

THE TEXTURE OF LIVELIHOODS: MIGRATION AND MAKING A LIVING IN HANOI

NGUYEN Tuan Anh, Jonathan RIGG and LUONG Thi Thu Huong

Abstract

Through the experience of 30 rural migrants to Hanoi, this paper reconstructs their livelihood histories, linking the experience of our migrant subjects with wider transformations in Vietnam's economy and society. We argue for an 'everyday' political economy that recognises the fluid connections between the state, society and economy, and the individual. While highlighting the indeterminacy and contingency of life, we recognise the wider context that contributes to the production of the livelihood textures we discern. The characteristic livelihood pathways of the migrant households are shown to echo research undertaken in rural, often less economically vibrant, contexts.

Keywords: Livelihoods, migration, Asia, urban

Introduction

How do lives and living progress over time? What form do livelihood trajectories take? Do the smooth transitions evident from aggregate statistics hide a good deal of turbulence in individual experiences and family life courses? What are the points of connection between individual actions and state policies, and how do they operate? It is these questions which lie at the heart of this paper, and they are given illumination and empirical substance with reference to the experiences of rural-urban migrants in Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam.

Livelihoods studies on the one hand and work on poverty transitions on the other have highlighted that aggregate statistics and integrative, high level studies frequently hide from view the texture of livelihood histories. We can glean little from the averages as to why some individuals and households succeed, and others do not. To achieve this, we need 'microscopic inquiries, [that trace] events on the ground...in order to ascertain who gains, who loses, and how' (Krishna, 2010: 11; and see Ravallion, 2001). Up close and personal, things look different than they do from afar.

In many areas of the global South there has occurred a transformation in opportunities, mobility patterns, social norms – and, therefore, in livelihoods. This has led some scholars and practitioners to go beyond 'sustainable' livelihoods and instead focus their attention on livelihood 'pathways' and 'trajectories' (de Haan and Zoomer, 2003; Sallu, Twyman, and Stringer, 2010). One of the most sustained attempts to understand the character of upward and downward livelihood movements is seen in the work of Baulch and Davis in Bangladesh (Davis 2006, 2007; Baulch and Davis, 2008; Davis and Baulch, 2011) who have been able to draw on a particularly rich panel data set. Qualitative examination of life histories reveals that upward and downward movements differ in terms of their shape: upward movements are usually gradual and incremental while downward movements tend to be more abrupt and jagged (Baulch and Davis, 2008; and see Mushongah and Scoones, 2012: 1253). This is an observation which resonates with the results of our research in Hanoi, Vietnam. But unlike Baulch and Davis' work in Bangladesh, our work is based on research undertaken in an urban area (Hanoi), in a context of considerable economic expansion and vitality, and where much livelihood activity is non-traditional.

In an effort to foreground the ways in which idiosyncratic life events and stories often trump efforts at generalising livelihood pathways, we begin by recounting the livelihood histories of six individuals and their families. We situate each story in one of four livelihood 'movements'. We then draw out

the implications of these detailed livelihood histories for, first, how we understand the logics of social change and, second, how we then link this, more widely, to our understandings of livelihood transformations. We use this discussion to reflect on the macro-micro linkages that contribute to the shaping of livelihoods, and discuss the intersection between political economy and everyday political economy. Hobson and Seabrooke may rhetorically ask 'are we to believe that the ninety per cent of the world's population who are conventionally ignored have *no* input into shaping their own lives, if not others around and beyond them?' (2007: 12 [emphasis in original]), but the experiences recounted here also show how these ninety per cent, notwithstanding their agency, are deeply implicated in a web of higher level associations and dependencies. As Li puts it (2007), people are implicated in 'power's matrices' and just as there are limits to government, so there are limits to agency.

Making a living in Hanoi: methods and research context

The empirical evidence used to inform the discussion that follows is based on fieldwork undertaken in Hanoi, Vietnam's capital, in late 2010. This fieldwork comprised detailed interviews (at which all three authors were present) with 30 migrants from rural areas who had moved to Hanoi between 1976 and 2007. The sampling framework had four key criteria: that the interviewees should originate from rural contexts, with a family livelihood background in farming; that they should be distributed widely across the city in terms of their location of residence and work (see Figure 1); that there should be a balance between male and female interviewees; and that they should have initially arrived in Hanoi across three periods between 1986 and 2007 reflecting Vietnam's process of economic reform (or *doi moi*). The first period (1986-1992) spans the start of *doi moi* (reform) in 1986 and ends just before the promulgation of the new Land Law in 1993; the second period runs from 1993 through to 1999, the early reform years during which Vietnam remained one of Asia's poorest countries; and the final period spans the years from 2000 to 2010 during which the country attained upper middle-income status. We linked our sampling to year of initial departure because we expected the migration 'era' to be reflected in the underpinning migration logics.¹

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The field research took as its starting point, 'the migrant' and we spent considerable time detailing the migration and livelihood histories of each respondent. We then scaled up from the migrant to their wider family/household and, from here, sometimes to their village of origin and the urban social milieu. In taking this approach we deviated from much livelihoods research which takes 'the household' as the starting point and then disaggregates, where necessary, to the individual. We adopted this approach because we were interested in how migrants sometimes re-shape their engagement with other social units ('communities', 'families') over time.

The interviews themselves were taped, transcribed, translated and cross-checked against our summary statements. We undertook a second round of interviews, both face-to-face and by telephone, to follow up on particular issues, to confirm areas where we had further questions, and in some instances to interview other members of migrant families. Finally, we also undertook two excursions to the countryside, to Thanh Hoa (200 km south of Hanoi) and Nam Dinh (100 km south of Hanoi), to visit the areas, settlements and natal households from which selected migrants originated.

Movements of progress, distress and stagnation: distilling 30 life histories

Of our 30 respondents, the very large majority were poor or near-poor at the start of their migration sojourn. By the time of the interviews in 2010, most were either non-poor or middle income (Table

1). There are three things to note here. First, we did not ask respondents specific questions about their income or consumption but have classified them on the basis of their living conditions, the character of their work and employment, and their asset profiles. We also rely on self-reporting of their conditions on departure from the countryside, which sometimes required them to track back two decades. Second, the rising levels of prosperity set out in Table 1 need to be seen in the context of the record of the Vietnamese economy. Between 1990 and 2010 per capita gross national income (GNI) rose almost ten-fold, from US\$130 to US\$1,160.² The majority of our respondents moved to Hanoi between 1990 and 2000, with the 'average' date of moving being 1996. While inequalities have also widened, this growth can nonetheless be seen reflected in steeply declining aggregate rates of poverty. In 1990, 87 per cent of Vietnam's population were recorded as living on less than \$2 per day; in 2008 the figure was 38 per cent (ADB, 2011). In consequence, the upward trend in living conditions among our respondents is to be expected – they were riding the wave of an expanding economy.³ The third point to note is that even when families had moved from poor to near-poor, *relatively* they may not have progressed and there were several cases where gradual improvements in absolute living standards need to be seen against the backdrop of relative deterioration.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

There were four characteristic shapes to livelihood movements among our 30 cases, with the first and third dominating (Table 2):⁴

1. Upward movement, gradual: riding the wave of opportunity in an expanding economy
2. Downward movement, multi-stepped: a series of unfortunate events
3. Steady state: absolute improvement in living conditions, but relative stagnation
4. Recovery: steep decline in fortunes and gradual return

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Upward movement, gradual: riding the wave of opportunity in an expanding economy

The largest number of respondents reported gradually rising incomes and strengthening livelihoods. It was rare for people to abruptly improve their situations; it was through a combination of the positive effects of national policies, hard work, the exploitation of contacts, and sometimes a touch of good fortune that our respondents improved their livelihoods.

Mr Do (interview #0029, 8.10.2010) was born in 1969 in Cao Vien commune, Thanh Oai district, in what was then Ha Tay province on the outskirts of Hanoi, around 10 km from the city centre.⁵ Coming from a poor family, he left school after grade 7 and, at the age of 16, took up his first job, making fireworks for which his home village was locally renowned. Nine years later, in 1994, the government banned the industry. With little farm land,⁶ many of the commune's inhabitants – including Do – were forced to look beyond the area to meet their needs, most turning to Hanoi. Then in his mid-20s, Do began to sell rice in Hanoi, taking advantage of the growing population, expanding economy, and easing of restrictions on personal mobility. Leaving home at daybreak, he would cycle to Hanoi to sell rice at the markets in Thanh Xuan district, returning with restaurant slops for his sideline pig-raising business. During these forays, he became friends with a restaurant worker from Bac Ninh province. Despite saving some money, by around 2005, with a growing family to support, Do was coming to the view that he could no longer make a reasonable living in Cao Vien. So, in 2006, Do gave up his peripatetic existence and, along with his wife, departed more permanently for Hanoi, leaving their two young sons behind to be raised by Do's parents. In recounting his decision to leave home for Hanoi, Do explained '*We had no jobs in my homeland so my wife and I came here [to Hanoi] and learnt a job. In my homeland we could not make a living.*'

Picking up cooking skills and a rudimentary knowledge of the restaurant trade from his friend from Bac Ninh and by working in restaurants themselves, Do and his wife made the decision to set up their own restaurant business. They borrowed money from relatives, rented a building near the Regional Academy of Politics and Public Administration I, in Thanh Xuan district, and in 2006 started serving migrants to the city, just like them. Running the restaurant was extremely hard and physically draining, and Do and his wife were exhausted most of the time.⁷ Nonetheless they persevered and the reputation of their restaurant grew. Four years later, in 2010, the building was repossessed and they had quickly to find a new place to rent on Vu Huu Street, also in Thanh Xuan district. Bringing their loyal customers with them ensured that this too was a success. By the end of 2010 they had a flourishing business, employing three assistants,⁸ and serving 300 customers daily. After deducting expenses, Do and his wife were making around 7-8 million VND (US\$350-400) each month. Their futures, however, still remained far from assured. They were sleeping on the floor of their restaurant; were still registered as temporary residents in Hanoi; the work was exhausting; and buying land to build a house in Hanoi remained way beyond their means.⁹ But their prospects and those of their children had improved markedly since they had left Cao Vien four years earlier.

Steady state: absolute improvement, relative stagnation

While most of our respondents talked of a gradual and significant improvement in their lives, there was also a sense that, relative to other city-dwellers, some were running to stand still. Opportunities were certainly growing, but costs¹⁰ were rising and needs were escalating as well, and while returns to work might have improved, the nature of the work and its position in the hierarchy of employment implied little progress. At a personal level, they appeared caught in a middle income trap. Their livelihoods might not have been quite as marginal as they once were in material terms, but they remained marginal in the social space they occupied in the Vietnamese urban order.¹¹ There is a sense in these stories neither of progress nor of distress but, rather, of immobility. What the majority of households in this livelihood transition 'category' demonstrate is of mothers and fathers sacrificing their present for the futures of their children. Mainly this came in the form of investment in education. As Mr Do said to us:

'I will try my best so that my children can complete their schooling and find good jobs outside [the village]. I do not want my children to repeat their parents' road, with no education, strenuous work, and having to rush into work [when still young]' (Mr Do, interview 8.10.2010).

Mr Vinh (Interview #006, 14.9.10) had been living in Hanoi since 1990 and had had one job: as a market porter. He left Thanh Hoa province's Quang Xuong district, one of Vietnam's poorest, because his family was hungry – the late 1980s was a period of near famine in the area. Vinh was embarrassed by the fact that he had not been able to rise to a higher level occupation, but hoped that his children, educated through his labours, would achieve that in his place. At the time of our interview he was 57, married with three children, but still remained a temporary resident in Hanoi (with KT-4 registration),¹² notwithstanding his 20 years in the capital. Being a porter was 'the hardest job in the city', he told us, and to keep costs to a minimum he shared a rented room with ten other men in Hai Ba Trung district. Despite his meagre wages and cramped living condition, separated from his family, he stayed in Hanoi for the reason that there was no work in Quang Xuong. While he struggled to make a living in Hanoi, Mr Vinh's wife maintained the farm in Quang Xuong. His hopes for the future rested upon his three sons. By carefully shepherding their limited resources, Vinh and his wife had managed to fund their sons through tertiary education. When times were particularly hard he borrowed money from the men with whom he joined the army in 1973. His eldest son, aged 29 in 2010, had attended the forestry university and then obtained employment with the forestry department in Thanh Hoa city. His second son had just graduated from the prestigious

transportation university and his third son was studying at the mining and geology university on the outskirts of Hanoi. While Mr Vinh's future security may be assured through his children, his day-to-day living conditions had scarcely improved since his arrival in Hanoi in 1990. Indeed, in relative terms, his standard of living had declined.

Mr Viet (interview #018, 28.9.2010) was also 57 years old and worked as a motorcycle taxi driver, operating out of a pitch in Dong Da district (Figure 2). In 1972, at the age of 19, he joined the army leaving ten years later to work at a succession of jobs: in a tea factory, as a fruit trader, and on a construction site. None was satisfactory and in 1990 he left his home village in Xuan Truong district of Nam Dinh to travel the 120 km to Hanoi. He arrived in the city early in Vietnam's reform process and initially worked for a window manufacturing company. In 1992 he left this job and took up *cyclo*¹³ driving. When, in 1994, the city authorities banned *cyclos* from the city (except in the Old Quarter), Mr Viet became a *xe om* (motorcycle taxi) driver. The other drivers in the area where he worked in Dong Da district were also from his commune, nine drivers in all. After 20 years working in the city he was still 'temporarily' in Hanoi and lived in a small rented room with three other migrant men, surrounded by drying washing and with a peeling Spice Girls poster on one wall. Mr Viet's income had risen, but so too had his expenses. In 1992, as a *cyclo* driver, he earned 500,000 VND (US\$25) a month; in 2010, driving a motorbike, he made 1.5 million VND (US\$75) to 2.0 million VND (US\$100). But rental and food costs in Hanoi had increased even more steeply, and when he had paid his bills had only a small amount left to send home. He was also getting too old for a job suited to younger men. He worked from 05.00-23.00 and that was hard, he told us, for someone in their late 50s. With hindsight he could have been rich if only he had taken the opportunity to buy land in Hanoi when he arrived in 1990 – he was given a lump sum of 8 million VND when he left the army. It was a lost opportunity he rued.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Mr Viet did own nine units of land and a one storey house on a 360m² residential plot in his village. The farm was managed by his wife and his village was one where most of the working age population had left, and those who had not were supported by those who had.¹⁴ As the eldest son, Mr Viet felt a responsibility to maintain his patriline (see Bryant, 2002), binding him to his homeland even while his village could not sustain a livelihood for him, his wife and his daughters: it took a lot of rice and a lot of time, Mr Viet told us, to earn the money to buy the things needed for a reasonable existence. His work in Hanoi, however, was risky and a serious accident could undermine all his industry at a stroke.

Downward movement, multi-stepped: a series of unfortunate events

In contrast to these stories of gradually improving material living condition, even when set against relative decline, there were also two cases in our sample who recounted an absolute decline in their quality of life. A theme that linked these stories was the role of untoward events in undoing progress, driving livelihoods downwards. While sometimes individuals and households could recover from these shocks, there were other occasions when long-term and seemingly irrevocable damage was done to the prospects of the respondent and their wider family.

Of all the migrants we talked to, the most distressing story was that of Ms Ha (interview #010, 21.9.2010), just 18 years old at the time that we interviewed her in a student restaurant in Cau Giay where she worked (Figure 3). Ha arrived in Hanoi in 2004 as a twelve year-old from Hau Loc district, Thanh Hoa province, about 150 km south of Hanoi. Ha did not have any registration documents – she was, effectively, an undocumented migrant – when we met her and at night was sleeping on the restaurant tables and washing in public toilets. She had had eight jobs in six years.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Ha's departure from Hau Loc was driven by poverty. Ha's father abandoned her mother and three children, leaving the family in dire straits. The village where Ha was born is coastal with almost no farm land and most livelihoods are based around fishing. Her mother scraped a living as a small-scale trader, but this only generated around 10,000 dong (US\$0.50) per day, not enough to survive. Sending Ha to Hanoi to work as a live-in maid¹⁵ – a job secured through an agent – at the age of 12 was the only answer, and Ha's life had been shaped by the wider family's predicament ever since. Her mother was 56 years old at the time of the interview, had high blood pressure, and in the month before our interview, broke her leg.

Ha rarely returned home because she feared that her mother would force her to take a job requiring that she work in China or Malaysia. Instead she remained in Hanoi, taking a series of unsatisfactory, marginal jobs. To secure a better job, however, would mean getting ID, and this required that she visit the police station in her home village. Fearful of being sent abroad, she instead tried to manage in Hanoi without documentation. Even this, though, did not free Ha from her family obligations. Her mother kept tabs on Ha by mobile phone, placing her under enormous pressure to remit money.

Ha's troubles were not just linked to her father's abandonment of the family. They were also associated with the migration failure of her 28 year-old elder sister who had borrowed 80 million VND (US\$4,000) to secure a job in Malaysia. This sojourn had failed, saddling Ha's sister and her husband with large debts. Ha told us:

I have to send money back to my mother. Now my mother has three grandchildren to feed. My sister went to work as a labourer in Malaysia for three years. During that time, her husband stayed at home. [Using his wife's remittances] he sank into alcoholism, and led a life of debauchery. Two months ago, they went to work in China to send my mother money in order to bring up their children and pay off their debts. From the time when I started to work up to now, I have to send money back to my mother. I do not spend money for myself. Each month I spend only 200,000 VND (US\$10). I have to send the rest of my earnings back [to my mother].

Leaving their three young children to be cared for by Ha's mother, Ha's sister and husband had embarked two months prior to our interview on a second overseas sojourn, to China. This, they hoped, would be more successful than the last. In the meantime, Ha was helping to keep the family's collective head above water, burdened as it was by a large debt and no assets.

Recovery: sudden decline and gradual return

Not all downward livelihood shocks irrevocably push families into poverty or near-poverty. In a number of cases we saw people recovering and gradually rebuilding their lives.

Mr Truong (interview #001, 6.9.2010; #001b 11.11.2010) was a 52 year-old married man with three children and had arrived in Hanoi from Thai Binh (110 km south-east of Hanoi) in 1989 (Figure 4). He lived and worked in Cau Giay, making a living from a small motorcycle maintenance shop that he had set up. He was, at the time of our interview, comparatively affluent with a successful business generating a turnover of about 15 million VND (US\$750) per month; he also owned land and a house in his home village. His two daughters were working as primary school teachers in Hanoi and his son, Duong, was training to be a hairdresser. But Truong's arrival in Hanoi some two decades beforehand was far from auspicious.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Before he left Thai Binh, Mr Truong was a 'middle' farmer with a good stock of land to work, a small truck which enabled him to run a modest but profitable transport business, and considerable business acumen and personal drive. Then, in 1989, his third child – Duong – was born with a cleft palate and his relatively comfortable rural life was transformed. His departure from Thai Binh was instigated by a wish to do something about his son's birth defect.

Mr Truong arrived in Hanoi in 1989 so that he could find the best medical care for his son. To fund the trip he sold his one significant asset other than the family's land, the small truck he owned. He scoured Hanoi for the best medical specialist, visiting five hospitals. To begin with he had hoped that he would be able to have his son treated, and then return to Thai Binh. But before long he realised that he would have to stay in Hanoi as his son underwent five years of treatment. To be with his son, Truong had to secure work but he had arrived in Hanoi with few skills; he was a farmer, after all. In 1999 he joined a garage as a trainee mechanic, using the rudimentary knowledge acquired running his truck. In 2000 he enrolled on a motorcycle maintenance course and when he completed this course was able to command increasingly better salaries as he moved from garage to garage. In 2001 Truong was joined by the rest of his family and his wife, Tam, set up a small tea stall. Finally, in 2004 Truong was in a position to open his own maintenance and repair shop. Over the twenty years since first setting foot in the capital in 1989 Mr Truong had moved six times and taken on a range of jobs. But he and Tam had managed to deal with the shock of the birth of their son, establish a profitable business, and provide for their children.

Interpreting the texture of livelihoods

There is richness and explanatory traction in each of these livelihood histories, lending support to Krishna's call, noted earlier, for more 'microscopic inquiries, [that trace] events on the ground' (Krishna, 2010: 11). It is also clear, however, that the lives of our respondents have been importantly shaped by a series of developments negotiated, enacted and implemented from the national level: the introduction of the policies of *doi moi* (reform) from the mid-1980s; the loosening of controls on personal mobility counter-balanced by the continuance of the household registration system; the erosion of Vietnam's iron rice bowl set against the de facto privatisation of farming; the declining terms of trade between farming and non-farming; and the boosting of opportunities linked to the opening of the economy to foreign investment. All these were significant policy 'events', and played an important role in our respondents' lives and livelihoods. Much of what happened would not have occurred in the absence of these high level perturbations and interventions, and urban migrant living cannot be understood in the absence of their recognition. For example: 18 year-old Ms Bich (interview #013, 22.9.2010) had found work in a garment factory; Mr Huu (interview #002, 6.9.2010), 55 years-old when we talked to him, had opened a small restaurant with his wife in Cau Giay; Mr Xoai (interview #004, 6.9.2010) had left his village because he couldn't get by just from farming, and established a small business as a tofu maker; and Ms Duyen (interview #024, 7.10.2010), 35 years old and from Nghe An some 300 km from Hanoi was running a small beauty salon. It was evident, then, that the landscape of opportunity for our respondents had been importantly shaped by higher level policy decisions and broader political and economic processes. Five stand out as particularly important: the squeezing of rural-based livelihoods; the growing opportunities for mobility; the expansion of employment in commercial firms and factories; the attractions of an urban schooling/education; and the proliferation of niches for micro-enterprise endeavour. These can be seen as factors that have enabled productive connection to and engagement with the urban economy. There were, however, some factors which were disabling,

limiting or constraining: the role of the household registration system, for instance and the April 2009 decision to ban street traders from 63 streets and 48 historical sites in Hanoi.¹⁶

While acknowledging these structural factors, equally importantly, there was an 'everyday' political economy to our respondents' lives. We see this everyday-ness operating in three ways. First of all, and beyond the wider picture outlined in the previous paragraph, idiosyncratic events were sometimes deterministic in shaping the lives that were recounted to us: a son with a birth defect; a broken family with a failed migration experience and crippling debts; a chance meeting with a restaurant worker. Just as 'lumpiness, rather than smoothness, is the normal texture of historical temporality' (Sewell, 1996: 843) so, too, with livelihood histories. For W.H. Auden, describing Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the fall of Icarus* 'the ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone /As it had to'. The texture of the livelihood histories recounted to us was often linked to such idiosyncratic events and, like Icarus and the ploughman, historical moments with national resonance were, by comparison, of little import.

Second, the wider story is one where the agency of the weak partially counterbalances the structuring forces of the strong. The Vietnamese state has played a role in marking out the possibilities open to such migrants, but simply seeing migration as a response to such imperatives denudes our understanding of what happens, how and why; this requires that serious attention is paid to the capacities, capabilities and actions of individuals. The household registration system, for example, so over-bearing and instrumental on paper was, in practice, successfully navigated by the large majority of our respondents. To our surprise, given some accounts,¹⁷ few of our respondents seemed particularly concerned with their lack of formal residency; they dealt with it. The same was true of the ban on street traders: government, it seems, has its limits. Acknowledging this, however, is not to suggest actors' free rein. As Turner and Schoenberger write in their paper on street traders in Hanoi: 'while these street vendors do, on a day-to-day basis, redefine and resist political efforts to constrain their livelihoods, their reactions and solutions are...embedded in the dominant, increasingly neo-liberal capitalist framework that characterises modern-day Vietnam' (2012: 1040).

Finally, these individual actions do sometimes coalesce into a bigger story with a punch and an impetus that can be transmitted upwards. Kerkvliet (2005, 2009) made just this point when he sought to explain why the Vietnamese leadership dismantled collective farming from the mid-1980s. Ironically, the demise of collective farming arose from the collected everyday political practices of thousands of small farmers across northern Vietnam. What we see happening in Hanoi and, by extension in the Vietnamese countryside is the amalgamation of individual acts given force by the fact of their union.

In their call for an everyday international political economy (EIPE), Hobson and Seabrooke say that '...a central purpose of EIPE is neither to marginalise the importance of the dominant, nor to reify the agency of the weak. Rather, it is to analyse the interactive relationship between the two; one that in many ways constitutes a dialogical, negotiative relationship' (2007: 15). This is just the point that Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) make in their paper on structure and agency debates in unravelling geographies of labour: agency is always relative and therefore always embedded (or structured) whether that is in relation to family and community (Mr Viet's commitment, as eldest son, to the patriline); in relation to global production networks (Ms Ha's sister's failed attempt to secure factory employment in Malaysia); or in relation to the policies and structures of the state (the loss of Mr Do's job making fireworks in his home village). *But* it is in the here-and-now of livelihoods that we can discern the relativity of living.

Thus, we see in our migrant experiences not a two-fold association between state and society, but a more complex three-fold nexus at work between state; society and economy; and the individual (Figure 5). Moreover, like Kerkvliet, we see the possibility for this operating both ‘downwards’ (individual to state) as well as ‘upwards’. ‘Everyday’ political economy and political economy are not two circuits of understanding, separated across political space but intersecting ways of understanding *both* national processes and local and personal experiences. This theme of disentangling political economy from everyday political economy can also be more forensically applied to thinking about the migration process.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Like livelihoods more widely, the rapid growth in rural-urban migration in Vietnam can be explained with reference to a coincidence of supporting factors and processes:¹⁸ the introduction of *doi moi* from 1986 and the Land Law of 1993 which commercialised agricultural production in the countryside; high levels of under- and unemployment in rural areas (see GSO/UNDF, 2006: 2-3; FAO/ILO/UNESCO, 2009); the easing of barriers on mobility previously; the employment and education opportunities afforded in urban areas (Oxfam and Action Aid, 2010); disparities in services between town and countryside; the decline in the terms of trade between agriculture and industry and the need to supplement farm incomes (PTF, 2003); the growing pressure of needs in the countryside; and the pull of the urban for young people. Together, these comprise what might be termed a political economy explanation for rural-urban migration. They constitute relatively high level developments that help to explain the flow of rural people to urban areas. Some 12 to 16 million or between 13 and 18 per cent of Vietnam’s population are said to be ‘floating’ (UNDP, 2010: 5).¹⁹

While migration emerges from (or is embedded in) a complex policy context, migrants – like ‘the poor’ – are a highly varied group. Indeed, among the myriad actions that people might take, the decision to ‘spontaneously’ migrate is arguably the most resonant of agency. Goss and Lindquist (1995: 345) in their application of a structuration perspective to international labour migration argue that movement is the ‘outcome of a complex combination of individual actions and social structures... [where] the capacity for such action is differentially distributed according to knowledge of rules and access to resources, which in turn may be partially determined by their position within other social institutions’. Even given our sampling frame that selected rural-urban migrants from farming backgrounds who had migrated to Hanoi since the introduction of *doi moi*, the variation in experience necessitates that we go beyond simply setting out the propelling and enabling processes, but detail the ways in which these processes become imprinted in individual migrant’s lives. Rural-urban migrants do, to be sure, face a common problem set – absence of health insurance and social protection, informal work contracts, limited access to education for their children, and so forth (see ADB, 2006) – but the effects are differentiated and migrants respond in particular ways, helping to create unique livelihood textures or signatures. This is echoed in Thao and Agergaard’s (2012) study of migration to Hanoi where they make a two-fold case: to view migration in the longue durée and to see migrants contesting and shaping from below state policies and regulatory efforts. They maintain that migrants, through their individual actions, have undermined state efforts to control mobility and thus been instrumental in the ‘remarkable reform’ of the Residence Law and the *ho khau* system in 2007.

Focusing on and emphasising the particularities of individual experience is important. But looking across the piece – at least in terms of these 30 migrant narratives – and it is possible to begin to see some common features in the shape of livelihood movements. Upwards movement tend to be gradual and cumulative (see Hulme and Shepherd, 2003; Sen, 2003; Kabeer, 2004; Davis, 2006, 2007; Baulch and Davis, 2008; Krishna, 2010; Rigg, 2012; Mushongah and Scoones, 2012) as migrants secure work, meet their needs, begin to generate surpluses, invest wisely or fortuitously, and save

for the future. Downward movement tend to be more abrupt and jagged. While an expanding economy can shift the balance towards livelihoods that veer cumulatively upwards, even in an expanding economy some individuals will be cheated, face serious illness and personal tragedy, or simply be buffeted by events. Much of the attention paid to Asian policy has focused on the growth agenda. What has tended to be ignored is how government policy can protect, cushion and ameliorate downward movements, as well as support and enable upward drifts. Of these the most significant, in poorer Asian countries, is health protection.

Vietnam began introducing universal health coverage in 1992, when the country was still low income. In general, analysts have been favourably impressed by Vietnam's achievements. Nonetheless, the livelihood risks of ill-health for our respondents and for vulnerable groups are significant. To begin with, there is a large currently uninsured population (Ekman *et al.*, 2008: 260) of whom many are migrants. Furthermore, there are significant costs even for those who are covered: accessing public health providers in some areas (especially remote, rural areas) is difficult and costly; and there are various medical, non-medical, out-of-hospital and 'informal' costs. The poor find these costs prohibitive even for quite minor illnesses while 'for catastrophic illness that requires a hospital admission the out-of-pocket expenses...are large even for those with health insurance' (Sepehri *et al.*, 2006: 614). There is also evidence that inequalities in health care access are widening both in terms of access and quality of provision (Giang 2008). For the poor whose main, often only asset is their labour, an accident or illness can cause them to sell whatever assets they do have and/or become indebted to a debilitating degree. Short-term illnesses can, in this way, result in the compromising of families' and individuals' long-term prospects (Krishna, 2010; Krishna and Shariff, 2011: 542-3). Mr Viet, the 57 year-old motorcycle taxi driver, and Mr Vinh who has been living and working in Hanoi for over two decades as a market porter, had been lucky in maintaining their health and avoiding accidents. Like Dhaka's rickshaw pullers (Begum and Sen, 2004, 2005), avoiding accidents and keeping one's health is important above all else in sustaining a livelihood.

We found most of our respondents were pretty clear of their destination in livelihood terms: they wished to live more secure lives, with robust livelihoods, higher incomes, greater levels of material consumption, and a better standard of living or quality of life. Our respondents also recognised that there were often trade-offs between these aims – for example between higher incomes (in the city) and a better quality of life (in the countryside). As Mr Think (interview #026, 7.10.2010) explained to us:

Think: I love my homeland [quê hương²⁰]. However, I do not love agriculture. Farming is a hard job. ... I was even a good farmer. But I do not like farming. The homeland is where I was born. The homeland brought me up. The homeland is in my heart. ... The young and capable people should choose cities, the old should live in the countryside. When you are of working age, you should live in cities. When you retire you should live in the countryside.

Our respondents were leaving the countryside because of escalating risks, declining returns and limited prospects; but in leaving their villages they were encountering new risks and vulnerabilities. When – as they did in most cases – migrants managed to navigate the shoals of urban life and work, the income generated was being inter-generationally transferred in the hope that the vulnerabilities of one generation could be used to generate resilience in the next. In this way, risk and opportunity were being transmitted across space and the generations, and being re-shaped in the process. Our respondents had, in the main, escaped the poverty trap but they had not escaped the middle-income trap. As migrants working and living across rural and urban worlds they were almost consigned by dint of their living patterns to work that, while it may have permitted them to 'get by', did not permit significant accumulation. The suggestion here is that this is intimately linked to the unwillingness of most of our respondents completely to abandon their rural homes. Being in the city

meant return to the countryside. And returning to the countryside placed a threshold on what could be achieved in the city.

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Notes

¹ See XXXX, 2012 for further details on the methods and approach underpinning the study.

² World Bank data downloaded from <http://data.worldbank.org/country/vietnam>.

³ A distinction between this study and Mushongah and Scoones' (2012) paper is that their study is made in the context of rural stagnation and frequent livelihood crisis.

⁴ Baluch and Davis (2008) note three 'shapes' to livelihood transitions (smooth, sawtooth and stepped [single and multi]), and three directions (upward, downward and stable). This leads them to identify ten different possible livelihood movements of which four movements dominate: saw-tooth in all directions, and declining multi-step.

⁵ Ha Tay is now part of the Hanoi Capital Region.

⁶ At the time that farm land was allocated, each commune member was given 10 *thước*, or two-thirds of a *sào* (in Northern Vietnam, 1 *sào* = 360m², 1 *sào* = 15 *thước*). Độ and his wife have 26 *thước* of farm land, less than two *sào*.

⁷ *'...when I was not familiar with the job, it was very strenuous. We worked from dawn to dusk. We had to wake up at 4.00 am. ... At first, we felt fear. [But] step-by-step we have become familiar with the work, and we like it. ...Moreover, [unlike my homeland] it is quite easy to earn money'* (Interview transcript, 8.10.2010).

⁸ Who are members of the Mường minority, and not of majority Kinh ethnicity.

⁹ From our interviews, it seems that land in central Hanoi has increased from between 1-2 million VND/m² in the late 1980s and 1990s, to 10 million VND/m² in the early 2000s, to more than 100 VND/m² by 2010 – a one hundred-fold increase in just two decades. Local sources suggest that Vietnam has some of the highest house prices relative to income of any country in the world (see: <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/business/17898/housing-prices-increased-more-than-100-times-over-the-last-20-years.html>).

¹⁰ The inflation rate at the time of the interviews was around 10 per cent, and had been rising since the beginning of the year, peaking in late 2011 at over 20 per cent.

¹¹ This is a point made in a number of other studies: DiGregorio, 1994; Resurreccion and Khanh, 2007; Turner, 2009; Agergaard and Thao, 2011; Turner and Schoenberger, 2012.

¹² Like China's *hukou* system, Vietnam's household registration or *ho khau* system formerly tied access to state services to residency. The 'link between identification and access to rights and services was all embracing' and 'to live without a *ho khau* was to live without the rights granted to Vietnamese citizens under the law' (Hardy 2001: 192). Until the late 1980s the system effectively 'fixed' people in space, mobility was all but impossible, and changing one's registration was hard. With the economic reforms from the mid-1980s, however, the logic of the household registration system has been eroded. Vietnam's development model now depends on people becoming mobile while the relative importance of state transfers has declined.

¹³ Bicycle rickshaw.

¹⁴ We also visited his wife in Nam Dinh.

¹⁵ She left this job because she was paid irregularly.

¹⁶ See Hanoi City People's Committee (2009) and Turner and Schoenberger (2012).

¹⁷ The UNDP concluded in a report published in 2010 that: 'Viet Nam's household registration system presents a systemic institutional barrier for internal migrants in accessing both basic and specialized Government services, contrary to the rights provided to them and all other citizens under the Constitution of Viet Nam. Reform of this system is needed so that the registration status of citizens is decoupled from their access to social services, giving equal access to everyone...' (UNDP 2010: 7).

¹⁸ See Phan and Coxhead (2010) for an approach to understanding migration that seeks explanation through the lens of such high level processes.

¹⁹ 'Migrating to regions with high demand for labour, such as large cities...is a common livelihood strategy [for rural people]. Limited land, risky agricultural production, education costs, social contributions and expenses (funerals or weddings) are strong drivers of migration. Improved transportation, better communication, and simpler procedures also facilitate migration for work' (Oxfam and Action Aid 2010: 48).

²⁰ *Quê hương* is variously translated as 'homeland', 'native place' and 'native land'. 'Home' is preferred here rather than 'native' because of its social intimations of belonging. The French *pays natal*, however, is closer to the Vietnamese meaning of the term.

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Table 1: Livelihood status: the aggregate picture

Livelihood status	At start of migration sojourn	At time of interview
Poor	20	4
Near poor	6	8
non-poor	4	11
Middle income	0	7
<i>Total</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>30</i>

Source: interviews, September-December 2010; n = 30

Table 2: Livelihood movements in Hanoi




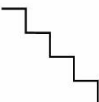
Direction	Shape	Shape	Frequency (out of 30 cases)
Upward/improving	Gradual		15
Upward/improving	Recovery		3
Steady state	Absolute improvement, relative stagnation		10
Downward/declining	Multi-stepped		2

Figure 1: Hanoi and location of respondents' place of residence and work

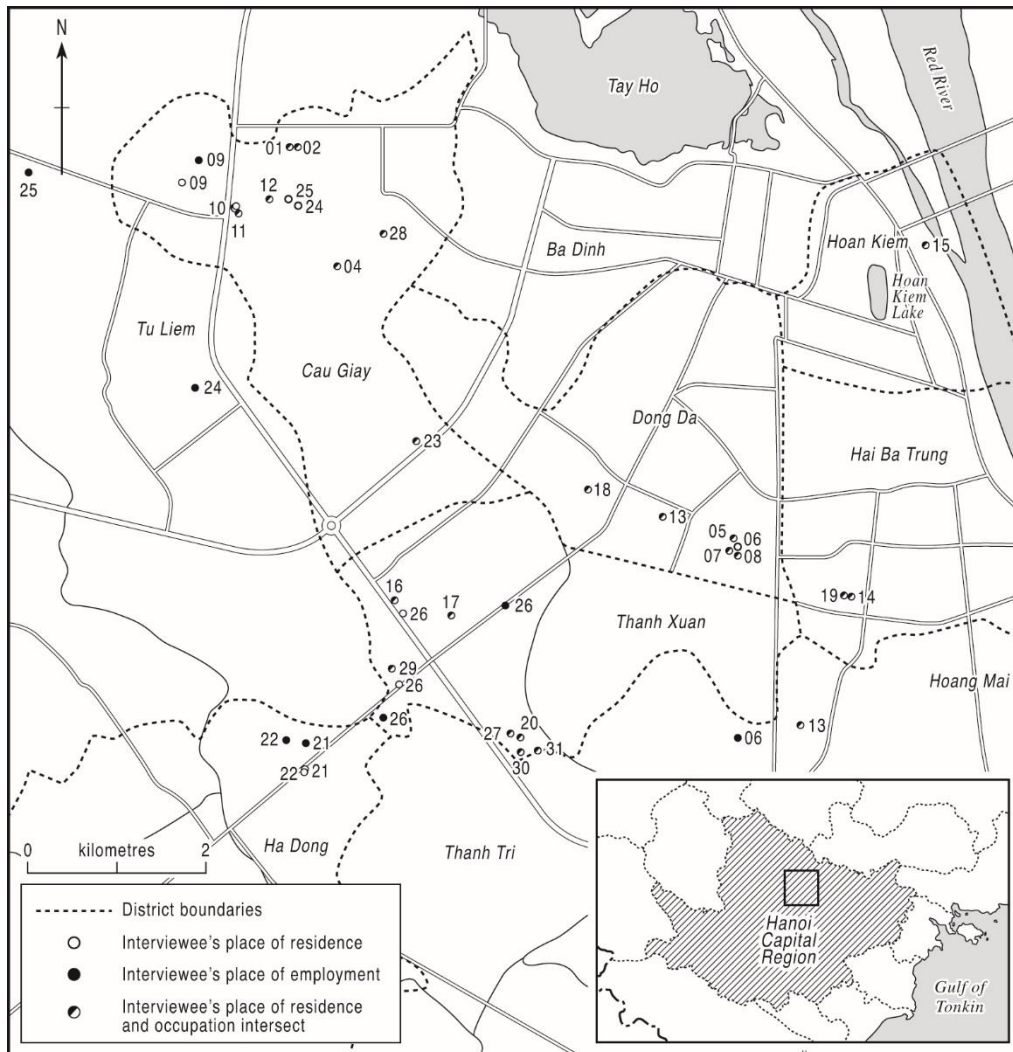


Figure 2: Mr Mr Viet's livelihood timeline, 1953-2010

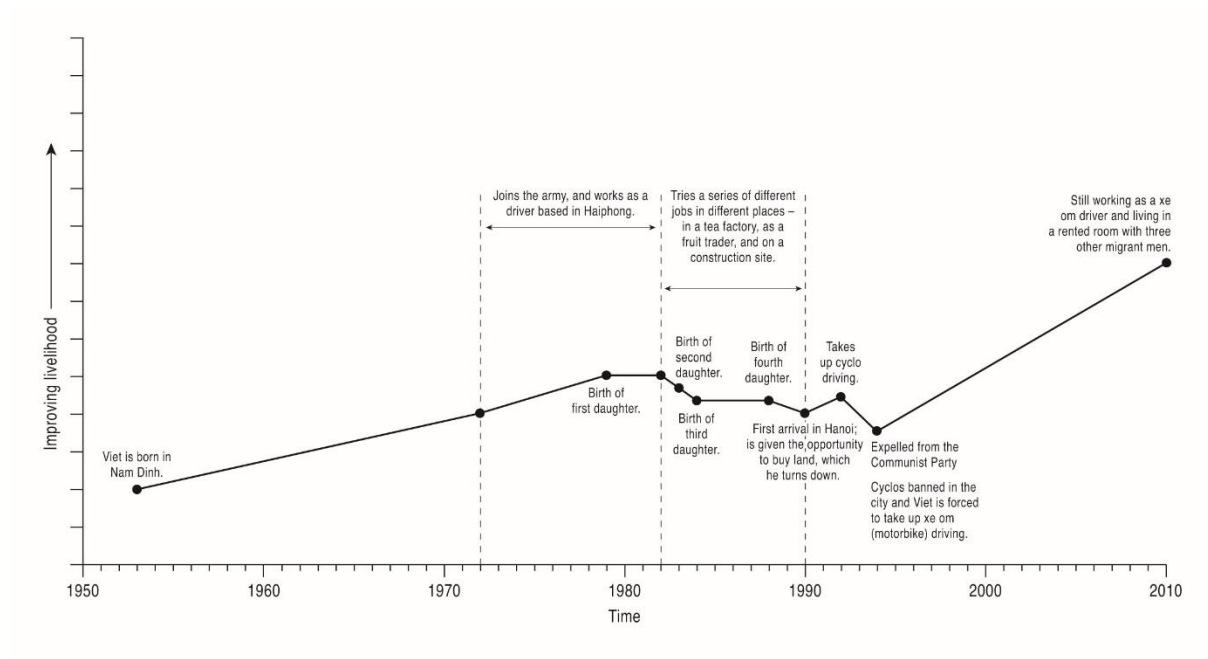


Figure 3: Ms Ha's livelihood timeline, 1992-2010

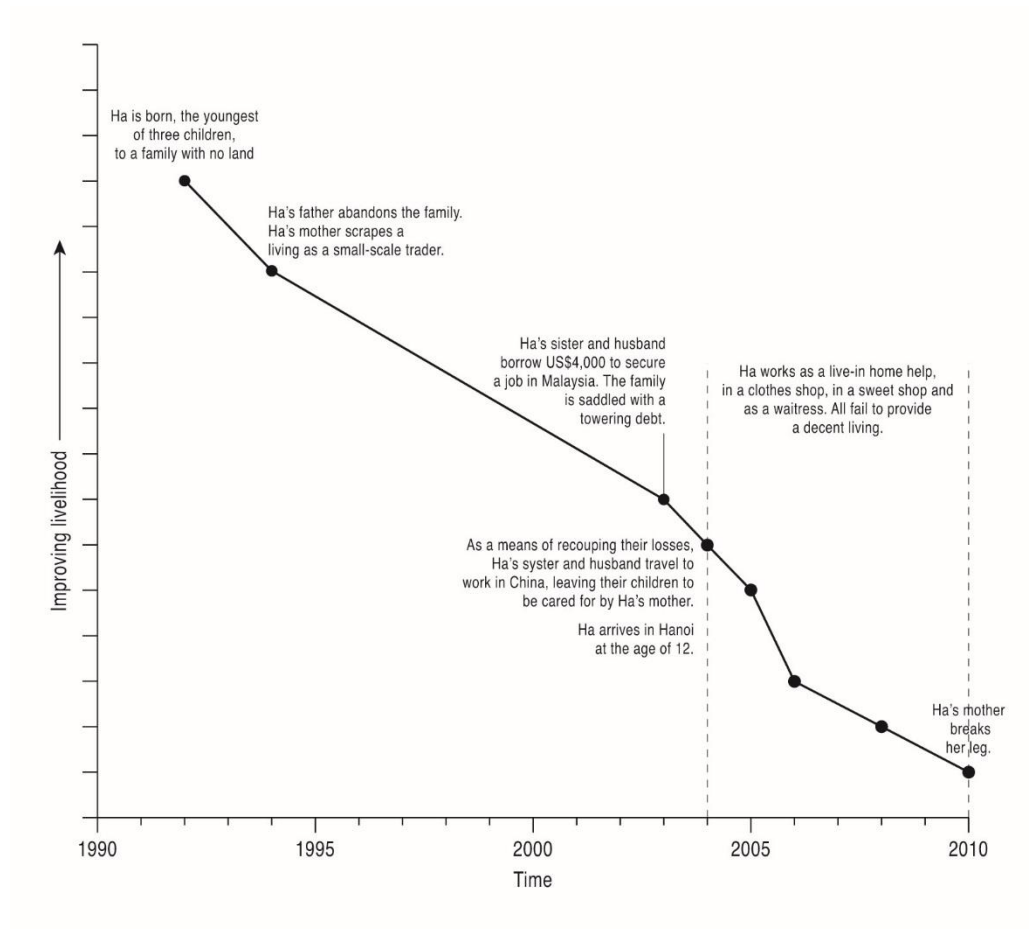


Figure 4: Mr Truong's livelihood timeline, 1958-2010

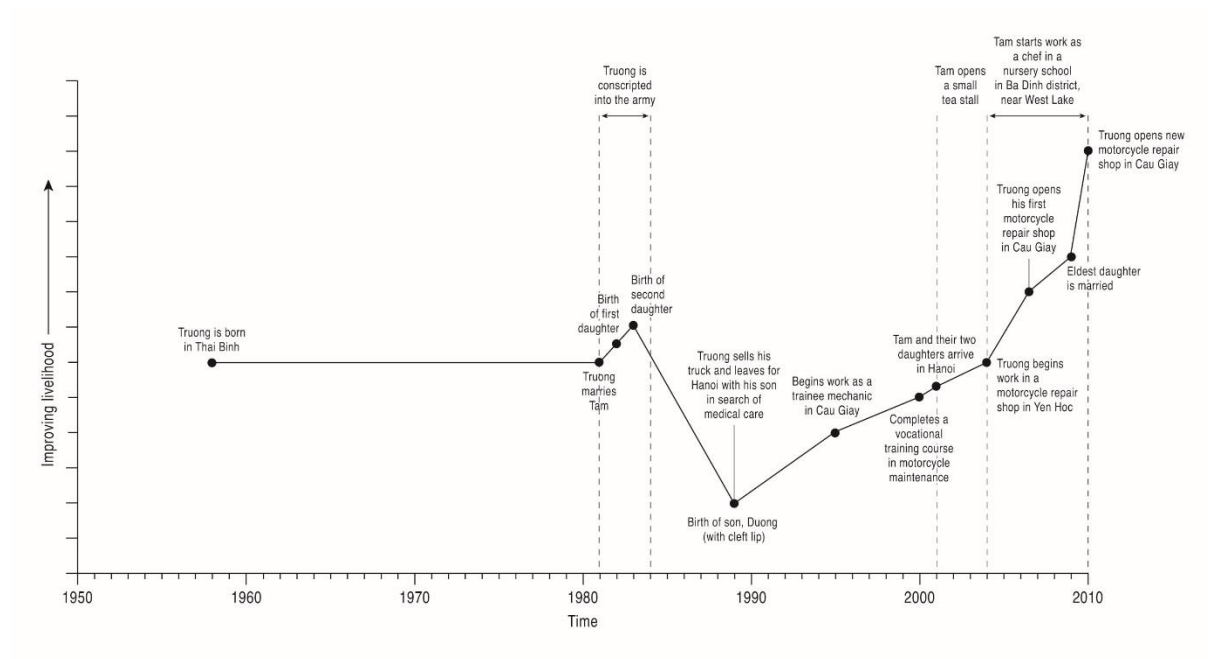


Figure 5: The everyday political economy nexus

