

BORDER MARKETS AND LIVELIHOOD TRANSFORMATION OF HMONG PEOPLE AT THE VIETNAMESE-CHINESE BORDER: A CASE STUDY OF CAN CAU CATTLE MARKET

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ABSTRACT

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Received: 6 June 2020

Revised: 2 December 2020

Accepted: 4 December 2020

Published: 28 January 2022

Citation:

Tam, T. T. (2022). *Border markets and livelihood transformation of Hmong people at the Vietnamese-Chinese border: a case study of Can Cau cattle market.* *Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies* 22(1): 39-49.

Since Vietnam implemented its reform policy in 1986 and normalized relations with China in 1990, the network of border markets along the Vietnamese Chinese border has witnessed greater bustle and development. Several of the local ethnic people's marketplaces have been expanded and became trading hubs for various goods with other localities and Chinese markets across the border. This paper aims to study the impacts of these border marketplaces and the transformation of local people's livelihoods, as well as analyze the benefits of these border markets to local ethnic minority groups. The research has been conducted with both qualitative and quantitative approach, including in-depth interviews, group discussions, participatory observation, and questionnaires distributed to 100 petty traders residing in Can Cau Commune, Si Ma Cai District, Lao Cai Province, where one of the Hmong people's well-known cattle markets is located. The study results found that Can Cau-based Hmong people, who have been making good use of their location, have succeeded in grasping various livelihood opportunities, also by profiting from their social and cultural resources such as their ethnic relations, lineages, languages, and cross-border networks. This is a good example of the successful participation of an ethnic minority group within the borderlands' economic integration process, although they are faced with market competition and the common instability of border markets.

Keywords: Border market; livelihood; Hmong; Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, Vietnam's economic renovation and integration process initiated in the 1980s, along with the tendency of Southeast Asian countries' modernization and deep integration into the global markets, have made a dramatic change in highland ethnic minority people's socio-economic life. The majority of Vietnam's ethnic minorities and localities have taken a greater interest in crop plants' transformation, the development of new plant varieties, and the production of commercial crops (Sikor and Pham, 2005; Nguyen, 2013); as well as the diversification of occupations, especially with new jobs such as

tourism services, hired labor and trading (Ly, 2014). In the Vietnamese borderlands, there has been a boom in commodity production, leading to deforestation and the hiring of large portions of arable land for growing bananas, pineapples, and rubber or raising shrimp for export markets (Taylor, 2016).

The Hmong, one of Vietnam's 53 ethnic minority groups, has a population of over 1 million and is centrally residing in Northern Vietnam's mountainous Provinces, including Lao Cai. The Hmong originally came from Southern China and first settled in Northern Vietnam's mountainous regions around 200 to 300 years ago, practicing their traditional livelihoods of upland farming, mostly rice and corn (Michaud and Turner, 2006). Since Vietnam's settlement and settled-agriculture production program for highland ethnic minority groups in the 1960s and the enactment of the Law on Forest Protection and Prevention of Deforestation for upland farming in 1991, rice paddies have been seen everywhere in Hmong areas. Nowadays, the livelihood of this ethnic group primarily depends on growing rice in paddies and terraced fields as well as corn and upland rice in the remaining forest areas, maintaining forest gardens, and exploiting forest products such as firewood, medicinal plants, and honey (Turner, 2012). The Hmong in the inland Provinces of Bac Kan and Yen Bai mostly live on agricultural production and hired labor (Ly, 2018), whereas other livelihoods like growing cardamom plants, tourism services, and interregional and cross-border trading of cattle and locally-made brocade products are more favored by their counterparts residing in the borderlands, especially in Lao Cai Province (Tugault-Lafleur and Turner 2009; Turner, 2010).

Despite their traditional subsistence economy, Northern Vietnamese ethnic minorities, including the Hmong, have viewed markets and their exchange activities as an important part of their socio-economic life. Along the over 1,000-km-long border between Vietnam and China, there have been about 200 markets in the centers of borderland towns, Districts, and Communes, mostly adjacent to or across from their Chinese equivalents. These border markets are places for the exchange of commodities and cultural and social activities for the local ethnicities and their counterparts elsewhere in Vietnam and across the border with China. Noticeably, the marketplaces have witnessed various trading activities between the local Hmong and those from other ethnic groups as well as Chinese Hmong traders across the border (Ta, 2018). Between 1979 and 1988, given the border war between the two countries, the border was closed, and formal trade was suspended for a decade. Since the 1991 normalization of Sino-Vietnamese relations, trading activities, both formal and informal, in this borderland have revived and developed quickly. The borderlands and the border markets have transformed from poor mountainous remote areas into dynamic locations with various cross-border socio-economic and cultural exchanges, attracting a large number of traders and vendors elsewhere to do business here and creating more jobs, especially in service and hired labor. Northern Vietnamese border marketplaces, which used to be considered as marginal places, have become dynamic sites where local ethnic groups can have various choices of livelihoods instead of only doing farming as before. Borderland trading operations between Vietnam and China have been promoted rapidly.

Some studies on Lao Cai Province's highland marketplaces showed that the ethnic groups of Hmong, Dao, and Giay are enthusiastically engaged in trading activities in the marketplaces, and the Hmong with their long-lasting cultural and social exchanges with other ethnic groups are believed to be the most active (Turner and Michaud, 2016). The Hmong's society is presumably based on kinship, and its customary laws define the rights and responsibilities of lineage members, regardless of religions, political status, residence, nationality, and territory (Ly, 2018). Other research highlighted that the Hmong's relations with their ethnic counterparts in the region and across the border are the factors facilitating their maintenance and development of trading operations in the localities (Schoenberger and Turner, 2008; Turner, 2010; Bonnin, 2011).

While the aforementioned research mostly focuses on crop plant transformations and analyzed the methods and tactics that Hmong vendors used to earn their incomes, there have been few studies on the role of border markets in their people's livelihoods. This paper, therefore, aims to study the impacts of border marketplaces on the Hmong's livelihoods on a backdrop of globalization. The article, based on the research on the development of Can Cau Market, one of Northern Vietnam's largest highland cattle trading markets in Lao Cai Province, is also to clarify the local Hmong's involvement in water buffalo trading at the market and their livelihood transformation over the past two decades. Through analyzing the daily interactions of local people in border markets, this study aims to highlight the discussion on the spatial organization of the marketplace as well as the flexibility and dynamics of residents in the borderland region.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

Borders, borderlines, and borderlands are human creations based on different ethical traditions (Brunet-Jailly, 2010). Borders as a concept are referring to the extent of an area within the jurisdiction of one political community in relation to another. This is also a term indicating the result of modern states'

formation (Baud and Schendel, 1997). According to the assessment of Baud and Van Schendel, studies on border areas from before to the late 1990s focused mainly on the legal, geopolitical, and geographic aspects of creating frontiers and their consequences. This has also led to the state-centric approach, ignoring the role of local people as well as actors in marginal interactions (Baud and Schendel, 1997). Since the late 1990s, more scholars have begun to see borders as territorial-social construction, which shows contradictions and conflicts between the rigid requirements of national borders and inherently flexible human flow (Zhang, 2011).

There has been an explosion of studies about borders, regional developments, issues of transnational cooperation, and cross-border interactions in the context of globalization and political upheavals around the world since 1990 (Liikanen, 2016). However, the research topic on borderland marketplaces has received little attention. Border markets could be understood as markets in the borderland area, which are places of goods exchange between people from two sides of the border. These exchange activities have a long history and continue up until now (Hang, 2001).

So far, borderland-related research has long been based on two classical social theories: structuralism and functionalism. The structuralistic approach emphasizes the importance of the state to the border regions, from the central and peripheral point of view, while functionalism is developed based on cultural-social anthropology, featuring the role of interaction between border residents in everyday life. In addition, historical-ethnological theories and the conception of social space have also been applied to research borderlands (Nguyen, 2018). However, the Regional Systems Analysis (RSA) and the Social Network Analysis (SNA), which were developed by George William Skinner (1925-2008), will be used for this research. From Skinner's study of Southern Chinese rural markets, he has charted spatial arrangement for rural fair markets and broke the space analysis into regional analytical systems (RSA or SNA). Skinner believed that RSA should focus on the relationship of space and the government to seek an explanation for the connection between spatial structures and dynamics of cultural, social, and economic practices in the rural areas (Skinner 1964; 1965a; 1965b). According to him, the spatial organization of these markets is to serve as fundamental economic, social, and cultural bases for China's traditionally rural society. The market structure with interlocking networks linking regional exchanges is not similar to that of the government.

Therefore, regional marketing networks have become relational models that set out to test the relevance of different categories of relations (social, economic, spatial, cultural, and political) over time. Skinner's theory of social networks revolving around the fair market system can be applied to analyze interactions between borderland communities based on the position that boundaries are not barriers or obstacles that block contact but are a space for interactions. In this research, the author will apply this conceptual framework of regional marketing networks to explore how market systems in the Vietnamese-Chinese border area shape local social organization and livelihoods and integrate local ethnic communities into the general society.

The field research was conducted in Can Cau Commune, Si Ma Cai District, Lao Cai Province and divided into four stages with 10 days each, lasting two years: in September and December of 2017 – the most active time of border markets, and in February and June 2018 – when trading activities decreased due to local seasonal work and reduced demand for Chinese goods. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are applied in the research, with statistics provided by local authorities. Quantitatively, 100 questionnaires were distributed to Can Cau Commune-based Hmong vendors doing business at Can Cau Market, with random sampling. The questionnaire focused on four main topics: status of traders, their work and income; the flow of commodities, social exchange in the market; traders' perspective on the market transformation; and market development policies as well as how they impact their livelihood. There were several alternative answers prepared for selection for each question, and people were free to add more information. SPSS was the software used to analyze data from the market questionnaire survey.

Qualitatively, 40 in-depth interviews with two Commune officials, one staff of Can Cau Market Management Board, and 37 key informants, including buyers and sellers from both genders at the market, both middle-aged and elderly. The interviews included completely open questions on the informants' and their family's living standards situation, livelihood, and their work at the market. More importantly, people were free to share their own opinions, feelings, and thoughts on market expansion and its impact on their lives and their communities. The life-history interview methodology was used to understand the experiences and emotions when working and trading at the market. Information collected from the interviews was compared with the market questionnaire survey to see if the two methods both reflect the same situation and trends. Statistical analysis and systematic categorization were used to interpret information gained from the interviews.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE HMONG IN CAN CAU COMMUNE AND CAN CAU MARKET'S ESTABLISHMENT

As of June 2018, Can Cau Commune has had a population of 2,781 people or 540 households, belonging to five ethnic groups (Hmong, Tay, Nung, Phu La, and Kinh); the Hmong have the biggest population, with 480 households and 2,645 people¹ residing in the hamlets of Can Chu Su, Coc Pha, Mu Trang Phin, Can Cau, and Chu San. The Commune has a complicated topography with great division, located at an altitude of 1,200m-1,600m above sea level. Cultivation conditions are very difficult, with only the Hmong able to adapt to these, the altitude, and the terrain. In the past, the Can Cau Commune was only inhabited by the Hmong. From 1990 up to now, more Tay, Nung, and Phu La have moved to work there, along with some Kinh who came to open food, phone, and motorcycle shops. The Commune has an area of 16.29 square kilometers and is covered by mostly mountains and hills, suitable for upland farming. While the Hmong used to largely depend on growing upland rice, corn, and other crops, breeding water buffaloes and bulls, and exploiting forest resources, they are also able to combine upland farming, husbandry, market-oriented farming like growing plums, peaches, and pears and selling goods at the market.

Can Cau Commune's Hmong have surnames like Trang, Giang, Thao, Sung, Cu, and Vang, of which Trang and Vang are the largest lineages. These clans are all ethnically and familially connected to Chinese Hmong across the border. Hmong villagers are fluent in at least three languages, i.e. the Hmong language, Southwestern Mandarin, and Vietnamese.

For centuries, cattle have been viewed as an important commodity in Northern Vietnam's highland markets. The Hmong and many other ethnic groups think that water buffaloes and horses are of great value for transportation and agricultural production and worth a fortune. Cattle trading transactions were made by Hmong residing in Bac Ha District, Lao Cai Province with traders from neighboring Provinces, Northern Vietnam's Delta, and from China (Bonnin, 2011). Si Ma Cai Market, which is the central market of Si Ma Cai District, is also an ancient horse market in the region.

Can Cau Commune's Hmong used to exchange necessities in the area around Can Cau Lake located in and at Si Ma Cai District market. Because of difficulties in traveling through the mountains to the market, especially in rainy seasons, the so-called communal market was moved from the place surrounding Can Cau Lake to the Commune's center in 1980. In 1991, the Vietnamese Chinese relationship was normalized. The Vietnamese state issued a border-opening policy that allowed residents to trade and exchange goods at markets on both sides of the border. Since then, a series of border markets have been active again. In 1995, the market was relocated and rebuilt at the end of a slope in Can Chu Su village, along Provincial Road 153 leading to Si Ma Cai District center.

By 1995, the Can Cau Market had been a small-sized open-air marketplace where agricultural products such as vegetables, corn, rice, chicken, and pigs, as well as some other kinds of groceries, had been sold. Furthermore, water buffaloes had been sold at the market as ten Hmong traders had sought to purchase buffaloes and then sold them back to the locals and Chinese Hmong; however, much of the trading had taken place in the villagers' houses rather than at the market. Since its relocation, the marketplace has been accessed more easily, and increasing local purchase demands have led to a larger number of marketgoers from Can Cau village and other neighboring Communes. A cattle trading place was quickly formed to meet the locals' needs for buying and selling buffaloes. Over the period from 1995 to 2000, the market was gradually expanded due to the trading development policy on the border areas. Decree No.20/1998/ND-CP dated March 31, 1998, by the Prime Minister on mountainous trade development encouraged border people to participate in the exchange of goods, creating a fast socio-economic development in the border areas, and built and completed the infrastructure system, as well as a system of traditional markets and operated trading activities of border residents. As a result, in 2001, Can Cau Market was planned to be widened and divided into two sections, with the grocery area covering about 2,500 square meters, located along the side of Road 153 and filled with rows of thatched-roof and wooden-frame shops, and the buffalo trading area lying at the end of the market, covering about 5,000 square meters. In addition, a parking lot and a buffalo grazing area as planned were also used for trading buffaloes. Thus, the overall space for buffalo trading accounts for two-thirds of the total area of the Can Cau Market.

The development of the Can Cau Market has not only met the local needs for water buffalo trading but also ensured a large supply of buffaloes for the Chinese market. The marketplace, which used to be opened only once a week on Saturdays, is now open four days per week on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, mainly for buffalo trading.

¹ Statistics provided by Can Cau Commune on June 30, 2010.

Noticeably, besides the increasing local consumption capacity, borderland policies – such as the border opening policy in 1991, the development policy of border trading, and the preferential prioritized policies of reduced import tax for residents in border areas – and favorable geographical conditions have facilitated the development of this marketplace. On October 19, 1998, the Vietnamese and Chinese governments signed an agreement on borderland trade to promote bilateral relations and frontier commerce. Two years after the agreement's signing, 13 border marketplaces and 3 border gate markets were re-opened and expanded, and trading and goods exchanging activities were further promoted (Hang, 2001). Circular No.34/2016 on goods trading of border residents has also encouraged people on both sides to promote exchange and cross-border trade cooperation. The system of the aforementioned policies has positively promoted the development of markets in border areas, encouraging people to participate in trading, creating a great deal of purchasing power. Moreover, the links and exchanges on socio-economics are increasing between Vietnam and China on a global scale. In that context, the Can Cau Market and other local markets have witnessed further development and greater diversity of commodities.

Can Cau Market (open on Saturdays) and Lao Cai Province's three big cattle markets of Coc Ly (open on Tuesdays), Bac Ha in Bac Ha District (open on Sundays), and Sin Cheng in Si Ma Cai District (open on Fridays) have long been widely known for water buffalo trading, and all these markets are adjacent to the Chinese border, thereby facilitating transactions with major cattle markets in Yunan, China. Can Cau Market, which is only 10 kilometers from the border or the shortest distance from the border among the four markets, has been further expanded and now is the biggest one.

Furthermore, Chinese traders, who used to seek to buy water buffaloes in Hung Quoc market – the largest one in Northern Vietnam's mountainous Provinces before 2010 located in Hung Quoc town, Tra Linh District, Cao Bang Province, are now more likely to turn to Can Cau Market to do their business as some trading restrictions have been imposed on Hung Quoc market since 2010. Noticeably, the number of water buffaloes sold in the Can Cau Market every market day increased from several hundred over the period between 2000 and 2009 to some thousand from 2010 to 2018. Since 2018, there has been a decrease in traded buffaloes, with only 300 to 500 heads per market day due to impacts of China's border gate closing policy². This demonstrates that the development of Vietnam's border marketplaces has been largely dependent on the consumption capacity of Chinese markets across the border and both governments' borderland policies. However, the traditional market of Can Cau has always been a busy commercial center as it has become one of the most important goods and culture exchange hubs in the region and a well-known tourist destination.



Figure 1: Map of Lao Cai Province Showing Can Cau Market
Source: Wikipedia (2020)

² Vietnam-China border gates in Si Ma Cai District are closed 5-7 times a year, with the closing periods lasting 3-5 days each. During the closure, the two-way trade is suspended. Few or no Chinese traders enter Vietnam to bring goods back to their home country for the fear of Chinese police's commodity seizure. This border policy was introduced by the Chinese Government to tighten, control, and limit the import of Vietnamese goods into the country.

Since 2010, there has been a relatively stable number of regular traders and marketgoers at Can Cau Market every single market day, including 480 Can Cau Commune-based Hmong households; 120 to 150 buffalo sellers and buyers from the Hmong and other ethnic groups residing in the neighboring Communes and the Provinces of Bac Ha and Si Ma Cai; 50 to 70 Kinh (or Vietnamese) traders from delta Provinces like Bac Giang, Vinh Phuc, and Thanh Hoa; and about 30 to 45 Chinese traders.

Of the total number of buffaloes traded in the Can Cau Market, about 80% have been sold to Chinese traders, 10% to owners of fighting buffaloes from Hai Phong Province and some of Highlands' Provinces³, and around 10% to locals who raise them for farming. The price of a buffalo is calculated based on an estimation of its overall weight and meat amount; thus, traders should be good at evaluating a buffalo's weight. As far as payment is concerned, the Vietnamese currency is favored, but Chinese money is also used for transactions between Vietnamese-Hmong people and Chinese traders. In general, marketplace trading, which is supposed to be a kind of informal credit transaction, is carried out quickly and flexibly.



Figure 2: Water Buffalo Trading in Can Cau Market



Figure 3: A Corner of Hmong's Brocade in Can Cau Market, Goods Imported from China

³ The Buffalo Fighting Festival is held on Do Son beach, Hai Phong province on the ninth day of the eighth lunar month every year. The Buffalo Stabbing Festival is organized to celebrate a big community event in the Vietnamese highlands. In preparation of these festivals, buffalo owners seek big, strong, and well-shaped buffaloes in the mountainous areas, especially Northern Vietnam's mountains, bring them back home, and raise and train them so that they show the best performance in the festivals.

4. CHANGES IN HMONG PEOPLE’S LIVELIHOODS

The emergence of Professional and Semi-professional Vendors

Before 1994, ten men from Can Cau Commune had traveled around Northern Vietnam’s mountainous region and to Lao Cai Province’s lowland Districts like Bao Thang, Bao Yen, and Bac Ha to purchase buffaloes, bring them home, and sell them back to the local people and their ethnic counterparts across the Chinese border for farming. Their trading had taken place in their houses or on the banks of the San Chai River adjacent to the Vietnam-China border. They were the first buffalo traders and the key people who had laid a foundation for buffalo transactions in the Can Cau Market. They passed their trading experiences onto their children, siblings, and relatives. These Hmong traders all have relatives and friends among the Hmong in China, and their trading relationships have been maintained for generations to generations. This is an important part of the ethnic and social network of the Hmong in the Can Cau Commune.

Since Can Cau Market’s establishment in 1995, buffalo trading has been promoted, with 127 professional Hmong buffalo sellers in the Commune. Yet, their starting points differed (see Table 1).

Table 1: Starting Points of Can Cau-based Hmong Traders

No.	Time	Number of traders	Percentage (%)
1	Before 1991	7	7
2	Since 1991	12	12
3	Since 2000	10	10
4	Since 2005	12	12
5	Since 2010	27	27
6	Since 2015	32	32

Source: 2019 survey results

Can Cau-based Hmong buffalo traders are divided into three categories: large, medium, and small households⁴. With regards to large buffalo trading households, the Commune’s seven most-affluent traders usually travel around Northern Vietnam’s Provinces to choose big, strong, and well-shaped water buffaloes each worth VND100-160 million and sell them at Can Cau Market or to fighting buffalo owners elsewhere in the country, and their business capital is estimated to be no less than VND3 billion. These traders are experienced at choosing buffaloes and closely related to buffalo owners from other localities, thus aware of buffalo prices and market demands. Their profits from high-priced fighting buffaloes are five-fold that of meat-oriented and reproduction-oriented buffaloes sold at the market. This group of traders also became intermediaries in buffalo trading activities between the Kinh in many localities throughout the country as well as Chinese traders, because of their long-term trading relationships and fluency in communicating with the Chinese Hmong. On the other hand, they are also the intermediaries between the Tay, Nung, Thu Lao, and Kinh traders in the lowlands.

The medium-sized trading households with business capitals of VND1.2-2 billion usually seek to buy water buffaloes (30 to 40 buffaloes per market day) from the local markets and the delta region and sell them back to 3-5 Chinese traders with whom they are on good terms. The Commune has 40 medium-sized merchant households who are the village’s first buffalo trading generation and some young vendors who aim for financial wealth. Most of these traders have trucks of 3-5 tons used for buffalo transportation. This group of traders not only has kinship and ethnic relations but also wide-spanning friendships with the Hmong in China.

Meanwhile, the smaller buffalo trading households, of which there are around 80 traders, buy water buffaloes from Can Cau Markets and other neighboring marketplaces and sell them back to some Chinese buyers or larger buffalo trading households at the market. They also seek to buy buffaloes from Kinh people residing in the delta region and sell them at the market or even purchase and fatten skinny buffaloes for sale. Their capitals range from VND200-300 million. Many of these traders have bought trucks of 3.5 tons and more to transport their buffaloes and ship large trading households’ goods for extra wages. The social relations of these smaller trader groups also span wide. With the expansion of their geographic scope, they not only have ethnic relations in the same region but also expanded ones with Kinh in many other Provinces throughout the country and the Hmong in China.

In addition to these professional traders, there are some semi-professional buffalo vendors from the Commune’s Hmong ethnic group. They purchase water buffaloes from Kinh sellers and other local ethnic groups at Can Cau Market and sell them back to other traders and buyers right at the market, which is known

⁴ The classification is based on financial capital that a trader uses for trading: large scale, VND3 billion and above; medium scale, VND1,5-2 billion; and small scale, under VND1,5 billion. This classification is suitable with the general classification of Can Cau Market Management Board and traders in the market in 2017.

as the method of buying at the market gate and then selling at the market end. The mode of transaction which involves no large sums (less than VND100 million) has tempted many Hmong people to trade buffaloes.

Can Cau Market’s buffalo traders, besides those from the Hmong, also come from local ethnic minority groups such as the Thu Lao, Giay, Tay, and Nung, who reside in the neighboring Communes and Districts like Bao Thang, Bac Ha, Muong Khung (Lao Cai Province), and Xi Man (Ha Giang Province). They are small vendors with small capitals and – unlike Can Cau’s Hmong – have hardly any ties with their Chinese-Hmong traders across the border.

Some traders from the Can Cau Commune said that their income from buffalo trading was very high. On a single market day, 3-5 buffaloes can be purchased and sold back to others with prices ranging from VND500,000 to VND2-3 million per head. If they are lucky enough to get more orders from Chinese traders, they can sell seven or more buffaloes per market day. Newcomers can get a profit of 500,000VND or more from the transactions of 2-3 buffaloes per day. Furthermore, Hmong usually buy young and skinny buffaloes from Kinh and fatten them in their houses within 2-3 weeks before selling them back to others; they can get a spread of VND1-2 million per head, even up to VND3 million on occasions. Yet, it would be very risky if the purchased buffaloes were infected with diseases like marsh fever and had their weights incorrectly estimated. This business is also hindered by policies, especially the policy on border gate closures which makes it hard for cross-border goods’ transportation into China. Since 2019, border gates have been closed 20 times, lasting five days each and leading to a reduction in the number of marketgoers and traded buffaloes.

Changes in Occupation Patterns and Emergence of Extra Jobs and New Services

The formation of the buffalo market has changed the Hmong’s income mechanisms in Can Cau. Before 2010, most households’ main income had been from agriculture and forestry, as well as hired labor. Since 2010 and the further development of the Can Cau Market, the Commune’s 480 Hmong households have been enthusiastically engaged in buffalo trading, brocade sales, and other services such as restaurants and cattle transportation. The author’s survey with 100 small traders at Can Cau Market showed that their incomes were sourced mainly from trade (77%) and partially from agriculture and forestry (13%)⁵. Giang Gieo Nh. (47 years old, male Hmong, Can Cau) said, “Buffalo trading is a job that brings a very high income. Most of the family’s valuable assets such as cars, motorcycles, televisions, and refrigerators all come from that one income source. In the past, our main income source was swidden cultivation and we often suffered from food insufficiency in drought years. Since 2010, as many changed to buffalo trading, many families’ income has increased and stabilized. Nowadays, all my family members are actively involved in buffalo trade, while the cultivation and animal husbandry are just side jobs as the income from buffalo trading is many times higher.”

Since 2010, the number of food stalls in the Can Cau Market has also increased from 40 to 50-56 stalls per market sessions, which also provides a significant source of income for many families. According to Trang Thi P. (42 years old, female Hmong food stall owner at Can Cau Market), since the market’s development, the number of people coming there has increased. Every day, she could sell 80-120 bowls of rice noodles and earn VND500,000-700,000 each market session, equaling 2-3 times her income by session before 2010. The money from selling food has helped her children to go to the District’s high school, buy motorbikes, a TV, and repair their home.

Table 2: Occupations with the Biggest Income in Can Cau’s Hmong Households in 2018

No.	Occupation	Number of people	Percentage (%)
1	Crop cultivation	9	9
2	Husbandry	4	4
3	State salary and allowance	1	1
4	Trading	77	77
5	Service	2	2
6	Hired driving	2	2
7	Hired labor	5	5
Total		100	100

Source: 2019 questionnaire data results

Buffalo trading has helped strengthen familial ties with clear job assignments among family members. Men, who usually pass their experience and knowledge about buffalo trading on to the next generations, are supposed to take day-long trips purchasing goods. The Hmong buffalo traders often teach their children how to choose a big, strong, meaty buffalo which is large in weight, with a curved tail, and a large belly. Beside that, their social and kinship relationships, as well as their way of increasing and protecting their reputation with customers, are also passed on from generation to generation.

⁵ A total of 100 small traders of Can Cau market were randomly selected among 480 Hmong households in Can Chau Commune.

Nowadays, Hmong children are often invested in their studies to the end of high school, with some also attending intermediate or vocational schools. However, most of them return home to participate in buffalo trading with their parents after graduation. In the family, women do the household chores, grow grass in the house, and fatten buffaloes. Many women also cut grass everywhere to sell at the market as there is an increasing demands for grass as food for buffaloes. Transportation services are also seen in the Commune, with 40 households with cars and trucks being involved. On Saturdays, when the market is open and students are off school, 50-60 secondary school boys are often hired to lead buffaloes to the market by their owners, with wages ranging from VND15,000-20,000VND per buffalo and 10-15 buffaloes for each person.

Apart from buffalo trading, other goods are being sold at the market by Hmong women since the market’s expansion. The marketplace, according to popular belief of the Hmong and other ethnic groups in Northern Vietnam’s mountainous areas, is not only an exchange area for goods but also the place where cultural and social activities take place. Therefore, 87% of marketgoers seek to enjoy traditional food instead of buying goods. The food area is the most crowded and busiest, with a variety of the Hmong’s delicacies, such as Thang Co⁶, Men Mem⁷, Canh Sau (bean soup), and Pho Thit Lon Den (black pork noodles). There were 90 stalls of black pork noodles at the market in 2019, as opposed to 30 stalls in 1999. Moreover, there are 23, 30, 12, and 9 stalls for Thang Co, Canh Dau, wine, and five-colored sticky rice, respectively. Female villagers are the main sellers in the food area and at almost all stalls for local hand-made brocade products. Since 2019, Can Cau Commune has had 80 industrial sewing machines made by China, operated by electricity, which help to make sewing products faster. On a market day of January 2019, there were 250-300 brocade stalls, compared to 35-55 in 1999 (Vuong D. Q., 2005: 59). An increase in the number of food and brocade stalls demonstrates the changes in the local women’s occupations and livelihoods.

Income Changes and Wealth Gap

The survey of 100 trading households was based on several criteria for assessing the importance for people’s livelihoods, including the levels of (1) great importance, (2) importance, (3) little importance, and (4) no importance. The survey results show 70% of the families said that their income stems from trading operations, compared to 30% of other kinds of livelihoods, which were either of great importance (1) or importance (2). The households’ incomes varied, and 73% of families had average earnings ranging from VND160-300 million (approximately USD7,200-13,600) per year, which is a big sum of money compared to the Hmong’s 2015 income per capita of VND575,000 per month (UNDP, Uy ban Dan toc and Irish Aid, 2017).

Table 3: Total Household Income from Jobs at the Market in 2018 (Unit: Million VND⁸)

No.	Incomes	Number of households	Percentage (%)
1	100-120	7	7
2	130-150	7	7
3	160-180	10	10
4	190-210	15	15
5	210-230	23	23
6	240-260	12	12
7	270-300	17	17
8	300 or more	9	9

Source: 2019 survey results

With regards to income from the market, surveyed people said that their earnings had been stable (53%), relatively unstable (47%), better (37%), unchanged (54%), or worse (9%) compared to the last five years. When asked “What impacts has the birth of the market had?”, 62% of respondents answered that their life has become better with higher incomes; 69% said they had more job choices; and 68% revealed that the traffic was more convenient.

Thanks to high incomes from trading, the local people’s livelihoods have been improving. Since 2010, the whole Commune has had 45 new solid 2-story houses worth VND1 billion VND800 million (all owned by Hmong buffalo traders), 18 1-story flat-roofed houses, as well as other permanent and semi-permanent houses. Most of the Commune’s Hmong households have motorbikes valued at least at VND20 million each.

⁶ Thang Co is a traditional dish of the Hmong in Northwestern Vietnam’s mountainous region, made from horse meat. The technique of cooking this dish is quite simple. After the animal is killed and washed, its internal organs are removed, then chopped and cooked.

⁷ Men Mem is a dish of the Hmong, made of grinded corn, served like sticky rice.

⁸ According to the exchange rate in 2018, USD100 equaled about VND2, 200,000.

Additionally, the area's households own flat-screen televisions (80), mobile phones (484), sewing machines (80), and poultry feed grinders (90)⁹.

However, a few households trading buffaloes in Can Cau fell into poverty and even bankruptcy. According to Giang. A. P, (54 years old, Hmong man, Can Cau Commune) in 2014, because he bought sick buffaloes and his Chinese friends refused to import these, he had to dump sale three shipments and lost VND300 million in a year. In 2015, he lost VND350 million too. The whole family's assets are five buffaloes that had to be sold to pay their debts, thus their trading capital was exhausted, and they fell into bankruptcy. His family members had to go back to the fields and raise buffalo like in previous years, and the family's income now only amounts to VND3-3.5 million per month.

As far as household economics classification is concerned, 35% are considered wealthy, 59% have a medium-sized income, and 6% are relatively poor¹⁰. The wealthier ones are large and medium-sized buffalo trading households. While the average rate of multidimensionally poor households of the Hmong in Vietnam is 63% (UNDP, Uy ban Dan toc and Irish Aid, 2017), the wealth gap in Can Cau Commune has shown significant improvements in people's incomes thanks to border market-based trading activities, compared to other localities.

5. CONCLUSION

Vietnam's doi moi or renovation and the normalization of Vietnamese Chinese relations in 1990 have had a strong impact on the socio-economic development in both nations' borderlands. The re-opening of the border gates and the trading promotion at traditional and new border marketplaces has facilitated the development of the region with various exchanges of goods and culture sprawling. It is these dynamic changes that have made the borderlands an attractive place for many actors who wish to improve their livelihoods. Therefore, it is fundamental that the local ethnic minorities' livelihoods should be ensured amidst the integration of border marketplaces.

The study case of Can Cau's Hmong along with the previous research has consolidated the statement that Vietnamese Hmong in many borderlands – especially in Lao Cai – have been active and dynamic in creating new livelihoods in accordance with the region's modernization process.

Can Cau's Hmong, who have been making good use of their location and social and cultural resources, have succeeded in grasping various livelihood opportunities. They have shown superiority over other local minorities with an overwhelming number of Hmong involved in borderland market activities and their role as mediators for transactions between Vietnamese and Chinese traders. Despite their income difference, most of the Hmong households (over 60%) stressed that the market has benefited them economically. This is a good example of the successful participation of an ethnic minority group amid the economic integration process, even though they are faced with market competition and instability in trading operations. Further research on ethnic minorities in other borderlands should be conducted for an overall picture of their lives.

The development process and the dynamics of Can Cau's border market in this study show that markets are indeed fundamental economic and social bases for locals, as confirmed by Skinner. They are places where local Hmong exchange goods and connect with other ethnic groups in the region and even beyond. Interactions between the Hmong in Can Cau and other Hmong people like their relatives and friends around the Chinese border show that borders are not necessarily barriers or obstacles that block contacts but can be a space for many social interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is drawn from my individual research project "The Role of Border Markets in Improving Local Ethnic Minorities' Livelihood in the Vietnam-China Borderlands" funded by the International Foundation for Science. I would like to express my gratitude to the foundation for financially supporting my research, and to colleagues at the Institute of Anthropology, Institute of Cultural Studies, VASS, for supporting my fieldwork, especially Ly Cam Tu and Nguyen Thanh Tung. Dr. Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh and two anonymous referees who gave useful comments on this article.

⁹ Statistics provided by Can Cau in December 2018.

¹⁰ Statistics provided by the head of Can Cau Commune in August, 2019.

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