land to produce local corn. Their father died seven years ago and their mother abandoned them soon after in order to remarry in a neighbouring commune: the elder brother dropped out of school to work the land and care for his younger brother. The attitude of the commune officers towards these boys was paternalistic and caring. They were perceived to be worthy recipients of state support, because of their tragic circumstances.

Whilst the boys were clearly 'poor' under any definition of poverty, local or otherwise, the officials were clearly intent on maximizing the boys' entitlement. They carefully recorded their meagre assets on the census sheet and cajoled them with encouraging questions to ensure they fully reported the hardships they faced, even under-reporting the amount of corn seed they had, as I saw the village mentor write down a far lower figure than the boys themselves had mentioned. The officials were patient as the boys tried to find the household registration card, which they eventually located in a dusty drawer, stained and creased. Other villagers would have been reprimanded by the officials for allowing such an important document to deteriorate in such a way, but the officials said nothing, clearly moved by the difficult circumstances in which the two boys were living. In this case then, the officials felt obligated to manipulate the reporting process to ensure that the boys were highly legible to the state, in line with widely held moral perceptions in the commune, and with the state imaginary that infuses the local state, that there is an obligation to look after those who are the victims of circumstances outside of their control.

### *Leveraging utility, position and status*

An example of leveraging position arose in An Trí 1 village where we visited the household of a teacher at the intermediate school, who had moved to the village from another commune relatively recently. This household had a certificate from the commune office in their previous village, stating that they were a near-poor household. Having moved recently, the household had no agricultural land, which is an important

determinant of wealth in the poverty census process, as crop production is measured. But both husband and wife were teachers, and thus had a stable income far greater than the majority of households in the commune. The household had a large refrigerator and ran a well-provisioned store from the front of the house. They also had two motorbikes, one of which was a late model, almost brand new Honda costing several thousand US dollars. Despite this, the commune officer recorded them as being near poor. He explained at the time that they had been near poor in their previous commune and it was thus difficult to change their status, but there were clearly other factors at work that influenced his decision.

A few nights later I was drinking corn wine with the village head and mentor after a night of visiting households in the same village and the discussion returned once more to the teacher's household. The mentor was slightly drunk and explained the decision as follows:

It's really difficult to get teachers to stay in this commune. It's far from Cao Xuyên [the district town] and even further from Lào Cai City. If you're educated, why would you want to live here? We have to make it attractive to make sure that the teachers want to stay.<sup>6</sup>

Although the officials didn't reveal the details of what had actually transpired, the implication from our discussion was that the household had successfully leveraged their important position to ensure they were categorised as 'near poor'. At the same time, the officials involved had been willingly complicit, and may have even suggested the classification scenario, in order to ensure the teachers stayed in the village and that there was therefore a beneficial outcome for the whole commune.

### *Manipulating state categories*

Another popular strategy deployed by villagers is to manipulate state categories to ensure that the household is recognised as poor.<sup>7</sup> One prevalent way of doing this

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<sup>6</sup> He went on to say "in their case both of them are teachers." By this final statement I interpreted him to be saying that the household had double the utility to the commune, as there were two teachers, and thus it was even more important to keep them happy.

<sup>7</sup> This was also apparent during the land reform period in Vietnam, with households engaged in this strategy to avoid being called 'landlords' or wealthy peasants, and was also apparent during the collectivization period where households maneuvered to maintain the 5% of land available for individual production. During the decollectivisation period, households also

appears to be ‘splitting’ the household. Whilst examining completed forms from my household survey I was struck by the number of new households registered just prior to the poverty census process starting, in October. When I crosschecked with the survey returns for the households in which the newly separate households had previously resided, they invariably recorded a drop in their registered status, i.e. from near poor to poor, or from average to near poor or poor. The ‘splitting’ process always involved a young couple leaving the parental home to establish their own household. However, in practice the newly established household usually took up residence in a simply constructed house a few metres from the parental home, as new land for house construction in the commune is not easily acquired. In all of the instances of household splitting that I came across, the two households continued to share resources, indeed they often still lived together in the one parental house, with the second house usually of rudimentary construction and remaining unoccupied.<sup>8</sup>

The Hoàng family in Bình Yên village is a case in point. The grandfather explained that the family had decided to split in August of the previous year, with his youngest son and daughter-in-law establishing their own home on the edge of the family compound. The grandfather explained that he had divided his land between his two sons, that he had given them each a buffalo (he had two) and that the three families were now separate. As such, they each qualified as ‘near-poor’ when their assets were registered in the poverty census process. However, all of the corn and rice grown on their land was stored in the loft space of the grandfather’s house, he cared for the two buffalos which continued to be housed in the pens next to his house, and he spent the day babysitting the youngest child of his son whilst the family worked the land. The recently split family of his youngest son continued to eat their meals in the paternal house, and all of the assets and resources of the family appeared to be pooled in the grandfathers house. If assessed collectively as one household however, they would have been registered as ‘average’ and thus not entitled to poverty reduction support.

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deployed this strategy to maximize the land they could prioritize for production (MacLean 2013).

<sup>8</sup> This process of dividing the household may also have been a traditional form of risk management in upland areas (Philip Taylor, personal communication).

Whilst the decision to split the household was no doubt genuine and based upon a sincere wish on the part of the younger son to make his own way, in practice they continued to live in one multi-generational household, as the government's concept of a single generation household is anathema to the way the Hmông, Nùng and other ethnic groups in the commune choose to live. The Hoàng household appeared to recognize the opportunity that 'splitting' provided and went through the process of registering the household as separate, thereby rendering themselves eligible for support as a near-poor household.<sup>9</sup> On their part, local officials didn't appear to question this process at all, simply recording the new household as separate and the assets of each as consequently separate too. They therefore appear to flexibly apply local norms to this process of household fissioning, using the government's assumption of discreet and segmented nuclear family clusters against itself. At the same time, through flexibly interpreting the eligibility criteria, government officials appear intent on ensuring that the ethnic minority groups in the commune remain engaged and onside with the state, and that the state in turn remains relevant to them.

Another example of splitting as a strategy is the household of Ms. Nguyễn Phương Giao, a young Hmông girl who had recently married and separated from her parent's household in Ninh Điền A village.<sup>10</sup> The parental home was part of the abandoned district government buildings dating back to the 1980s when the district government was located in the commune, following the invasion of Lào Cai province by Chinese forces. The rooms of the building had been occupied by some Ninh Điền A villagers and converted into homes, and Ms. Giao, her husband and their small child had simply moved into a small adjoining room of the building, next to their parent's rooms. As a separate household they were registered as poor, but as the girl's father remarked: "What could we do? They are so young and can't look after themselves. We couldn't let them move too far away. But they need help and this way (i.e. splitting the household) at least they will receive something for themselves". Again, local officials

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<sup>9</sup> In order to be recognised, a new household must register with the commune authorities and apply for a new household registration book, which is the most important state document that people in the commune have.

<sup>10</sup> Ms. Giao and her family always claimed to me that the couple were 17 when they were wed, but she in fact looks much younger. There is sensitivity in the village over under-age marriage, as the previous village leader was relieved of his position by the commune for allowing his son to marry an under-age girl. His brother subsequently became the village head.

sense of obligation to provide for the young couple overcame any instinct to rigidly enforce the centre state defined poverty survey process.

### *Exploiting ambiguities in state eligibility criteria*

Closely related to the manipulation of government categories is the strategy of exploiting any ambiguity in regulations over who is eligible to benefit from poverty reduction projects. This ambiguity stems from the fact that some projects and programmes do not explicitly establish who the beneficiaries should be, stating only that the resources should be used for ‘poverty reduction’. Local officials thus have the discretionary power to decide upon the allocation of resources. In the case of a project to provide fifty free ducks to households for poverty reduction, local people in Tràng Tôn village successfully exploited the lack of clarity over entitlement to the resources and lobbied the village head to distribute the ducks to every household in half of the village instead. The other half of the village that didn’t receive the ducks subsequently received free chickens under another project in the following year.

Eligibility thereby exploded out from the category of the poor, with local people deploying *metis* to ensure that state resources that were supposed to be carefully targeted, instead went to everyone. In a context where, in fact, many in the village are indeed poor this is perhaps a better outcome in the eyes of local state officials, given that it ensures cohesion and adherence to perceptions of what is appropriate and ‘just’ in the local state imaginary. It also cements the sense of relevance of the state to those who benefit, an important long-term political goal in the borderlands for centre state officials and the local political elites that benefit from the current system. The state’s targeting of poor households is thus allowed to be subverted by a more locally embedded conception of entitlement, albeit one that reinforces existing hierarchies in the village and bolsters the political projects of the powerful.

### **‘Stasis’ and bypassed development for the unconnected**

In Vinh Thủy commune then, important state resources for poverty reduction, which centre state designs direct towards those most in need, often end up with those who are the most politically connected and therefore best able to establish claims upon these resources. Local commune officials appear to actively facilitate lapses in the official

process of identifying the poor, for three reasons. First, because many of the beneficiaries are network clients of these officials, and including them in the poor list bolsters their political capital and pool of obligations and indebtedness, a critical project of power. Second, officials are keenly aware of the need to adhere to long standing traditions of general sharing, mutuality and cooperation which underpin the operation of harmonious social relations in the commune, and which is an important element in the local state imaginary. Delivering poverty reduction support therefore fulfils expectations of them as leaders of the two dominant ethnic groups (Hmông and Nùng) to provide for their own. And last, dispensing government poverty reduction support is a way of keeping a large number of people engaged with the state, an important expectation placed upon them as local officials by higher up officials in the state hierarchy. This in turn ensures the commune remains peaceful and harmonious and that alternative centres of power and mobilisation around ethnicity or religion (in the case of the Hmông) do not develop.

What ensues is the perpetuation of entrenched hierarchies of power in the commune. This helps produce a desired degree of stability and predictability in the commune but has consequences for those who are politically unimportant and often desperately lacking in material resources as a result. They are largely left behind in the struggle for state resources that I have described. They lack the political connections to render themselves legible and eligible for the state support which would structurally change their lives, such as loans for buffalo (reserved for the ‘productive’ near-poor), substantial production inputs (they have little land and so are not deemed eligible for this kind of assistance) or a role in pioneering new agro-industrial crops where the government invests heavily to encourage production.

Paradoxically though, a significant shift has taken place in the northern borderlands over the past 10-15 years or so, whereby the state is now able to ensure a minimum level of subsistence and food security for destitute and chronically deprived households. Nobody starves anymore because the state ensures a minimum provision of subsistence for everyone. This was often cited to me as perhaps the most important change to have occurred in the commune over the past 15 years, according to both local party state officials, and local people. This assurance of a basic level of provision means that even the most powerless and unconnected remain engaged with the state.

The household of Mrs. Dương Thị Mát from Thạch Liêm village illustrates this well. Her household is one of the poorest in the commune and she claimed “if the government didn’t support us we’d probably die with nothing to eat”. Over the past few years the government has provided her with the essentials of food and shelter. She has received timber for reinforcing her ramshackle house; asbestos sheeting to waterproof the roof; and critically every year she receives 10 kilos of rice for each person in her household, which they sell in order to buy enough corn to see them through the hungry season when their own meagre corn supply is finished. The household lacks sufficient land, which is a feature for most chronically poor households in the commune, and this lack of land is also the reason given by local officers for not allocating hybrid corn seed and fertilizer to them. The lack of land also precludes the chronically poor from engaging in the lucrative projects of the commune to plant high value agro-industrial crops, such as tea and tobacco.

Chronically poor households like that of Mrs. Dương are politically unconnected and are thus locked in a condition of stasis. They are assured of the basics of food, shelter and education, but don’t have access to the state largesse and opportunities that could potentially transform their lives. Instead these resources go to better off, politically well connected others, who are better able to register their legibility and exercise *metis*. This in turn ensures that the political equilibrium of the commune is maintained, along with the social status quo.

The chronically poor appear to fall through the gap between two conceptions of entitlement: they are recognised in the ‘moral economy’ schema of ensuring a minimum level of subsistence for all under locally derived norms of social provision and mutuality, but are outside of the important kin lineages and clan networks and thus have little status or influence to be able to demand more. At the same time, the subversion of the government’s technocratic poverty survey system, which would have probably privileged them as key beneficiaries of the full suite of state support, closes off to them the only other possible avenue for the accumulation of the resources necessary to structurally transform their livelihoods. Stasis then is hard to escape for these chronically poor outsiders, who constitute about twenty percent of the commune population overall. They include the smaller ethnic groups in the commune



(particularly the Dao) who lack political representation in the commune government, and those households amongst the dominant Hmông and Nùng groups who primarily live in the remoter villages of the commune and are outside of the privileged networks or family lineages.

This lack of connectedness and consequent illegibility means that the powerless are open to exploitation by commune powerholders. In Cao Thành B village, for example, the very poorest households are eligible for an educational support fee that is supposed to offset the additional costs that households face in sending their children to school. In practice though the very poor never see the money as they're supposed to, reinforcing their sense of powerlessness. As one woman explained:

We have to sign every month that we have received the money but in fact the money goes straight to the teachers at the school and we never see it. Even though we sign for it, it's never given to us.

Her friend went on to say:

In this village the rich families get more things from the government than the poor families. Here they just choose some families whom they want to give things to. If they like someone they give things to them. We go along to all of the village meetings but we're not invited to speak. It's always the same people that speak. And we're never told about what things the commune has given the village, and when they will be handed out, and to whom. The village head just tells us that we need to work hard and be nice and if the government has anything he will bring it to us.

Ironically they are subject to paternalistic conceptions amongst local officials and elites, of being underdeveloped and unable to make good livelihood choices on their own, the same narratives that have structured lowland perceptions of all upland people. Despite the structural obstacles they face and their serial marginalisation through this lack of connectedness, these disadvantaged households still aspire to 'play the game' and struggle to render themselves legible to local powerholders, in order to be enveloped in the classification of 'poor' which prevails in the local state, and thus eligible for significant, potentially transformative state support. They live within, and are confined by, the prevailing governmental categories that are applied in the local state space, even though these categories and the associated practices are responsible for their continued immiseration. With no social or political capital they have little

prospect of successfully influencing these structures to improve their prospects and state development processes consequently largely pass them by.

## **Conclusion**

Poverty reduction is a principal means through which the centre state pursues a historical project of power in the northwestern uplands, of developing the lands and people of the region under a standardising and universalising biopolitical state imaginary. The technocratic idea of poverty that is projected, and the ordering of upland people into particular groups that results, continues the work of the ethnic classificatory project in the uplands. Indeed 'ethnic minorities' and 'the poor' are increasingly synonymous in development discourses in Vietnam, operating as mutually reinforcing incentivized categories through which centre state planners attempt to incorporate the people of the northwestern uplands into the nation state, as recipients of state largesse. Both 'ethnicity' and 'poverty', as categories deployed by the state, are make believe compacts, which serve the projects of power of both centre state and local actors in the local state.

Poverty reduction is a critical governmental process around which politics takes place in the local state space, and indeed is one of the governmental processes through which the local state becomes apparent, as an arena of conflict and mediation. Ideas of poverty and material programmes for poverty reduction support are projected and enacted in the local state space and as such, they are subject to being contested, reworked and reimagined by local people through their everyday political actions. Local officials in particular, as local powerholders and custodians of the poverty census process that I have described, deploy political *metis* in skilful ways to pursue their own projects of power in the margins of the wider state governmental process for poverty reduction.

Examples abound of the deft deployment of *metis* around and through the poverty census process. Local officials manipulate the poverty checklist to ascribe entitlement to those in their networks they deem eligible, irrespective of whether or not they meet the technocratic criteria. They rotate people off and on the poor list to maintain harmony and ensure their political networks stay intact. And they grant people that have utility and status in the commune the classification of being poor in order to

ensure they continue to stay in the commune (as was the case with the two teachers I described). Through all of these strategies, they utilise the state prescribed documentation to legitimate their practices. Local people too are adept at deploying *metis* within the wider governmental poverty classification process. They conceal and misreport their assets, in collusion with state officials; they leverage their utility to the commune, or their status as being politically connected; and they manipulate state categories through splitting their households, or exploiting the lack of clarity in regulations over the entitlement to support.

Both local elites and local people's ability to exercise agency, in the form of *metis*, is dependent upon the poverty reduction project of the central state from which it draws sustenance and inspiration. *Metis* draws potency in particular from the contradictions inherent in the poverty census process. The centre state prescribes a supposedly objective survey process to identify the poor, but also sets specific targets for poverty reduction that have nothing to do with the survey process. Local powerholders are therefore able to exploit the spaces for political action that open up in the local state space, and rework the system of identifying the poor, in pursuit of their own projects of power.

These projects include straightforward attempts to appropriate resources for household accumulation, and for their wider lineage and kin networks. Distributing resources through these networks strengthens the position of local powerholders. There are also though powerful expectations that state resources will nurture the commune population more widely (if not equally), and notions too that the destitute will be provided with at least a minimum level of subsistence. Those who are poor through what is deemed to be misfortune are also encompassed in the local biopolitical schema. Local officials, as the brokers of power in the local state space, are expected to ensure the wellbeing of the commune as a whole, and make sure it flourishes.

These local biopolitical imaginaries feed off the standardizing, normalizing and regularizing state imaginary, but in a way that is embedded in and rigorously disciplined by the obligations, standards and expectations prevalent in the local state. Notions of sociality and obligation are therefore an important check upon the arbitrary exercise of power, and a constituent part of local state imaginaries, even as these

imaginaries accept and normalise the partial and unequal distribution of power that prevails in Vĩnh Thủy.

State poverty reduction support is vernacularised in the local state space, to serve local projects of power. But poverty reduction processes nevertheless serve to support the wider project of power of the centre state in the northwestern borderlands, as they bind politically important elites and a large number of upland people to the centre state, through the system and the largesse that flows from it. Local elites assume primary responsibility for supporting life in the commune through their control of these state poverty reduction processes and the associated material resources, and commune residents in turn do all they can to ensure they are connected to and enveloped in this local biopolitical imaginary.

The local biopolitical schema that results though is highly uneven, and those who lack the social and political capital necessary to establish connections to local state powerholders lose out in the struggle for significant, potentially life changing resources. The lack of these political connections is a central constituent part of poverty as locally understood, though this is not recognized in the highly technocratic and statistical definition of poverty that the government and assorted development partners subscribe to. As a result, the very system intended to reduce inequality and structurally transform the livelihoods of the chronically deprived, the system for poverty reduction, serves instead only to reinforce their relative deprivation and subordination, and perpetuates their disconnection from power in the local state.



**Photo 6.1:** A typical house in Vĩnh Thủy commune



**Photo 6.2:** A poorer village in the commune. Note the houses with new asbestos roofing, provided as part of the government's poverty reduction support

## CHAPTER 7

### State, Projects and People. Modernising the Uplands through the Market

#### Introduction

This chapter explores how centre state designs for the modernisation of the northwestern uplands are mediated through the local state and contorted according to the projects of power of both local powerholders and local people in Vĩnh Thủy. As with the governmental designs for poverty reduction that I discussed in the previous chapter, attempts to modernise the commune are part of a wider project of power, to nurture and develop the people of the northwestern uplands in ways that incorporate them as citizens of a unified nation state. Attempts to promote poverty reduction and modernisation are therefore twin pillars of the biopolitical project of state making in Vĩnh Thủy, but neither works out in the way envisaged in state planner's technical designs. Rather, local people exercise political *metis* through the local state space, a form of agency that draws from and is nurtured by these overarching governmental projects themselves.

In the post *đổi mới* period Vietnam is officially described as having a 'socialist-oriented market economy' (*nền kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*), and 'the market' (*thị trường*) is integral in state attempts to foster progress, development and modernisation in the northwestern uplands. The notion of the market in Vĩnh Thủy is a complex metaphor in a constellation of local and translocal discourses of value, desire and dreams for betterment amongst local people, government cadre and translocal actors. These discourses and associated practices are projected, contested and made anew in the local state space. As encountered locally, I contend the market can be understood simultaneously as a technology of government; a contested space shaped by historical and structural relations of power; and as an ensemble of moral and political economy practices.

Promoting the market to foster state imagined notions of modernisation and development is not new for the northwestern borderlands of Vietnam, or of course for upland Southeast Asia generally. The borderlands have historically been an important

region for trade between southern China and the Vietnamese lowlands, notably in opium (Le Failler 2011). In the past, colonial and post-colonial regimes sought to exploit the considerable natural resource endowments of the northwestern uplands through both extraction and migration, with supposedly more commercially minded Kinh migrants encouraged to migrate to the region to avail of the opportunities that were there (DeKoninck 1996 & 2000, Hardy 2003b, McElwee 2004 & 2006).

James Scott (2009) too has shown how the modern portrayal of upland regions in Southeast Asia as untouched by commerce with the lowlands is flawed, with considerable evidence existing for a close and mutually dependent system of trade in goods (and people) between the uplands and lowlands throughout the Southeast Asian massif. In reference to more recent history, Nevins and Peluso (2008) assert that the commodification of “people, nature and places” has been integral to the emergence of capitalism in Southeast Asia, as states in the region have been continuously engaged in defining, enclosing and regulating populations and landscapes. As they observe, the production of markets in the region has been anything but ‘free’.

Despite this long and complex regional history of both willing and forced commercial engagement, the contemporary narratives of development agencies nevertheless often characterise upland ethnic minority people of the region as ignorant of the market, and untouched by market interactions.<sup>1</sup> Vietnam’s international development partners consequently promote a particular form of market-based development, embodied for example in the World Bank’s ‘Northern Mountains Poverty Reduction Project’. This project was operating in Vĩnh Thủy and throughout the region at the time of my fieldwork and was premised on a belief that improving the road infrastructure and expanding the production of commercially attractive commodities by households will extend the market to previously untouched areas. As one World Bank expert associated with the project explained to me: “People need to see and understand that there is money to be made from these new activities, and that they can get their goods to market easily and cheaply. After that, the market will take care of the rest”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Ferguson (1990) describes in detail how this wilful neglect of history and characterisation of ‘undeveloped’ others is central to the political project of ‘development’.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a World Bank regional economist on mission in Vietnam, 2009.



Notions of the seamless technocratic integration of the uplands through a ‘free market’ are of course highly problematic. As Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara and James Fairhead show, the idea of a ‘free market’ as a universal and omnipotent presence with its own agency is deeply flawed. Rather, in remote and rural areas “one finds that markets for land, labour and goods are locally bound, politically managed and thus anything but free” (Fairhead 1993:20). In Vinh Thủy markets are sites within the local state that are constituted by, and constitutive of, prevailing social relations and structures of power in the local state. Markets are refracted, and made operative “through the interaction of real social groups” in the local state space, and are “culturally and politically specific institutions” with particular histories and values (Hewitt de Alcantara 1993:3). Like other institutions, markets serve projects of power in the local state and these are always highly contested and contingent.

This chapter has two parts. In the first half I discuss a programme for the modernisation of the uplands that is currently prevalent throughout rural Vietnam, the ‘New Rural’ programme. This programme embodies the centre state’s current modernising vision and frames the centre state’s market imaginary in the uplands. I examine the programme’s utopian intent, which has strong echoes with past state socialist schemes to build a new countryside, more than with the prevalent free market narratives of Vietnam’s development partners. Through case studies I then examine some of the current schemes for fostering marketisation, modernisation and development that the government has promoted in the commune: for large-scale tea plantations, tobacco production, and hybrid corn. I examine the centre state’s positioning to the market through these initiatives, and local people’s manoeuvring in the local state space in which market schemes are enacted. As I shall show, local people skilfully navigate through these schemes in the local state space, as they pursue their own projects in the margins of this state-market nexus.

In the second half of the chapter I discuss ‘the project’ as a prevalent technology of government in the local state, one which is integral to the centre state’s attempts to modernise the uplands through the market. The market has privileged a new cast of actors, often drawn from amongst the ranks of those nominally described as being of ‘civil society’. These actors increasingly act in state like ways and are operating what Hibou (1993) has described as “private indirect government”: a form of state

‘franchising’ which has not, I contend, led to any diminution of the power of traditional state actors. Rather the translocal vector of the local state supports the centre state vector in attempts to incorporate the uplands. Projects in Vĩnh Thủy commune are also local state spaces in which competing imaginings over the meaning of the market are played out, as I shall show in the case of a pig project designed to integrate local women into trans-local market chains. Centre state planners and translocal actors, local officials and local people all envisage the market in different ways. Sometimes these imaginings overlap and sometimes they conflict as they come together within the structured terrain of the local state.

### **The ‘New Rural’ programme and socialist utopianism rendered ‘technical’**

The preeminent central government programme for the modernisation and transformation of the Vietnamese countryside is the ‘New Rural’ programme (*chương trình nông thôn mới*). Its genesis, like all important policy and programme documents in Vietnam, lay in a high level resolution from the Central Committee of the Communist Party in August 2008, the ‘*Tam Nông*’ resolution.<sup>3</sup> This Resolution set the political direction for government in the development and implementation of policies for the countryside, and emphasised the need for modernisation, bringing all rural areas up to a national standard. Following the issuing of the resolution, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development formulated the ‘National Target Programme for New Rural Development 2010-2020’ (*Chương trình Mục tiêu Quốc Gia về Xây dựng Nông thôn mới*), the general objectives of which were stated as follows:

To build a new countryside with gradually more modern socio-economic infrastructure, rational economic structure and forms of production organization; to associate agriculture with the quick development of industries and services, and rural with urban development and planning; to assure a democratic and stable rural community deeply imbued with the national cultural identity; to protect the eco-environment and maintain security and order; and to raise people's material and spiritual lives with a socialist orientation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW of the 7<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Central Committee, Session 10 on Agriculture, Farmers and Rural Areas (*Nghị Quyết Hội Nghị Lần Thứ Bảy Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Khoá X Về Nông Nghiệp, Nông Dân, Nông Thôn*).

<sup>4</sup> Decision No. 800/QĐ-TTg, 04 June 2010.

What is notable about the document is the lack of market rhetoric, particularly of the ‘free’ market. In this sense it differs markedly from the programme documents of the World Bank and other development partners in how they frame development narratives for the northern uplands. What is projected through the New Rural programme document instead is a sense of ordered and managed change under the ‘rational’ management of the party state, “to assure a democratic and stable rural community” that supports the integration of rural areas into a national polity, and to maintain “order and security”.

The projected New Rural programme is nevertheless highly ambitious and in fact utopian in intent, in seeking to transform rural Vietnam and the people that live there in a fundamental way. In this regard it echoes past attempts from the state socialist period to build a new rural citizenry and civilization, a ‘new socialist countryside’. As with past socialist campaigns, the government today still relies upon mass mobilisation and the manufacture of broad based consent, and state cadre still play a key role in disseminating targets and in making plans for the successful completion of modernization programmes. The New Rural programme represents an important linkage to the past then, in how the centre state envisages and seeks to guide the modernisation of the uplands. It is a continuing form of socialist utopianism, one which is “rendered technical” (Li 2007) so as to serve the interests of the centre state in the borderlands.

In Vĩnh Thủy commune the New Rural programme is most visibly apparent in the form of three large colour maps that fill one entire wall of the commune office’s main meeting room. These maps display the technocratic vision of central state planners for the commune’s future through the rational ordering of infrastructure, agriculture, forestry and settlement (see Photo 7.1). As such they embody the central state imagining of modernisation and development for the local. The siting of these maps is important: the main meeting room is large and forms the central venue in the commune for ritual demonstrations of state power. At the front of the room are the traditional symbols of party state power: the white bust of Hồ Chí Minh and two revolutionary slogans, printed in large white letters on red cloth extolling state cadre and citizens alike to follow the teachings of Hồ Chí Minh for the greater glory of the Communist

Party of Vietnam.<sup>5</sup> The size and prominence of the New Rural maps are clearly intended to supplement these traditional symbols of state power, and render them current.

The central map of the three is approximately two and a half metres in height and two metres wide and the two maps either side are slightly smaller. The smaller maps depict in great detail the existing zones of land usage in the commune, including current areas of forestland and agricultural land use. The larger map summarises the overall land use pattern and plans for the new usage of commune land, along with new infrastructure, roads and buildings. This map is adorned with the title ‘Construction Planning for the New Rural’ (*Quy Hoach Xây Dựng Nông Thôn Mới*). The map intricately divides the commune into new areas for the development of commercial forestry, agro-industrial crop development, and new zones for agricultural land development. It also organises the population through demarcating zones of population settlement and more rational, clustered village sites reminiscent of the ‘high modernist’ schemes so thoroughly deconstructed by James Scott (1998) in his classic study *Seeing Like a State*. The maps visually embody the four meta-effects of isolation, identification, legibility and spatialisation that Trouillot (2001) identifies as critical in establishing ideas of state.

The maps project a modernist future imagining for the commune. Through their technocratic visualisation they project the competency and technological prowess of the party state in being able to realise this imagining. This projection of competence and expertise is symptomatic of the process of rendering technical, as through the maps state planners frame the commune’s ‘problems’ and prescribe ‘expert’ solutions, at the same time constructing boundaries and excluding alternative, potentially contentious diagnoses of the reasons for the commune’s perceived underdevelopment. Alongside other technical manifestations of the New Rural programme, such as regulatory documents, plans, statistical targets, visiting delegations and ‘projects’, they serve to materialise the nostalgia infused socialist utopianism of the Party’s modernising rhetoric.

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<sup>5</sup> ‘*Đảng cộng sản Việt nam quang vinh muôn năm!*’ (Glory forever for the Communist Party of Vietnam!) and ‘*suốt đời phấn đấu hy sinh cho mục tiêu sống lý tưởng cộng sản chiến đấu lao động và học tập theo gương Bác Hồ vĩ đại*’ (Strive and sacrifice throughout one’s life for the communist ideology. Live, fight, work, study and follow the example of the great Uncle Ho).

However, as Mitchell Dean (1994) notes, such “irreducibly utopian” governmental schemes for the improvement of the population can never achieve everything they set out to do. There is an unbridgeable gap between the development imagining of the state and what actually transpires, such that successive schemes are applied through the local state to attempt to plug the gap in an endless process of development interventionism. The attempt to render technical through such scheme’s invariably opens up such cracks and fissures, spaces in which local people explore the contradictions in state designs through their everyday political practice (Li 2007). These actions in turn seep back into improvement schemes and condition what they become.

This is certainly the case in Vĩnh Thủy, as the grandiose vision for the transformation of the commune under the New Rural programme is not necessarily one that is shared by the people and officials of the commune itself. This is because it was not one they themselves were involved in developing. The maps hanging on the commune wall were commissioned by the district government, and produced by a cadastral company in Lào Cai City. This company produced the maps according to instructions and data issued by the district level authorities for all of the communes in the district. Consequently each of the communes in the district received a similar set of maps. The future visioning for Vĩnh Thủy was therefore the product of collaboration between district officials and the cadastral company and had little to do with local officials, or local people themselves. The maps were simply part of a generic prescription for the uplands, developed by centre state planners according to the rubric of the New Rural programme of the central government. Whilst commune officers are required to work to the land use plan embodied in the maps, they have had no input into its formulation. As one of the commune cadastral officers wryly noted:

In fact the maps and plans were sent from the district and we didn’t know anything about it until they arrived. Certainly, as far as I know, no one in the commune was involved in deciding what the plans should look like. But we will do our best to implement the government’s plans.

### **State and market's intimate entanglements: Developing tea in the commune**

The New Rural programme is an important technology through which centre state planners attempt to extend the reach of the market into remoter upland areas of Lào Cai province. At the same time too though, the market is also extending the reach of the state. State and market are mutually interdependent and interchangeable in the borderlands, with one reinforcing the effects of the other. This symbiotic relationship is vividly illustrated in the case of tea, the new miracle crop that was being aggressively championed by agricultural extension staff in the commune at the time of my fieldwork. The district head of the Agriculture and Rural Development Department described the future of upland communes in the following way:

We have a strategy to develop consumer products in these places so that the nature of production of these people is completely transformed. In the future the commune [Vĩnh Thủy] will be a large-scale tea farm and all of the farmers will be employed in growing tea for the market, through their household production units.

In Vĩnh Thủy commune particular areas were demarcated for tea development under the New Rural programme, and enshrined in the commune maps I just described. The provincial government assigned a company with the task of implementing the tea project in the commune: the Tay Binh Tea Company. Formerly a state owned enterprise, the company was transformed into a limited liability company, but retained close connections to the state. The provincial government is the only stakeholder in the company and the management board is made up of four senior provincial officials.

The company was originally established in 1967 as a state owned farm with over 100 hectares of land. Following the national reforms of the early 1990s, the collective's land was redistributed and the new company was left with only the factory site of five hectares. It is dependent now on contracting with households to convert their land to tea. In 2000 the company established production in four lowland communes of the district, where they now have over 1,650 hectares of tea under cultivation. Tea production has expanded over the past two years to four upland communes, including Vĩnh Thủy, as a provincial initiative under the New Rural programme. Thus the company's role in expanding the tea sector is a political task, not one based upon market logic necessarily, reinforcing how the construction of 'the market' is deeply embedded in the political priorities of the higher level state.

Initially only a couple of hectares of tea were planted in 2010 by two demonstration households in Vĩnh Thủy commune. The model for dissemination followed the pattern of past agricultural campaigns in the uplands, with local cadre acting as the demonstration vanguard for the project, receiving substantial inputs and support in order to pioneer the first rounds of planting. The uptake in the commune has been slow, as with previous attempts to promote crop innovations: in 2013 there were 16.5 hectares of tea under cultivation by 25 households. The level of subsidy and incentives to tea producers remains high, with farmers able to receive the equivalent of about 20 million VND (950 USD) per hectare of tea cultivated in start-up costs, as seed and fertiliser subsidies. The opportunity to participate goes largely to the better off and well-connected households in the commune, either because they are legible in the local state arena, or because only those farmers who have demonstrated farming prowess are trusted with such an important task.

Tay Binh Tea effectively oversees all aspects of tea production in the commune. The company directly advises farmers on production and regularly visits the commune to monitor progress and provide technical advice, and inputs such as fertiliser. At the beginning of the project they also took interested farmers from the commune down to the lowlands of the district to visit well-established tea growing areas and talk to the farmers there about the production process, and the kinds of returns they could make from tea production. These visits were highly successful, with 33 of the 39 farmers from the commune that went on the tour subsequently signing up for the project. The company has a network of collection stations in the more established lowland communes where they have been supervising the production of tea for more than ten years. Tea producers bring their produce to be weighed and recorded, and they subsequently receive monthly payments. Tea production occupies the owner-cultivators in these areas for much of the year and it is this model of smallholder based agro-commercial production that state planners imagine as the future for Vĩnh Thủy commune and other upland areas of the district: a stable household based production system producing high quality tea for the market through the state's own proxy company.

The state's entanglement with the market extends far beyond simply subsidising production. As an extension of the provincial government, the company benefits greatly from the state's careful regulation of the market for tea in the province. Tay Binh Tea retains a privileged position in the highly regulated provincial tea market, which is carefully divided between different district tea companies each with their own production area. Provincial authorities are suspicious of open and 'wasteful' competition between companies in the production process, as the head of the economic and technical department of the company explained to me:

We [the Thai Binh Tea Company] don't operate in any other districts as there are tea companies in these other districts and the Lào Cai authorities carefully regulate the industry in the province. We can't jump into the market of another company. Instead the market is managed more effectively. There was an expensive lesson from Yen Bai province where so many private companies operated that it made everything messed up. There are four tea companies in the province, two private, and they are allocated areas to operate in by the province and they can't operate anywhere else. Other private companies can't operate here, in tea at least.<sup>6</sup>

### **Contesting the managed market. The case of tobacco**

Prior to the development of tea in the commune, tobacco was the state's agro-industrial commodity of choice. As with tea, developing the market for tobacco was also a carefully state managed process, with provincial officials similarly setting the parameters for production and engaged in regulating many aspects of the relationship between producers and buyers. The legacy of the attempt to promote tobacco can be seen throughout Vĩnh Thủy, where tobacco drying towers dot the landscape, all approximately 12 metres tall and identically constructed from brick.<sup>7</sup> They are also all abandoned and, although recently built, are now slowly falling into ruin (see Photo 7.2).

Tobacco had been an important crop in the district during the early 2000s, with major production around the district town of Cao Xuyên and in the southern, lower lying

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<sup>6</sup> This director, Mr. Huan, also revealed that the company remained a state enterprise owned by the province "because it is close to the border", highlighting how Lào Cai's strategic frontier position provides an important justification for the centre state to retain close economic control over agricultural enterprises and production.

<sup>7</sup> There are 45 of these towers in total in the commune.



communes. District agricultural extension officers recalled to me how, during harvesting season, the whole of the valley around Cao Xuyên town would be transformed into a sea of bright green.<sup>8</sup> Using the lowland model of production that they were familiar with, state planners therefore sought to extend tobacco production to upland communes as the latest attempt to transform what they saw as villagers inefficient, subsistence based livelihoods into a more commodity and market based form of production. The tobacco towers were constructed under the 30a Programme of the national government, to support the poorest districts of the country, and the project itself sat within the New Rural programme for the commune. In keeping with the usual operational mode of the district government, the District People's Committee appointed a company to oversee production, collect and value the product and pay the farmers.

The original company appointed was the Hồng Lợi company, registered as a joint stock company in Lào Cai City, and whose chairman was also the chairman of a state-owned stock company dealing with import-export in Hưng Yên province. Once tobacco had been established in Vĩnh Thủy however, farmers quickly discovered that the Hồng Lợi company was not, in fact, interested in buying the tobacco that they produced. A number of farmers in the commune said that the company asked them to sign a document stating that they had received a payment from the company, but they never received this money and their crop was not collected. It subsequently transpired that Hồng Lợi was just a front operation for the laundering of cheap tobacco from China, which was passed off as having been produced in Lào Cai province in order to avoid customs duty. The company had made contracts with farmers throughout the district, as well as in neighbouring districts of the province, in order to facilitate this laundering operation. The company was investigated and the operation was closed down, with the company chairman and his associates prosecuted by the authorities in a high profile investigation that attracted significant news coverage, and the Lào Cai

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<sup>8</sup> Tobacco production in the lowland areas of the district tailed off however, partly as a result of the difficulties involving intermediary companies described here, but also as a result of the slump in the price of tobacco.

government subsequently terminated the agreement with Hồng Lợi (*Báo công an nhân dân* newspaper, 15 November 2011).<sup>9</sup>

Following these problems district officials explained how they then approached the tobacco bureau in Hanoi for a recommendation for a second company that they could work with, to collect the local people's tobacco crop. Eventually a second company was appointed, the Ngân Hạnh company.<sup>10</sup> This company worked with the commune authorities in Vĩnh Thủy to promote tobacco production but when the 2012 crop was harvested, the company ranked the crop at 'D' grade, the lowest quality which of course had a correspondingly low wholesale price for the producers. Farmers in the commune couldn't understand why their crop was graded so poorly and protested to the company and to visiting government officials from the district. The farmers had little time for the company's argument that the tobacco leaves were marked and thus of low quality.<sup>11</sup> They complained that the company was cheating them and that they were not being compensated at a rate commensurate with their efforts. As far as they were concerned, the tobacco company should pay the top price that was offered, as they considered their crop to be of 'A grade' standard, irrespective of what the company's technical evaluation was.

Whether or not provincial and district officials colluded with the Hồng Lợi company is difficult to say, though local people in Vĩnh Thủy had strong suspicions that this was the case. Certainly the close management of the process by state officials and the district government's continued efforts to manage the market for tobacco make such a suspicion understandable. By the time the second company, Ngân Hạnh, was appointed local farmer's confidence in tobacco companies and the district agricultural extension staff had been shaken and they harboured suspicions of all of the actors involved. They were deeply sceptical of further state attempts to expose them to 'the market' through tobacco development and this ambivalence was widely shared in

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<sup>9</sup> The agreement was terminated through Decision No. 16/TB-SKH of the provincial government, 04 May 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Ngân Hạnh is a subsidiary of the tobacco company Ngân Sơn, a joint stock company based in Bắc Ninh.

<sup>11</sup> District agricultural extension staff told me that to attain the 'A' grade, the leaves must be completely unblemished after the drying process. This is a difficult task and one that it took lowland tobacco farmers in the district several years to perfect.

neighbouring upland communes of the district, where protests took place that included farmers burning their own tobacco crop in the brick towers. As a commune informant who was involved in the tobacco project explained: “at the time we would rather leave our crop to rot in the towers than accept what the company were offering us”.

In the case of tobacco the behaviour of provincial and district officials and successive state appointed companies was sufficiently obtuse to mobilise commune farmers into a display of concerted action. Their response to the attempts to foster tobacco development demonstrated how they had a particular imagining of what market relations should entail in this instance, and a particular set of expectations of how the state should regulate their entanglement with the market. The response of Mrs Hạnh is indicative of how many local people who were involved in the project felt:

We never thought they [higher state officials] would just leave us like that. They brought the companies to the commune in the first place, after all. They had a responsibility to make sure we'd be alright. We have no power against these companies, only the government does. They should do their best for us, not for them.

Local residents understood the key role the local state officials played in regulating the tobacco market and felt strongly that they therefore had a duty of care towards villagers to ensure they were not harmed by the particular framing of the market they had set in place. In this particular case they were not market averse, quite the opposite in fact. They eagerly looked forward to the chance to grow tobacco for the increase in income that would follow. But they had expectations that the state would ensure their wellbeing in their dealings with a powerful entity from outside of the commune, over which they had no influence or control. In fact villagers displayed an astute ability to use district state officials paternalistic and controlling narratives back against the officials themselves, a *metis*-infused strategy which highlighted what they saw as the state's long standing obligations towards them as 'poor' and 'powerless' rural people in need of development. Mrs Hạnh's friend Mrs. Thu went on to explain:

They told us that they were bringing tobacco to the commune to help us get rich. We're always told that the government is here to help, to show us the way out of being poor. Well, we followed their advice just like we've always done. We don't want to be poor forever after all, and the government has a lot of experience from other places that they can bring here to help. But we really felt

disappointed after tobacco. We put in a lot of effort and stopped growing other things but then we got cheated, and there was no one who could help us.

Markets are made real through the interaction of social groups (de Alcantara 1993). They are structured through long standing relations of power and are infused with highly localised cultural understandings. In the case of tobacco local villagers had their own view of the value of what they produced and wanted 'the market' to recognise this value on their terms. They weren't interested in the abstract and socially disembodied valuation that the tobacco company's experts ascribed to their tobacco crop, using 'technical' criteria. Importantly, they appealed to the state to intervene on their behalf, demonstrating their understanding of how the state plays a critical intermediary and structuring role in market relations. Their appeals were grounded in the state's own rhetoric of development and long standing notions of obligation on the part of the state to ensure the security of the rural population.

### **Market ambivalence. The case of hybrid corn production**

Perhaps the most important recent agricultural marketing initiative of the state in Vĩnh Thủy commune has been the promotion of hybrid corn. For state planners, hybrid corn embodies the desired shift from 'traditional', locally produced crop varieties to more productive, 'modern' and marketable crops. The programme to promote the use of hybrid corn seed in the commune began in the late 1990's, though it had begun earlier in lowland parts of Cao Xuyên district as the authorities recognised the opportunity offered by rising demand from China for the supply of feed for livestock production. The border crossing just outside the district town of Cao Xuyên is a major transit point for the sale of hybrid corn, with a long line of trucks waiting at the border gate during the peak months following harvesting (July – September). Vĩnh Thủy commune has its own corn traders that buy locally produced corn and sell to contacts across the Chinese border, and there are also traders from the district town and from other nearby communes that regularly buy up the local crop.<sup>12</sup>

The district government and officers in the commune worked hard to promote the shift to hybrid corn through providing free fertiliser and seed to 'pioneer' farmers, who

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<sup>12</sup> Occasionally, traders from China also visit the commune, but this is unusual and they usually work through local middlemen.

were expected to demonstrate to others how hybrid corn could successfully be produced and how they could raise their income as a consequence. Hybrid corn varieties require far greater inputs in terms of fertiliser, and more intensive care by farmers, but productivity is far higher, with commune farmers reporting that they can double their yield using hybrid varieties, compared to the local varieties they have traditionally grown.<sup>13</sup> Hybrid corn takes only three months to mature, against the six months of local varieties, but is also more perishable than the local corn varieties, and generally needs to be processed and sold within three months of harvest, whereas local varieties can be stored for up to a year.

Hybrid corn production required a fundamental shift in farming practices by local farmers, and resulted in a correspondingly significant shift in relationships between farmers, the government (upon whom they were dependent for inputs and production advice), and the market, with which they necessarily became much more closely attuned. Cash incomes have improved significantly now that local producers have become more integrated into the wider commercial networks for corn trading, though commune farmers are heavily reliant upon the seed and fertiliser subsidies supplied by the government. Even with these subsidies, fertiliser was still the biggest annual household expense reported by householders I interviewed in the commune.

Hybrid corn production neatly encapsulates both the opportunities and risks associated with market integration in Vĩnh Thủy: it tantalizingly offers better cash incomes for those who can successfully grow the crop, but also poses far greater risks, in terms of perishability and the increased levels of farming inputs required, which must be paid for, or accessed through the state. It also draws farmers into wider market networks, often cross-border networks, where the customers may be unknown and where fluctuations and vagaries of supply and demand are unfamiliar and outside of the ability of local farmers to influence.

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<sup>13</sup> Corn in the commune sells for approximately 2,500 VND per kilo for the whole corn cob, and 5-6,000 VND per kilo for the kernels. In 2013 the price fluctuated according to supply however: for those farmers who were able to harvest early in June the price per kilo was 6-7,000 Dong, but by November the price being paid had dropped to 5,500-6,000 per kilo. The importance of the China trade in corn was highlighted in 2012 when tensions between Vietnam and China over the South China Sea resulted in the temporary closure of the border. The price for corn that season consequently dropped to only 3,000 VND per kilo for the kernels, a drop of 50%.

A local trader resident in the commune, Mrs. Vũ Hà Ngân, represents someone who has successfully benefitted from the development of hybrid corn in Vĩnh Thủy, and the competitive market which resulted. She is a Nùng woman, born in the commune, and married a Kinh man from the district. They have a small truck that enables them to engage in the corn trade, and they have been trading successfully for more than ten years:

When we first got married, we borrowed some money, 5 million Dong, and we started to buy corn. We continued to expand the business every year and borrowed more money, 15 million and then 30 million Dong. Our business has grown and now we don't need to borrow money any more. Sometimes now we give credit to farmers against the next crop.

Mrs. Ngân explained how the local trade in corn works. She first visits households in the commune on her motorbike to negotiate with villagers. Once she has bought their produce her husband then collects the corn in their truck. In the remoter villages, they have to transport the corn sacks on her motorbike. They also buy corn from villagers who bring it to their house. They wait until they have enough corn to fill their truck (about 50 tonnes) and then transport it to the border with China.

We meet the traders at the border and they take care of everything, they help us to get across the border to do the trade. Often the Chinese don't pay immediately, they pay later, but we don't worry as we know them and have visited their houses. We have their [mobile] phone numbers and we know some Chinese [language]. The Chinese traders will return the corn if it isn't good quality, but there is always a very high demand.

During the second half of the year, from July onwards, there is always a steady stream of traders' trucks rolling through the commune looking to buy local people's hybrid corn. On market days in particular corn traders position themselves along the main road through the commune and local farmers bring their corn in sacks to trade (see Photo 7.3).

Despite the success of hybrid corn production in the commune, and the flourishing market which results, agricultural marketisation projects of the state are often met with initial scepticism on the part of local people as the commune agricultural extension officer (Ms. Lê Văn Duong) explained:

When we first implement a new project here it's extremely difficult, the level of the people is very different, some know the language and some don't, some understand and some don't. When I go to the village meeting to disseminate information some people understand and follow my advice but when they don't, they sometimes give me bad words and insult me.... People haven't seen the success [of the new crop] yet so they doubt and dare not join the project. <sup>14</sup>

To overcome this reluctance, local officials are expected to play a leading role in promoting new crops and modes of agricultural production. They represent a 'vanguard' of key farmers, pioneering and advocating for each new agricultural production campaign to other commune residents. As the commune agricultural extension officer explained, these people are the ones that have the "enthusiasm and competency to do this work" but it is also expected of them, as local officials.

During 2013 then, the commune chairman and his wife were engaged in demonstrating the production of seasonal vegetables and pumpkin on their household plot and were producing tea and hybrid corn as commune demonstrators. They were also key farmers for the demonstration of chicken and pig production. They received subsidised and free farming inputs as a result, such as seed, fertiliser, tools and equipment, which served to bolster and maintain their preeminent position at the apex of the local state and the centre of the local state patronage machine. This was the case with other prominent local party-state officials and their families too, who similarly serve in this 'model farmer' role. In fact the commune chairman himself had little interest in agriculture: he

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<sup>14</sup> Ms. Duong's comments about the risk averse nature of the commune's farmers resonate with a long standing academic debate over the nature of peasant engagement with the market, best embodied in the classic exchange from the 1970's between James Scott's (1976) notion of 'moral economy' and the rival 'political economy' perspective of Samuel Popkin (Popkin 1979). Both drew upon rural Vietnam for their case study evidence. Scott argued that pre-capitalist peasant societies were marked by notions of reciprocity, social exchange and the guarantee of a minimum subsistence, relations of moral economy which were destroyed through the spread of capitalism and the modern state. Popkin took issue with what he perceived of as this overly romantic and idyllic view of pre-capitalist village relations. Rather than being primarily concerned with ensuring security, he argued that in fact rural villagers are continually striving to raise their subsistence level and that they are prepared to take risks to accumulate. He advocated moving analysis "back one step" from the village to the individual, and argued that villages, and social relations generally, are more conflictual than the moral economists suggest. "Moral economists take too benign a view of villages and patron-client ties and too harsh a view of market potential" (Popkin, 1979:29) he argued. These views of course foreshadowed the shift towards liberal individual and ultimately neo-liberal conceptions of the state and market which dominated the international development discourse throughout the late 1980s and 1990s.

had no time to farm given his responsibilities, and hired labourers from his family network to work his land. But he was careful to maintain the impression that he was engaged in agriculture and enthused by the latest round of agricultural campaigns pushed by the district.

Ms. Duong's earlier comments of course reflect the frustration and prejudice of state officials trying to compel villagers to embark on a course of livelihood 'improvement' for which there is no evidence of success, at least initially. The villager's scepticism is therefore well placed, and echoes the cynicism of local people towards local officials that I discussed in Chapter 4. Even today, where many households grow a significant amount of hybrid corn for the market and accept that this production has significantly increased their income, they still continue to grow local corn varieties too, which they use to feed livestock and distil *rượu ngô*, the strong corn spirit which is the main form of alcohol consumed in the commune. Local varieties of corn are far hardier and disease resistant, can be stored for far longer than the hybrid corn, and are more suitable for traditional forms of food production, particularly for brewing alcohol. Local people also prefer the taste. They thus maintain a foot in two camps: they engage in producing and trading hybrid corn as a commodity for sale in the market, but are also engaged in producing local corn in order to sustain and reproduce a more intimate form of being.

Local corn is linked to the reproduction of important cultural forms and a subsistence economy that operates in parallel to more 'modern', market based forms. A farmer from Suối Đông village described the relationship with the market in these distinctly ambivalent terms:

Of course we like to grow the hybrid corn for the money that we can make from it. But few people in the village grow just this type of corn. To do so would be a big risk. It can't be stored for long and if we couldn't sell it, we wouldn't be able to feed our animals through the year. It's better to be careful and grow both types of corn – that way we don't have to depend only on selling outside of the commune.

Villagers are clearly careful and quite sophisticated in their response to the agricultural marketization drives of the centre state then. They recognise the benefits of hybrid corn and appreciate the increased income it provides, but also continue to practice



more ‘traditional’ agricultural forms in order to ensure both food security, and the reproduction of important local social norms and practices with which agriculture is intimately entwined.

### **Projects, power and the local state**

Attempts to facilitate the modernisation of the uplands in general, and to introduce the market in particular, have led to the proliferation of ‘the project’ (*dự án*) as an increasingly prevalent governmental technology in Vĩnh Thủy, and an important site for political contestation in the local state. Projects set out to homogenise, control and develop upland people and landscapes, but also open up spaces for dissonance, whereby hegemonic ideas are ruptured and reimagined in the local state space.<sup>15</sup>

#### *‘The project’, and it’s prevalence*

Projects are everywhere in the northern uplands and increasingly permeate both the language of rule of the party state, and the material enactment of this rule, as they serve the routine function of delivering the material things necessary to foster the notion of progress and development in the uplands. In this way they mirror the function of the ‘campaigns’ (*chiến dịch*) which were prevalent during the state socialist era, and which still operate as governmental technologies today, particularly for the Party in disseminating ideology.

Projects are integral to the workings of international organisations and bilateral and multilateral development agencies working in northern Vietnam, but the language and symbolism of the project is not simply an imposed or imported, exogenous technology. Projects are also embedded in the workings, narratives, rituals and symbols of the party state itself. Consider, for example, a huge mural that runs the entire length of the outside wall of the national war commemoration site in the central park of Lào Cai City. The mural is a depiction of the recent history of the north of Vietnam, running from the colonial struggle against the French and successive wars of liberation, to the present day, which is depicted in the mural in terms of ethnic harmony, modernity, progress and development. A central image in this part of the mural is of ethnic

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<sup>15</sup> Occasionally, projects also become the site for much more significant and profound conflict between the citizenry and the state, as we saw earlier in the case of the failed tobacco project in Vĩnh Thủy.

minority women sitting behind computers, clutching folders embossed with the title ‘*dur án*’ (see Photo 7.4). The project, then, has deeply indigenous roots as the symbolic embodiment of the party state’s drive towards modernity.

Aspinall (2013) defines the project as “a self-contained, collaborative, and funded activity intended to achieve a designated end and which is to be attained through at least the formal performance of a competitive process”. As he notes, the project has been a feature in Indonesia since the developmentalism of the New Order period but the penetration of projects through almost every sphere of social and political life is a more recent development:

Wherever you go, in virtually every social sector, it can appear that everyone - nongovernmental organisation (NGO) activists, political party functionaries, local government bureaucrats, journalists, educators, religious leaders and others - is engaged in the endless task of *mencari proyek* (looking for projects) or at least being accused of doing so (Aspinall 2013:30).

Andrew Walker (2012) similarly observes the seemingly ubiquitous nature of projects, this time in rural northern Thailand. On one level, Walker acknowledges the depoliticising intent of state projects observed by Ferguson (1994) in his classic study of the *Anti-Politics Machine* in Lesotho, and also the way that project’s bound and render technical in Li’s (2007) terms, seeking to create ‘neutral’ spaces in which governmentality can be exercised. But Walker also interprets projects from a different scalar and epistemological viewpoint. His discussion of projects in northern Thailand focuses upon how they are locally imagined, created and implemented, as “moments of intersection” (Walker 2012:145) between state power and local programmes and designs for development. As such:

Local development projects provide an institutional context in which state power can be condensed, domesticated, and productively mingled with local livelihoods and the moral appeal of community (Walker 2012:145).

For Walker projects are ritualised performances that create a “localised field of auspiciousness in which power can flow between the various elements assembled” (Walker 2012:154). Critically projects are “openly and explicitly productive of politics” and are “auspicious performances that seek to conjure power not conceal it”

(Walker 2012:165). Projects are valued for the connections they make and the resources they bring in, not for any technical project outcomes, which Walker contends are in any case usually negligible. Instead, “expectations, desires, and disappointments” about the “intimate conduct of government” crystallise around projects (Walker 2012:165).

There were many development projects in operation in Vĩnh Thủy during my fieldwork, ranging from small-scale projects to promote vegetable production, to the large-scale projects we have already discussed, for the transformation of the uplands landscape through tea and tobacco production. Members of the commune and village government in the commune are kept busy administering these projects through for example distributing seed and fertiliser, or demonstrating new agricultural and livestock rearing techniques. Their role and authority is thus made manifest largely through the domain of the project, and the associated material resources that they bring to the commune, which effectively makes the state idea, and local official’s authority, real.

### *INGO’s, projects and the ‘franchising’ of state power*

Projects are also the medium through which a new corpus of institutional actors are increasingly involved in the process of modernisation, marketisation and development in Vĩnh Thủy commune. Representatives of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are particularly important in this regard: they are supposedly ‘non-state’ actors but they play an important role in generating state effects and are ultimately engaged in doing the everyday maintenance work for the state idea. Beatrice Hibou and her colleagues (1999) have observed what they describe as a growing trend towards state “privatisation” and the exercise of “private indirect government” (see also Gainsborough 2010a).

But importantly as Hibou observes, the growing influence and agency of actors outside of the formal government sector in no way represents a decline in state power, or in the influence of state actors. What Hibou notes instead is a “widening range of forms of state intervention” (Hibou 1999:vii) through which the state gives economic responsibility to a range of ‘non-state’ actors but maintains, and often strengthens, overall state control. Thus the growing state privatisation she observes “is not so much

a loss of control as an option for indirect government, using private intermediaries on an increasing scale” (Hibou 1999: xviii).<sup>16</sup> The proliferation of non-state actors engaged in state work in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy should be seen in this context, I believe. It is not the decline of state power. Rather, it is power being exercised in new ways, through shared interests amongst local state vectors in the local state space.

SEED, the INGO that supported my fieldwork in Vĩnh Thủy, has been operating in the commune for more than ten years. SEED has a well-established portfolio of projects and is well regarded by commune authorities and by local people, who appreciate the material support these projects bring to the commune. They work in partnership with the Department of Agriculture and the Women’s Union of the province to promote their project objectives of women’s greater social and economic empowerment and the integration of upland farmers into more economically productive forms of agriculture, through promoting livestock development and facilitating greater market linkages. SEED staff (who are all Vietnamese nationals from Hanoi) are regular visitors to the commune, and are always accompanied by provincial and district cadre from the Agriculture Department and the Women’s Union on these trips.

Non-governmental organisations globally are usually portrayed (including by NGO’s themselves) as the vanguard of ‘civil society’, a conceptual realm kept separate from the state as a distinct domain. But in Vĩnh Thủy any clear conceptual division between the two quickly disappears when the everyday actions of INGO staff and local state officials are examined. Provincial officials accompany INGO staff on all of their project visits, and INGO staff promote activities that reinforce the existing work of the government in modernising agriculture in the local state. Through projects the INGO reinforces the government’s norms, procedures and language as these projects fit snugly with the government’s own objectives, targets and modalities and are

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<sup>16</sup> Hibou and her collaborators were writing in the late 1990s, the high water mark of neo-liberalism and associated notions of the triumph of the economic over the political, and the ‘retreat’ of the state. What Hibou sought to show was that the state was not in retreat, but was in fact reconfiguring power and legitimacy as part of an ongoing historical process which was (and is) largely in the hands of those who control economic and political power in society. For Hibou, private indirect government represents a shift in state modalities and a move towards new modes and practices of government representative of ‘neo-liberal’ rule, through the market in particular.

implemented on an everyday basis by commune officials. INGO work then is, to all intents and purposes, state work, as it reinforces the governmental projects of power of local officials and the centre state, in the local state space.

The interchangeable nature of state and INGO work in Vĩnh Thủy was apparent through countless project training (or capacity building) events held during my fieldwork. On one occasion I arrived at the commune office to observe a scheduled SEED training event for the commune women's groups, only to discover that there were none of the INGO's staff present. The training was on the management and organisation of commune groups and was branded 'SEED' training but the trainers were all from the provincial Department of Agriculture and the Women's Union. SEED was paying for the officials to deliver training that met the objectives of the both the government and the INGO, through their shared project.<sup>17</sup>

### *Projects as regulating, governmental technologies of power*

SEED's flagship project in Vĩnh Thủy commune sets out to improve the breeding and care of traditional Hmông black pigs (*lợn cắp nách*), for sale in the market. These pigs are small and hardy, and attract a good market price for their meat. They are of course native to the commune but SEED and the provincial agriculture authorities have been working to improve the production of these pigs, through assisting local farmers to build dedicated pig pens, get their livestock properly vaccinated, and to feed the pigs appropriate food to fatten them up for market more quickly. As part of the project, participating households are provided with a pig, and once it bears offspring the household returns one pig to the commune authorities, who then give this pig to the next household. It thus operates as a form of revolving fund, administered by the commune authorities.

SEED had been implementing the project in Vĩnh Thủy for three years by mid-2013 when I started my fieldwork, and the project was being replicated in a number of other communes around the province. I accompanied SEED staff from Hanoi and provincial

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<sup>17</sup> In January 2014 SEED staff from Hanoi conducted training for the Women's Groups in 'collective action'. Ironically, many of the women from the villages of Ninh Điền A and B could not attend as they were assisting a kinsman in building a new house. The irony of the situation was of course not lost on local people, who enjoyed relating to me why they had not joined the training.

government representatives on a visit to a neighbouring commune to see the progress of the project. During the visit we were supposed to meet with a delegation of women from the commune women's group mobilised for the project. However, our visit coincided with a visit by (more senior and important) provincial party dignitaries, who were reviewing progress on the implementation of the New Rural programme in the commune. The women farmers were therefore required to attend to the party delegation instead, and there were consequently no local people for our pig project delegation to meet with.

Despite the absence of any beneficiaries of the project, the visiting delegation nevertheless went ahead with a meeting with commune officers, in a rather surreal situation whereby the needs of the project beneficiaries were discussed without any of them actually being present. The occasion therefore evoked Peter Hinton's memorable description of meetings as ritual attempts to perpetuate an "illusion of progress" (Hinton 1992:116). It was conducted in order to satisfy the needs of the project to have a meeting, even though in effect three sets of 'state-like' actors were talking to each other: the commune officials, provincial officials and SEED staff.

During the discussion it was proposed by the commune officers that the project provide a small additional funding allocation to the local women's group in order to enable them to increase their pig production. Ms. Vân, the leader of the project delegation on the day responded with exasperation that "we can't simply add on additional money for your farmers. The project document doesn't allow us to do this". This lack of flexibility was presented as an irrefutable fact, with Ms. Vân's response closing off any avenues for further discussion. Her response had not been that additional funds were unavailable, but rather that additional funding couldn't be provided because it was outside of the scope of the project document to do so. In this instance then the project, and its associated regulations and procedures, was deployed as a powerful medium for the exercise of state governmentality, effectively restricting the scope of local actors to exercise autonomy or initiative. Project provisions are established, codified and rendered technical through project documents which then assume an authority which local level actors find it hard to subvert.

### *The project as a site for contestation and re-imagination of the market*

But just as project meetings can serve to restrict the range of actions open to actors, as in the case above, they can also operate as spaces in which agency can be effectively exercised, politics practiced, and state designs contested. In September 2013 a delegation from SEED visited the Vĩnh Thủy commune office to discuss the next phase of the pig project with the women's group representatives, all of who had been assembled in the main commune meeting room. The women were slightly agitated as it was a Thursday morning, so also the time for the weekly commune market and many of them were anxious to go and engage in their weekly shopping and socialising. The visiting delegation of INGO and government representatives was travelling from Lào Cai City that morning, and the women's anxiety was exacerbated by the delegation arriving ninety minutes later than scheduled. The delegation consisted of three members of SEED's staff from Hanoi, three members of the provincial Department of Agriculture, one member of the provincial Women's Union, and a man from a company in Hanoi looking to source organic pork for their supermarkets. The company, 'Envirostore', specialises in organic branding which has recently become extremely popular in Hanoi and other urban areas of Vietnam, as a result of concerns over food safety. Organic pork thus attracts a high price, though the meat from the Hmông pigs produced in the commune is also considered very tasty and has a somewhat exotic cache, which enables retailers to sell it at a premium in urban markets.<sup>18</sup>

The meeting room was arranged in the usual square configuration of desks and chairs, with the SEED and Envirostore representatives at the head of the table, flanked on the left side by commune officers who had out their notebooks and pens and took meticulous notes during the meeting. The right side desks were reserved for the provincial officials, with the remainder of the space around the square occupied by the women representatives of the commune. Their colourful Hmông, Nùng and Dao outfits contrasted with the smart casual clothes of the SEED staff and provincial and

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<sup>18</sup> This perceived exoticism is also related to the pigs close association with the Hmông, an ethnic minority group quite distant and alien to the understanding of many urban, lowland Vietnamese. For urban people, the Hmông and other ethnic minorities are associated with primitivism and 'purity', having been untouched by modern ways and thus presumably by industrial pollution, contamination and modern inorganic farming practices.

commune government officers. Some of the women who had positioned themselves on the chairs against the walls of the room were encouraged by the SEED staff to join the empty seats at the main table, even though this made the task of feeding and settling the babies they carried on their backs more difficult. Their inclusion at the table was important for the project staff in reinforcing symmetry and a sense of order for the meeting, and for their conception of how a democratic meeting space should be arranged.

The meeting was opened by the commune chairman, who stayed for the opening formalities but then left his seat for the head of the Farmer's Union to represent the commune. Two other commune officers sat throughout the meeting, taking notes and periodically participating in the discussion, usually to make a technical point on pig production or marketing, to demonstrate their higher competence and authority. The provincial officials largely wandered around the room, standing behind the chairs of the commune women to interject periodically, checking their smartphones and generally giving the impression of being above the proceedings (see Photo 7.6). After about an hour all of the provincial officials had retired to the sitting area in the commune office lobby to chat, smoke, drink tea and read newspapers.

Following the opening formalities of the meeting the lead SEED officer, Ms. Hai, made a long speech in Vietnamese to the women, explaining why the delegation had come and outlining the delegation's plans for the women to sell the prime pieces of pork from their pigs to the representative from Envirostore. The proposal was presented in the technocratic language of the project, and was also presented as a *fait accompli* to the women, a natural next step in the project. Many of the women present, particularly the Hmông women, struggle to speak or understand Vietnamese well and were reliant upon younger women amongst the group to periodically explain what was being proposed, in whispered asides.

Perhaps as a result of her competence in Vietnamese, but also because of her standing as the wife of an important commune officer, Mrs. Giang was the spokeswoman of the group and engaged in most of the talking with the assembled delegation. She demonstrated a sound grasp of the proposal and quickly deconstructed the offer. What Envirostore and SEED were proposing was that the women would butcher and prepare



the prime cuts from their pigs, and Envirostore would then collect them and pay the women a fixed price for the meat. SEED stood with Envirostore as a kind of guarantor for the project, promising that they would guarantee the price in case the market price slipped and Envirostore were unable to pay what they had promised.

As Mrs. Giang pointed out however, the women currently had no problem selling the prime cuts from their pigs: what they were looking for was a better return through selling the whole of the pig to wholesalers. If they sell just the prime pieces of meat, she asked, what are they to do with the rest of the animal? She also pointed out that they are not new to the buying and selling of their pigs. There is already a thriving market for Hmông pigs, as evidenced in the market street outside where a brisk trade in the sale of pigs took place every Thursday morning (see Photo 7.7). What they were looking for, she explained, was a better return through selling to buyers prepared to take all of the pig, and not just the prime cuts. This was something that Envirostore didn't seem able to do, at least at a price that was acceptable to the women. As Mrs. Giang exclaimed good humouredly to the Envirostore man: "if you can give us a better price than we already get, then of course we will sell our pigs to you!" They weren't interested in the rather rigid formalities and fixed terms on offer from the project, and certainly didn't feel beholden to the project to sell their pigs to them. They preferred instead to ride the market in the hope of getting a much better price. In this case then, they demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the potential of the market, and their place within it.

At this point the meeting clearly wasn't going as Envirostore and SEED intended. The assembled women had demonstrated that they had a strong conception of the market value for their pigs. The role of the Envirostore representative in the proceedings was also interesting. He said very little and as the discussion slipped further away from the delegation's intended direction the SEED leader, Ms. Hai, assumed the role of a salesperson for Envirostore and the project, cajoling the women with stories of what other villagers elsewhere have been able to do by joining projects like this, such as buying motorbikes and sending their children to expensive, far away schools. Ms. Hai was extolling both the virtues of the market as imagined under the project, and the women's responsibility as citizens to build a modern agriculture in order for the commune to develop. Once it was clear that the women would not immediately agree

to the project proposal, and that they didn't share the project's imaginary and their role within it, the discussion switched back to pig production, an issue around which all of the participants were familiar and comfortable.

Once again though, the technocratic demands of the project and the modern language of governmentality clashed, in this local state space, with locally embedded practices and understandings. Ms. Hai from SEED clearly had a list of issues that had to be raised and so began to discuss the different roles and responsibilities of men and women under the project. Clearly distinguishing the pig project as the women's domain was hard for the assembled women, however, as they saw the raising of pigs as a household enterprise. The men do the heavy work associated with the pigs, particularly the construction and maintenance of the pig enclosures, and children, mothers, and mothers-in-law also help with collecting food and feeding the pigs. The gender-disaggregated language of the pig project thus didn't accord with the women's experience of pig rearing, to the further frustration of SEED and the delegate from the Women's Union.

## **Conclusion**

Modernisation schemes, the market and projects are all complex sites of intersection in the local state space, through which historically and socially embedded relationships of power flow. Local people exercise agency in this local state space, in engaging with, resisting and reworking the universalising projects of the centre with which they engage. They pursue their own projects of power, but in the margins of these wider state projects to transform and integrate the uplands under the wider nation state.

As with the poverty reduction processes I described in the previous chapter, contestation over the meaning of the market creates the local state arena, as a space in which projects of power are contested. The local state space is forged as local projects of power engage with the governmental categories and processes through which the centre state and translocal actors attempt to project their integrative project of power upon the northwestern uplands, a project that is projected through modernisation schemes, projects and the idea of the market. The contestation that takes place around these governmental processes is productive of power, for as Akhil Gupta observes, governmentality is "an ever-renewing and ever-deepening process ... it engenders its

own modes of resistance, and makes, meets, moulds, or is contested by new subjects” (Gupta 2012:239).

The cases of ‘actually existing’ market integration that I have described all illustrate this local production of power.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the tobacco project, local people were first the victims in a dubious smuggling scheme carried out by a company with close links to the state. They then completely rejected the construction of market value imposed upon them by a second company, and dexterously deployed *metis* to appeal instead to the state to mediate on their behalf, so that they could get what they considered to be just recompense for their crops and labour, according to local moral economy notions of justice and obligation. With hybrid corn, local farmers displayed ambivalence towards the market: they were happy to convert some of their land for hybrid corn production but were also careful to grow local corn to ensure for their food security and the reproduction of important cultural forms. In the case of the Hmông pig project, local women actively struggled against the restricted notion of market value project staff attempted to impose upon them, demonstrating instead a keen awareness of their value and worth in an increasingly trans-local market schema.

In Vĩnh Thủy commune life is increasingly ‘projectised’ in the same way as Aspinall (2013) observes for Indonesia, and projects are similarly subjected to control by local power holders and elite interests. Projects in the commune also operate in the ways that Ferguson (1990) and Li (2007) describe, as powerful technologies of government which bound and demarcate subjects, and which create categories of rule that local people often adopt over time. Projects are instrumental in governing the uplands as they build up and reinforce the idea of the market and of the state as imagined by centre state planners.

These centre state imaginaries are also though powerfully reimagined by local people in the local state space, within the very projects through which these imaginaries are projected. This was vividly illustrated in the cases of tobacco and hybrid corn. Projects in the commune are generally externally introduced, not locally conceived and

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<sup>19</sup> During the heyday of the Soviet Union, state efforts to reconcile ideological purity with local conditions resulted in what was rhetorically described as ‘actually existing socialism’.

implemented as in Walker's (2012) case, but they are nevertheless important sites of negotiation (and contestation) in the local state space, over the meaning of development and the market, and are also therefore productive of power and politics. Projects too are sites in Vĩnh Thủy around which dreams, desires and disappointments are frequently enacted, as illustrated through the projects I described to develop tobacco, and rear pigs for the market. Local people engaged with, and powerfully imagined the market and what it could bring, and these imaginaries were acted out in the local state space as they contested and reworked the market imaginaries of centre state and translocal actors projecting their own market imaginaries. These local imaginaries in turn contribute to powerful, locally imagined ideas of the state itself.



**Photo 7.1:** A section of the 'New Rural' land use planning map for Vĩnh Thủy commune



**Photo 7.2:** A tobacco drying tower in Vĩnh Thủy commune



**Photo 7.3:** Corn trading in the commune

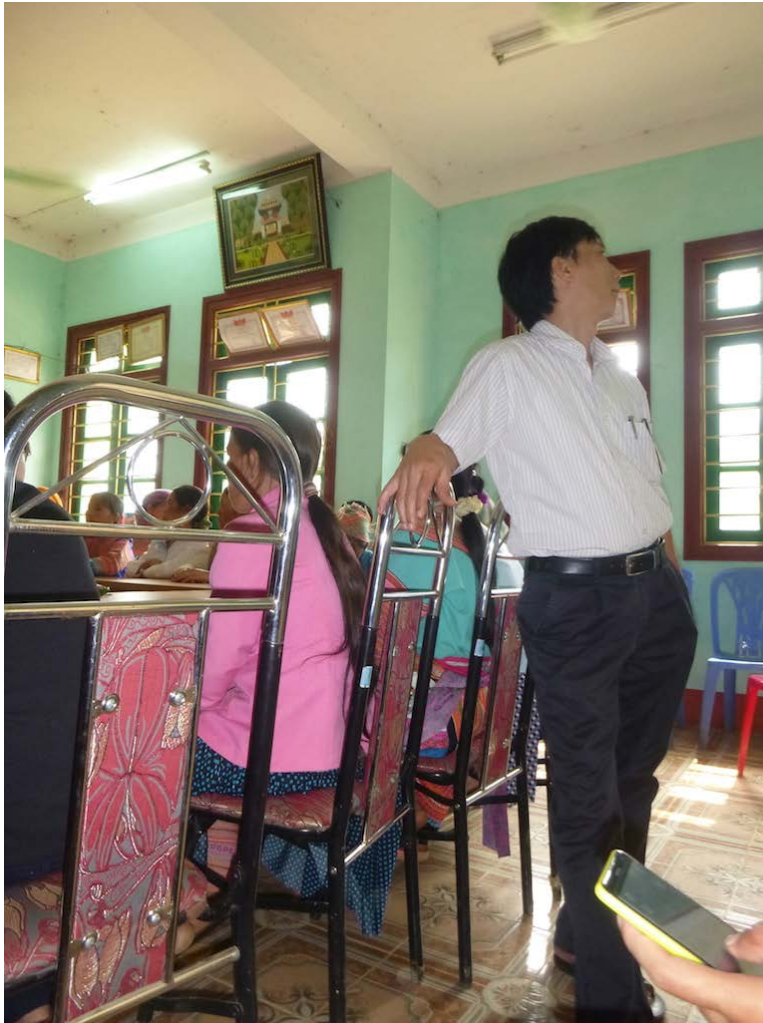


**Photo 7.4:** A part of the mural in Lào Cai City showing the importance of ‘the project’ (*dự án*) to the centre state imaginary of development





**Photo 7.5:** Local women trading agricultural produce at the weekly commune market



**Photo 7.6:** A provincial official at the meeting with women pig farmers



**Photo 7.7:** Trading local pigs in the weekly market



## CHAPTER 8

### **Conclusion: Politics, Power and the Local State**

My concluding chapter has four parts. In the first section I return to my conceptual model to review how the local state operates as a space for the practice of politics. In and through the local state, the four distinct vectors of actors, institutions and processes that I have identified in Vĩnh Thủy commune pursue projects of power. In the second section I return to my ethnography in order to draw together conclusions about the nature of politics in the local state. I highlight how political *metis* and projects of power are enacted in the local state space, and I discuss the outcomes of the political interactions that take place. In so doing I provide an answer to my research question, of how the different projects of power at work in the northwest uplands of Vietnam come together in (and through) the local state.

In the third section I discuss the implications of my study. I revisit, in the light of my findings, the three critical issues I identified in the introduction, which I argued were important areas where current knowledge and understanding of state making in the ethnic minority periphery of Vietnam should be strengthened. These three issues are, first, how best to characterise ethnic minority people's agency in the uplands; second, how to understand the nature of the state in the ethnic minority periphery; and third, how the dynamic interactions between ethnic minority people and the state in the northwestern uplands can best be understood. I discuss how I believe my political ethnography of Vĩnh Thủy commune has shed light on these key issues, and highlight the value I see in viewing upland state making processes through the conceptual lens of the local state. The final section identifies some possible future avenues for further research.

#### **The local state as a space for the practice of politics**

The local state space is the product of the coming together of four vectors, which are constellations of actors, interests, and processes. These four vectors are the centre state; the community; local officials; and the translocal institutions and flows that operate in the commune. In the local state space these vectors simultaneously pursue projects of power. Centre state actors and institutions project state effects in the local

state space in an attempt to develop, regulate and control the lands and people of the northwest, and attempt to project a singular state imaginary. Actors and institutions in the translocal flows vector are similarly concerned with promoting the integration of the uplands into the wider nation state, through promoting marketisation and particular forms of agricultural modernisation and rural development, as well as disseminating ideas of cultural integration and uniformity. Local people in the commune exercise political *metis* in navigating through the governmental processes of the centre state and pursue their own projects of power in the margins of the centre state and translocal processes that permeate the commune. Critically they deploy *metis* within the categories and governmental processes of state, not independently of them. This holds true for local officials too, the other vector of the local state. Local officials straddle both the centre state and local community vectors, as they enact state processes but are also intimately tied to the local community. Local official's skilfully contort and manipulate from within the governmental and translocal categories and processes that are projected in the local state space, pursue their projects of individual and lineage based accumulation, and are also subject to notions of obligation and a duty of care to the wider community as a whole. These embedded beliefs, conventions and practices make particular local ideas of the state, which intersect with the state idea of the centre, but are highly vernacularised.

In the section that follows I will draw on evidence from my ethnography of Vĩnh Thủy to show how each of these vectors pursues projects of power in the local state space. But as a prelude, it is important to reiterate that the outcomes that result from the coming together of these vectors seldom match the designs or expectations of any one of the vectors alone. The local state is a space created by the coming together of each of the vector's projects of power, and is a space in which these projects are enacted. It is not an institution, but rather a site of friction in which state practices and state imaginaries are contested, deconstructed and rendered anew in a perpetual process with no predetermined outcomes. Certainly embedded structural relations and disequilibriums of power between and within the vectors favour some actors over others. But there is no certainty over what results from the process of politics that takes place in the local state space, as my summary of the ethnography from the commune that follows demonstrates.

### **Political *metis* and projects of power in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy**

The study began in Chapter 2 by placing relations between the Kinh lowlands and ethnic minority uplands of the northwest of Vietnam in historical perspective. The contemporary political project of incorporating the northwest into the nation state is part of a longstanding attempt by lowland powerholders to subjugate and render passive the people of the upland ethnic minority periphery. In so doing, centre state planners today are continuing the project of past colonial, nationalist and socialist regimes, of creating an ‘ethnic state’ in the borderlands: a pliant and productive region run by ethnic minority elites according to the designs of lowland, centre state powerholders. In the past the Thái have been instrumental in building this ethnic state in the northwest and though the dominant ethnic groups are different in Vĩnh Thủy today (The Nùng and Hmông being the most numerous and powerful groups in the commune), rule through reliable proxies remains a central element in the attempt to establish and maintain political control of the northwest highlands by the centre. This system of rule, through which particular ethnic groups are favoured and connected to political power, is responsible for the current relative ‘underdevelopment’ of some ethnic groups, rather than any innate deficiency in their capacity to be ‘modern’.

The system of ethnic classification has been, and remains, critical to this project of state making in the borderlands. Identifying and demarcating groups through ethnic labels has been important in rendering upland peoples legible to the state, ordering them in particular ways through which centre state planners can then attempt to make them malleable through state making processes in the local state arena. Ethnic categories are a state effect and the system of defining people as poor, and delivering poverty reduction support, is an extension of this state effect. The increased capacity of the government to deliver material support to the borderland areas has consolidated this process, with the centre state itself an increasingly ubiquitous vector in the local state space. Through ethnic and poverty classifications and associated government munificence in distributing resources, centre state planners have attempted to extend a biopolitical imaginary to the uplands, of ethnic minority people and the resources of the uplands developed and incorporated into the centralised nation state. Under this imaginary the centre state privileges notions of a depoliticised ethnic harmony, cultural improvement, social stability and very particular renderings of modernisation and

development. There is also a longstanding current of fraternal concern and sense of obligation to upland people for their service to the nation during the wars of independence and this too fuels the biopolitical project to develop the uplands.

Local people in Vĩnh Thủy commune both engage with and reimagine this ethnic state projection within the realm of the local state, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Ethnic minority people, as local officials, embody state power in the local but both local officials and local people are highly adept at manoeuvring in and around the governmental categories and processes of the centre state within the local state arena. Local people exercise political *metis*, understood as savvy, dexterous political practice and a constantly learning approach to politics, in pursuit of their projects of power in the commune. As a result the designs of the centre state seldom work out as intended: local people live their lives through the categories and processes of state, even as they go about changing them. The ability to exercise *metis* is contingent upon being connected to the dominant lineages in the commune, and whilst the majority of people in the commune do have some connection, there is a significant number of households, about twenty percent overall, concentrated in particular in the more remote villages, that lack these connections and can therefore exercise *metis* only in a limited or sporadic way.

*Metis* is most apparent in the way that local officials contort the centre state's attempts to regulate local politics in the commune. Higher-level officials attempt to balance ethnic representation in the commune political structure to avoid ethnic conflict, but local Hmông and Nùng elites are adept at working within this governmental system to perpetuate control of the commune political structure by their dominant lineages. Similarly with the system of village 'mentors', who are supposed to ensure that these ethnic lineages do not dominate village politics, the designs of the centre state are bypassed in practice through the control local elites exert over the commune political system. As a result lineage comes to trump ethnicity in determining power in the commune. Elites in the commune are secure in their positions as a result of their manipulation of the ethnic reservation system and the closed system of recruitment to state positions that results, and they deploy *metis* in pursuing their projects of power in the shadow of the wider governmental processes of state. The ability to feed off governmental processes in a symbiotic manner is what is distinct about *metis* as a form



of agency. *Metis* is potent precisely because it is practised within the state regulatory practices designed to limit local agency.

The modern ethnic state imaginary is projected in the realm of the local state through the many localised state effects, or ‘micro-markers’ of state power, that I discuss in Chapter 4. State power manifests in the local state through these often mundane and routine practices, the bureaucratic technologies and rituals that permeate everyday life in the commune. Centre state planners attempt to govern and regulate the behaviour of local people in Vĩnh Thủy, officials and residents alike, through state ceremonies, meetings, supervision visits from higher level officials, through state writing, propaganda and through the moral dictats of the Party. These state effects are enacted by local officials as a matter of routine practice and create, in Bourdieu’s terms, a local state *habitus* as local people participate fully in these practices, and shape what they become, even as they themselves are shaped by them. Local residents in Vĩnh Thủy neither actively consent nor refuse to participate, but simply ‘do’ as part of the everyday reality of life in the commune. Through participating they contribute to building, bolstering and sustaining state ideas in the local state space.

Local people though are critically aware of the partiality of power in Vĩnh Thủy and are cynical of state agents and their practices. This cynicism colours their dealings with state agents, and means that the state idea projected from the centre is not necessarily accepted, but rather is reworked and contorted in the local state space according to local projects of power, resulting in particular local ideas of the state as partial in the exercise of power. At the same time though they maintain ideas of the ‘good state’, one which nurtures and safeguards them and around which their dreams and desires for betterment congeal. In their state imaginings, local people revere the state for the promise of development (even when this promise is usually frustrated), and this offsets the otherwise debilitating effects of the popular cynicism of state power that is also apparent in the commune. State ideas then are continually reconstructed through hope and desire in the local state space, even as they are simultaneously deconstructed through an under-current of cynicism.

Cynicism and desire are two aspects of the fantastical imaginings of local people about the state. They arise from an intense intimacy that pervades the local state space, which

creates a particularly intimate political culture. A third and equally important dimension to this political intimacy that I discuss in Chapter 5 is the affective ties and relations that prevail amongst people in Vĩnh Thủy. These affective ties, of kinship, neighbourliness, friendship, duty and obligation bind local officials to local people and ensure that political power is (unevenly) exercised on behalf of a broad swathe of the commune population, according to shared views of social obligation, reciprocity and care that are long standing tenets of upland sociality.

Political intimacy is a function of the closeness of everyday life and of the longevity of relations between people in the commune. Local officials, as leaders of their ethnic group lineages, are centrally positioned in this politics of intimacy so that once again, local officials play a pivotal role in mediating centre state processes with the expectations and values of commune life, in the local state arena. Affective ties and the politics of intimacy permeate local projects of power and ensure that the designs of the centre state are reworked and vernacularised through the local state, and thus never work out as originally intended by centre state bureaucrats. Political intimacy softens the exercise of power, making it more nuanced, adaptive and locally relevant, and therefore ultimately more acceptable to local people, even for those who suffer relative neglect through their lack of political connections. Critically, they remain engaged with state power and the state making process through this political intimacy and have their own particular state imaginings, fuelled by affective ties, cynicism and dreams and desires for development.

Chapters 6 and 7 explore how two key biopolitical processes of the centre state and translocal actors are mediated and reworked in the local state arena through political *metis*, moral economy expectations and local configurations of political power. The first of these processes is the marking out of local people as ‘poor’ and the delivery of poverty reduction support in the commune. This support is an important way in which households accumulate resources in the commune and the distribution of poverty reduction support is in turn a critical way in which local officials lubricate their networks of power. Local official’s practices must also adhere though to the notions of care, reciprocity and obligation that shape social relations in the local state space, and particularly the expectation that a broad and fairly inclusive group will be covered by state largesse.

On their part, most local people are confident and assertive in their dealings with state processes and are adept at exercising political *metis* in navigating the governmental poverty census process to secure benefits, but they need a degree of political connectedness to local officials to be able to do so. The struggle to be classified as poor in the commune revolves around the ability of households to play on their connections to local officials to render themselves legible and thus eligible for poverty reduction support. Those who lack the connections to assert their legibility are usually the powerless and least connected, the Dao ethnic group and those amongst the Hmông who are not directly connected to the dominant lineage group in the commune. Consequently they are unable to command the state resources necessary to significantly transform their wellbeing, but they are guaranteed the minimum necessary to ensure they survive, in stasis.

The relatively unconnected fall between two conceptions of entitlement. They lack the political legibility to command state resources under the centre state scheme for poverty reduction, which would otherwise privilege them as the primary recipients of state support. But they are also low down the hierarchy in the moral economy schema of the commune, as they are relatively unimportant to local powerholders. These local powerholders exercise *metis* to exploit the inherent contradictions in the centre state's biopolitical project in order to pursue, within the local state space, a biopolitical project of their own, one which operates within, and feeds off, the wider governmental project of the higher state. They nurture life in the commune according to both moral economy expectations, and the structured relations of power and privilege that prevail in the commune.

The mediation of bureaucratic and governmental processes through the local state, for identifying the poor or balancing ethnic political representation, results in outcomes that seldom conform to what was originally intended by centre state planners in Lào Cai City, or Hanoi. Undoubtedly though, centre state planners are aware of the ways that their technological designs are subverted by local officials and local people in the local state space. Government officials usually spend time at the local commune government level before assuming higher office, and district officials in Cao Xuyên Town, and provincial officials too, are complicit in many of the practices that I have

described: in the (mis)management of the poverty census process, the allocation of new cash cropping opportunities to state officials and their networks, and the careful allocation of political office to dominant lineage groups in the commune. Centre state officials therefore tacitly ignore, and sometimes actively endorse, the operation of local projects of power.

This is because, in keeping with the historical continuity of rule in the uplands, the centre state today is heavily dependent upon local elites in extending rule. Maintaining these elites and their extensive networks is therefore important in ensuring the state remains relevant to upland people today. State munificence through distributing poverty reduction resources in the northwestern borderlands should be seen in this context. As with centralised redistribution in the state socialist era, the distribution of state resources is central to the process of state making in the periphery, as it demonstrates the centre state's continued commitment to egalitarianism and a continuing concern with the development of peripheral regions. Ignoring and even facilitating the exercise of political *metis* by other local state vectors is therefore, paradoxically, part of the project of power of centre state officials.

Chapter 7 discusses a second important governmental process that is enacted, and reworked, in the local state space. This is the attempt made by the government, and national and transnational partners, to modernise and transform the northwest uplands through 'the market'. The notion of the market is increasingly integral in centre state attempts to manage and develop the uplands, but like attempts at poverty reduction, these attempts too are mediated through the local state and are subject to being reworked according to the projects of power of local officials and local residents. They imagine the market in ways quite different to the imaginary of centre state planners and other development actors operating in the commune. The market is both a governmental technology and a site for contestation over notions of value and desire. Like other institutions that are embedded and made real in the local state space, markets are shaped by the historical and structural relations of power that permeate life in Vĩnh Thủy.

Despite some of the rhetoric of international development partners operating in the uplands today, market relations are not new to the people of this frontier region, who

have been trading across borders and with the lowlands for centuries. There are historical continuities too in how centre state planners imagine the market in the uplands. This imaginary has more in common with state socialist era central planning than with the unfettered free market imaginary of Vietnam's development partners. The centre state's rendering of the market has the state and market as entwined and mutually reinforcing in the borderlands. It is a continuing form of socialist utopianism rendered 'technical'.

Local people contest this managed market idea and the controlling designs of the centre state, and exercise *metis* within the projects and campaigns for agricultural market transformation that are rolled out in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy. They understand the central role that the state plays in constructing the market idea in the uplands and have expectations of care and protection from the state in their market dealings with outside actors. Local people adeptly use the government's own rhetoric and discourses of their 'underdevelopment' to assert these expectations and the government's perceived duty of care. They are ambivalent towards the market even where, as in the case of growing hybrid corn, they clearly benefit from market engagement.

Many of the attempts to modernise the uplands take place through projects, which are an increasingly prevalent governmental technology in the uplands and an important site for contestation, cooperation and the exercise of political *metis* in the local state space. Through projects an expanded cast of actors are involved in generating state effects, business interests and NGOs in particular. They are increasingly doing 'state' work but their involvement in processes of governmentality in no way diminishes the potency and effectiveness of existing state institutions and actors: in fact they are instrumental in bolstering the state system in the uplands. Projects are also important spaces in the local state arena through which negotiation takes place over the meaning of development. Through projects development imaginaries are contested and negotiated, and dreams and desires for development also crystallise around projects in the local state space.

In summary, and in answer to my research question, the different projects of power of the vectors in the local state come together around the governmental processes,

technologies and everyday rituals of state that operate in the commune. These governmental processes are themselves productive of power as it is through them that local people exercise political *metis* in pursuing projects of power for themselves, their lineages, and for the community more widely. *Metis* feeds off these governmental processes in order to be effective, and it is this that distinguishes it from other conceptual forms of agency. *Metis* and the pursuit of local projects of power though are ultimately always bound within the wider confines of these existing governmental practices and ideas. The local state is an unevenly contoured landscape of power, wherein some vectors and actors have greater power than others, but what usually results from politics in the local state space are outcomes that do not wholly conform to those envisaged by any one of the local state vectors. Projects of power are contested, negotiated and rendered anew in the local state space, and it is through these local state practices that ideas of state are (re)imagined, and achieve potency.

### **Implications of the study**

In my introductory chapter I identified three problematic areas in the existing literature which I argued stand in the way of furthering our understanding of the state making processes at work in upland northwestern Vietnam. The first problematic area is in understanding the nature of ethnic minority people's agency. Is it best characterised as domination, resistance, or collaboration with the state? What conceptual framing of agency best captures the nature of ethnic minority agency in the northwestern uplands? The second issue relates to understanding the nature of the state itself. How can we best understand the state in relation to the operation of political power in the ethnic minority periphery? Third, and related to the two issues above, how can we best characterise the complex interactions between the state and ethnic minority people of the region, or in broader terms, between structures and agency? How far do state structures determine agency in the periphery, and to what degree can agency operate independently from these structures? I will consider each question in turn to illustrate how my study has engaged with these questions and contributes to furthering our understanding of state making in the northwestern uplands of Vietnam.

### *Political metis and ethnic minority people's agency in the state periphery*

In regard to the first question, in my study I have theorised the nature of the agency I observed amongst local people in Vĩnh Thủy, officials and residents alike, in terms of political *metis*. *Metis* is a concept adapted by James Scott (1998) to describe the flexible way that local people exercise agency, through constantly and iteratively learning and adapting to changing circumstances. *Metis* aptly describes the ways that local people in Vĩnh Thủy engage with, and rework the governmental processes that permeate the commune. I have also argued throughout this thesis that actors operating in the realm of the local state engage *metis* in pursuit of what Sherry Ortner (2006) describes as 'projects on the margins of power', that is to say projects that take place in the shadow of wider governmental processes of state. These micro-projects in Vĩnh Thủy encompass a range of individual and collective desires and obligations, to self, lineage and community and encompass complex actions at different times, and in different spaces. Conceiving of agency in the ethnic minority periphery in these terms of *metis* and projects on the margins of power provides a flexible reading of local people's motivations and engagement with broader governmental processes in Vĩnh Thủy, and transcends the unhelpful multipolarities of domination, resistance or collaboration that I identified in the existing literature. *Metis* and the pursuit of projects of power enables agency to be viewed in multi-faceted ways.

In Scott's original interpretation *metis* is a domain of knowledge and practice that occurs largely outside of the state modernisation processes he was critiquing. These processes, Scott contends, tend to crush *metis* or at least make it increasingly less viable. In contrast to this view, my observations from Vĩnh Thủy indicate that, far from crushing *metis*, these very governmental, biopolitical processes nourish *metis* and help it to flourish, as local people engage with state processes and are highly attuned to the nature of state power and the opportunities it offers. This was clearly the case with the process of identifying the poor and the subsequent struggle to be recognised as poor that I discussed in Chapter 6. It was clear in the way that local officials extend their political power through working within the centre state system for carefully allocating political office between ethnic groups, which I discussed in Chapter 3. And in Chapter 7 too we saw how local people skilfully reworked narratives of 'dependence' and

‘underdevelopment’ to exert pressure on government officials to protect them in their dealings with outside agents.

In Vĩnh Thủy *metis* is effectively deployed in a symbiotic relationship with state power and this dispels the notion that local knowledge or practices are destroyed in straightforward ways through state homogenisation. Rather, a more complicated, contingent and iterative process is at work. Local people pursue projects of power within the categories and governmental processes that permeate the local state, and these projects feed off governmental processes, even as local people are being transformed by them.

### *State effects, state imaginaries and the local state*

Here I address the need to better understand the nature of the state in the ethnic minority periphery. In the Introduction chapter I argued that the state is often portrayed in a monolithic manner and that stark binaries of state or society are unhelpful in understanding the complex processes of state making at work in the northwestern uplands of Vietnam. A more nuanced and differentiated view of the state is necessary, and my theorising of the local state makes a contribution, I believe, to addressing this need.

I have theorised the local state as an arena in which projects of power, and ultimately state imaginaries, of the different vectors active in the commune come together and vie for prominence. The local state is a productive domain of power in which local and supra-local ideas and projects of power are reconciled. This theorising of the local state space transcends awkward binaries of state and/or society, as state ideas only achieve potency, and state effects only resonate, in so far as they are reworked and adopted in the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy.<sup>1</sup> The state then is not a colonising, or exclusively supra-local force in the ethnic minority periphery. Rather, the state is a set of ideas and

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<sup>1</sup> In more connected, urbanised and affluent areas of the country residents are undoubtedly subject to more generalised, supra-local state ideas and effects transmitted through national technologies, such as television and the internet. The particular local mediation of state effects I observed in Vĩnh Thủy is therefore probably characteristic of relatively remote, ethnic minority areas in Vietnam only: elsewhere in Vietnam people are likely less intimately bound locally, and local state configurations and the dynamics and balance of power between local and translocal vectors are therefore probably quite different.



locally embedded practices that are viable precisely because they have been processed in the local state space.

In understanding the state, I distinguish between a state system and state idea. State ideas ultimately underpin the state system, and both are imagined and enacted through state effects. Trouillot (2001) identifies four critical meta-effects integral to establishing ideas and systems of state and these are clearly apparent in state making processes at work in Vĩnh Thủy: effects of isolation, identification, legibility and spatialisation. These meta-effects are enacted through the everyday, micro state effects that I discussed in Chapter 4: effects that are projected upon, and then mediated in, the local state space in Vĩnh Thủy. They are contested, cooperated over and reworked according to local structures of power and local norms of obligation, justice and reciprocity, and what results are locally acceptable forms of governance and resource distribution that shape, and are shaped by, local imaginaries of the state idea itself.

What then are these local state imaginaries? Local actor's imaginaries of the state in Vĩnh Thủy are formed in the shadow of wider state imaginaries projected through projects of power from outside of the commune, of harmony, progress, development, and particularly the idea of being part of a wider nation state. This imaginary offers opportunity and the prospect of development (the 'good state' idea), but also threatens to fundamentally transform existing ways of life, and is therefore also full of risk and danger. These higher-level imaginaries are processed through the politics of intimacy that pervades all dealings in the local state, material and ideational.

The state as imagined locally is an uneven landscape wherein existing local powerholders have prominence, and are able to distribute resources and opportunities largely amongst their own lineages and networks first. This was apparent in the discussion of the local political system in Vĩnh Thủy in Chapter 3, and in the poverty census process in Chapter 6. The state then is partial and unfair, and this perception fuels the everyday cynicism I observed in Chapter 4. But the state idea in Vĩnh Thủy is also made up of expectations of reciprocity, of a duty of care towards those least able to care for themselves, and of a 'general good' whereby the community as a whole will develop and prosper (ideas I discussed in Chapter 5, 6 and 7). The state idea is also permeated by powerful desires, as the entity through which all kinds of dreams can be

realised: for a life outside of the commune, for stable employment, for making money or for livelihood security. Indeed for any kind of imaginative desire in Vĩnh Thủy, the state is key. Even though these desires are usually frustrated, they are critical in sustaining local people's continued participation in the prevailing state system, and thereby ensuring the everyday reproduction of the system itself.

The idea of the state for the people of Vĩnh Thủy appears to be rooted then not only in what Navaro-Yashin (2002) describes as the “analytically reified” and “rational rubric” of modernity, of institutions, bureaucracy and order, though these are certainly important. It is also made real through the “intimate, the emotive, the ritualesque” and in “(usually frustrated) desire” (Navaro-Yashin 2002:203). These elements are constitutive of a powerful local state *habitus* (Bourdieu 1997) that shapes daily life and daily imaginings in the commune, a ‘structuring’ process (Giddens 1984) which the people of Vĩnh Thủy are intimately and perpetually involved in reproducing. Local officials and residents alike fix, rebuild and maintain the ideas of state through their everyday practices and intimate encounters. They participate in the social routines of the commune through which the state becomes real, despite being aware of the state's underside: its partiality, capture, and essential unfairness. The state idea lives on through the continual cycle of ideational construction, deconstruction and reconstruction in the local state space, processes that are underwritten by the political intimacy that pervades the local state.

### ***Structure and agency in the local state***

I am already some way along in addressing the third question that I identified, of how best to characterise the relations between structures (the state) and agency (local people's projects of power) in the northwestern uplands. Rather than privileging one over the other, my political ethnography of Vĩnh Thủy has illustrated how a constant articulation between the two takes place in the local state space, with local people both making (within limits) and being made by the structures within which they live. In the northwest of Vietnam the state is an increasingly pervasive presence and local people can't escape the governmental categories of state within which they live, even as they actively contort them through their exercise of *metis*, and through their pursuit of individual and communal projects of power.

In Bourdieu's (1977) terms, what takes place is "regulated improvisation" as local people exercise agency, but always within the boundaries of wider governmental projects in the uplands, and the existing state imaginaries within which they live. Ortner's (2006) description of projects operating in the 'margins' of power is apt, as this is precisely what occurs in Vĩnh Thủy. Local people navigate in and through wider governmental and translocal schemes in the commune, but cannot escape these schemes completely, or operate independently of them. Discrepancies in power and scale between the centre state vector and local people ultimately can't be transcended. Local people exercise *metis* to operate within and feed off governmental categories and processes and, whilst they imagine the state idea in very locally informed ways, this imaginary is also informed by wider state ideas. Consequently there is a stability of sorts to both local state practices and local ideas of the state, a local *habitus* grounded in the routine, everyday and unreflexive social and political encounters that take place in Vĩnh Thủy commune.

### **Possible avenues for future research**

There are three avenues for possible further research that my study opens up. The first relates to the practice and intent of the centre state. In my study I have purposely focused upon the local, and the manner in which governmental technologies and projects are applied and negotiated in a local state space. I have explored the centre state as a constellation of governmental actors and processes, and these are apparent largely only through the effects they generate in the local. I have therefore not explored centre state actors and institutions at the supra-local level with the same ethnographic intensity that I have local officials. I have necessarily had to adopt the short hand term of 'centre state' to cover a range of complex actors and institutions, with complex motivations. A fruitful area of further research would therefore be an ethnographic examination of the centre state actors and institutions that project their governmental imaginaries in the local state space, to compliment my portrayal of local actors in this study.

A second area of further research would be exploring how far my findings resonate in other ethnic minority areas in Vietnam. In the course of my study I travelled extensively in other areas of the north of Vietnam, in the centre and the south, and I found clear similarities in how ethnic minority people engage with state processes. But

I did not have the chance to carry out a similar detailed ethnographic study to my Vĩnh Thủy research. I was not therefore able to examine whether the state is imaginatively constructed in the same ways locally in other ethnic minority places, and whether the interplay of politics works in the same ways in other parts of the state periphery in Vietnam. The configuration of actors and processes would necessarily be different in different local state spaces around Vietnam, reflecting different histories of engagement amongst ethnic groups, with each other and with state power. Carrying out similar research in other ethnic minority areas would clearly be beneficial in establishing a wider applicability to my findings.

Linked to this, the third possible avenue for future research relates to the applicability of my findings in Southeast Asia generally. Ethnic minority people inhabit state peripheries throughout the region and whilst the historical experience with national state building regimes in the region is diverse, there are similarities too in how central authorities have attempted to manage ethnic minority people living in the state margins.

Certainly the Vietnamese political system lacks the democratic mechanisms of, for example, Thailand or Indonesia, and these mechanisms provide avenues through which local people directly engage in state making processes, in very different ways to those I have described in Vĩnh Thủy. But as Andrew Walker's (2012) work in rural Thailand shows, countries throughout the region are seeing a similar extension of state munificence to the periphery and a corresponding shift in the way that local people seek to be productively engaged with political power. A regional study might therefore explore whether the project of state building that configures political agency in the ways I have observed is particular only to Vietnam, or whether ethnic minority people on the margins of state power in the region exercise agency in similar ways irrespective of the nature of the state regime.

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