THESIS

LAND REFORM, LIBERALIZATION, AND LIVELIHOODS:

NEGOTIATED TRANSFORMATIONS IN VIETNAM'S NORTHERN MOUNTAIN REGION

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis project examines the relationship between ongoing processes of land reform, economic liberalization, and livelihood strategies among ethnic minority uplanders in the northern mountain region of Vietnam. *Đổi Mới*, roughly translating to "renovation" describes a period of economic liberalization beginning in 1986. Since the beginning of the *Đổi Mới* reforms, the Vietnamese government has passed a series of land laws intended to dissolve the collective agricultural system enforced during the revolutionary (1946 - 1975) and state socialist periods (1976 - 1986). De-collectivization in the northern uplands involves extensive land allocation. Land previously managed by agricultural collectives is distributed to households via the issuance of land use rights certificates, which define land boundaries and dictate acceptable land uses based on officially recognized land cover types. Land reform in the uplands is accompanied by the intensification of anti-swidden (slash and burn) policies and initiatives, which date back to the French colonial period. In Tat, a small ethnic minority Tây community in the Hòa Bình province of the northern mountain region, uplander reactions to land reform have brought about significant transformations within the local livelihood system to meet the demands of a rising market economy. Based on semi-structured interviews, transect walks and field notes produced after a research trip to Tat, I argue that the customary practice of swidden agriculture has played an important role in new state systems for upland resource extraction despite its

official discouragement. Further, I argue that ethnic minority uplanders define the process of land reform itself by negotiating, defying, or ignoring the enforcement of land use rights certificates. The results of this project pose important insights into the ongoing, informal processes that ultimately shape the influence of government policy at the local level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go to the residents of Tat village, who smiled and waved as I passed on the road, offered tea, fruit and water when I visited their homes, and sat through hour-long interviews that could otherwise be spent at leisure or agricultural work. Particularly, I would like to thank my host Nhân for guiding me on strenuous transects walks and setting up interviews with locals, and his family for accommodating me during my stay.

On one occasion, woefully underprepared for the conditions, Khánh (my translator) and I were covered in leeches as we hiked through secondary forest southwest of the major road that bisects Tat. Nhân, noticing our discomfort, cut a foundation of palm for us to stand on, and supplied us with a concoction of powder detergent to apply above our socks to repel leeches away. This is one example of Nhân's thoughtfulness. From the delicious meals, to helping set up my mosquito net for the first time, I cannot understate my host family's hospitality.

Next, I would like to thank my translator Khánh for accompanying me to the uplands. Despite having to offer less pay than he was accustomed to, Khánh was patient, friendly, and a pleasure to talk to while in Tat. Upon returning to Hanoi from Tat village, Khánh guided me to local landmarks, paid for meals, and provided transportation on his motorbike. Likewise, professors Phong and Thang from the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA) were indispensable to the success of the research project in Tat village. Not only did they both accompany me on a preliminary excursion to Tat, but graciously provided a desk at the university, helped me exchange currency before leaving for Tat, and introduced me to Khánh.

Also at VNUA, my appreciation goes to the Office of International Relations for assisting with receiving research permissions in the uplands, and the lengthy process of paperwork that entails.

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INTRODUCTION

Transformations

Like most things in the village, Nhân's house changed. Completely rebuilt sometime in the late 2000s, the home was raised from the ground with tall beams of wood near the center of Tat. Some of my host's neighbors opted to tear down their wooden homes in favor of new concrete structures. Nhân did not stray quite as far from the traditional Tây style but still made notable alterations. The space underneath the raised home, for instance, was previously used for cattle, storage, and workspace. Now the bottom level boasts a walled interior, complete with a television, sleeping areas, and seating suitable for receiving guests. Outside the home there were motorbikes and a pesticide sprayer. The roof, once covered in palm fronds, was now bright blue and made of tin. It was under that roof, on the second floor of the home, where I rested, wrote my field notes, shared meals, and listened to the rain as it pattered on the metal and dripped to the ground below.

I slept under the window on the right side of the upper room, which offered a pleasant view of a fishpond behind the home and the rice paddies stretching beyond. Khánh, my translator, slept in the center of the room. Nhân graciously prepared for him to sleep on the far left of the room, but Khánh politely declined, as this would mean sleeping near a shrine dedicated to Nhân's parents, marked with incense and pictures of the passed relatives. Supporting the tin roof were painted rafters adorned with both the red hammer and sickle of the communist party, and colorful traditional religious imagery. The marks where palm fronds were

tied tightly to the rafters were still visible. On one wall, certificates from the commune praised Nhân and his family for maintaining an orderly household, on the opposite wall, a buffalo skull.

It was in this room where we sat on a woven mat the evening of my final day in the village. Nhân put together a particularly large meal for us to celebrate the end of my stay in Tat, and the successful completion of the research project. He invited his brother Tiến to share the food, and the four of us, Nhân, Tiến, Khánh, and myself, shared chicken, pork, bamboo shoot, and plenty of *ruou*, a strong rice alcohol that Nhân made himself. He poured it from a reused plastic bottle, sliced mushrooms floating on the cloudy liquid as he refilled my cup.

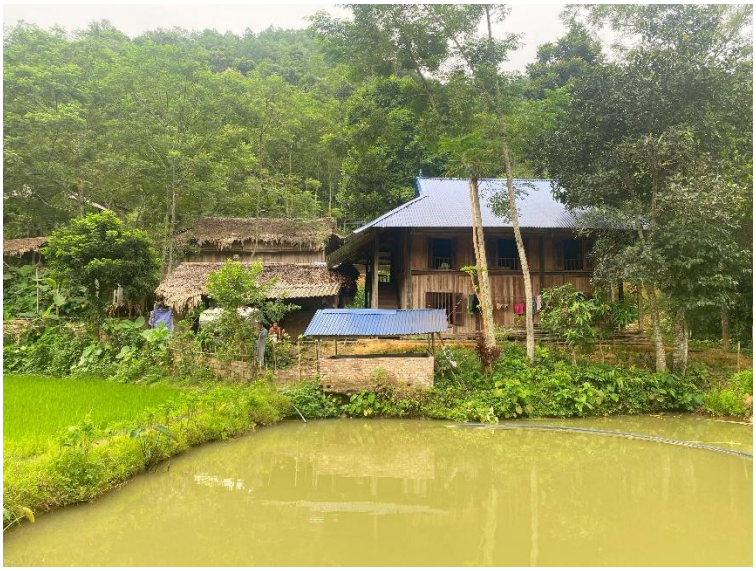

Figure 1.1: House near the center of Tat. Fishpond in foreground. (Thomas Chittenden)

I woke up late the next morning relieved to forgo interviewing or hiking up the slopes of the surrounding valleys on the day of my departure. Just the day before, Khánh, Nhân, and I climbed a hillside of swidden fields and timber monocultures. While it was usual for Khánh and me to skip breakfast, Nhân instead led us to a local soup shop. I leaned over my hot bowl, watching timber trucks rattle down the road. Previously a full day of travel, the commute from Hanoi to Tat now only takes about two hours on newly paved roads. I was only in Tat village for ten days, but the recent transformations the village underwent were apparent. Previous research of Tat did not depict the concrete homes or the prevalence of timber monocultures dominating the hillsides (Leisz et al., 2001, p. 88; Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86).

We returned to Nhân's home to wait for our taxi to arrive. Khánh and I sat on the decorated straw mat, drinking tea and playing online chess from our smartphones. Khánh lives in Hanoi, having earned a master's degree from the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA), he was deciding whether to return to pursue a doctoral degree. We were both outsiders to the uplands, and it was interesting to hear his thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of Tat Village. I was particularly struck by the variety of outcomes related to recent economic transformations in the village. Economic liberalization began in 1986 with a period of reforms referred to as "*Đổi Mới*" or "renovation." These reforms ended the nationwide collective agricultural system via the introduction of new land laws. *Đổi Mới* liberalization policies brought about new conveniences, sources of income, infrastructure, and improved living conditions for some. Many have better access to external goods and benefit from new varieties of crops, for instance. These changes, however, also engendered new conflicts between neighbors and local officials, intensified pre-existing inequalities, and clashed with customary land-use arrangements between neighbors.

Nhân took advantage of new changes in the village. In addition to income from collaborating with both Vietnamese and foreign researchers (primarily from VNUA), Nhân benefits from selling timber. When household-based land use rights certificates were introduced in the uplands, Nhân was one of the few villagers that gained land, rather than losing upland areas where swidden agriculture could be practiced. Other villagers, however, described conflicts over newly introduced land use rights with neighbors, local authorities, or companies. Many villagers I spoke with expressed concerns with income insecurity, land loss, or labor shortages associated with rural-urban work migration among local youths. Livelihood transformations and the introduction of new household-based land use rights benefited some but created new

challenges and insecurities for others. The story of Tat, then, is one of alternate perspectives on, and stories of change. In this thesis, I used multiple methods to bring together these stories through semi-structured interviews, field notes, and transect walks to better understand how economic liberalization and landscape transformations impact an ethnic minority community in the northern uplands of Vietnam, and how members of that community respond to and interpret recent changes. All names mentioned in this work, including collaborators, interviewed farmers, and community members in Tat are anonymized.

Background

Tat Village

Tat is a village of roughly 170 households located within the Tan Minh commune in the Đà Bắc district of Hòa Bình province in the northern Vietnamese uplands. The borders of the village are about 1.7 miles north to south and 2.4 miles east to west, first established by researchers Dao Minh Truong and Stephen J. Leisz in collaboration with Nhân and Tiến (Fox et al., 2000). A busy road bisects Tat from east to west through a narrow, central valley parallel to Tat stream. Directly to the south, a second, smaller valley accounts for the rest of the irrigated rice agriculture in Tat. The Tan Minh commune office, responsible for local governance, is located on the eastern border of Tat. Across from the

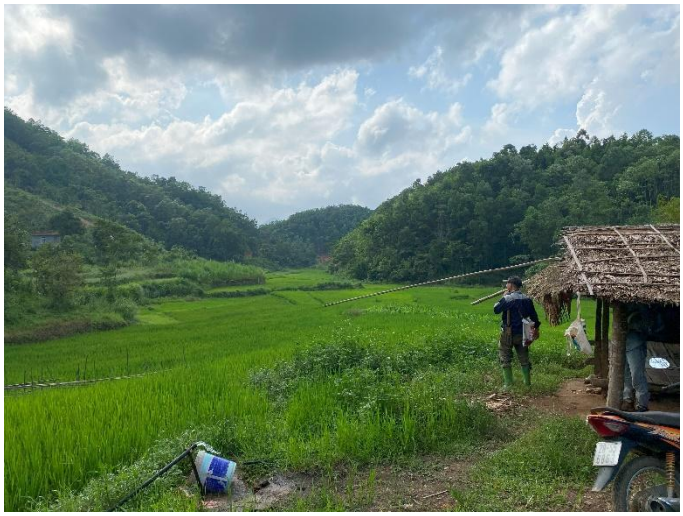

Figure 1.2: The southern valley of Tat (Thomas Chittenden)

commune office sits a small police station. I spent plenty of time in both administrative buildings with Khánh, waiting for paperwork to get approved, interviewing, and receiving research permissions. Slightly down the road, there is a small school and medical center. Besides a few local stores (which were not present in the early 2000s) the rest of the buildings in Tat are concrete and wooden homes, all scattered along the major road. Beyond the road, Tat is a hilly tapestry of agriculture, forest area, and mountainous slopes.

Tat is primarily inhabited by members of the Tây ethnic minority group. Most Tây groups reside in the northern province of Cao Bằng, bordering China. Further south, the Tây villagers of Tat speak a language distinct from most Tây groups. The Tây of Tat are distinguished from other Tây ethnic and linguistic groups as the Đà Bắc Tây, after the district in which they reside, and their language is not understood by other Tây groups (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 27). A Tây village is easily recognizable by its distinct style of raised wooden homes with palm frond roofs. Under the homes, Tây villagers originally kept cattle as a method of drawing insects away from the living space above. None of the villagers I spoke with in Tat continued this practice, and instead opted to either build walls around the bottom level of their homes for extra living space, rebuild their homes completely, or to use the area as a shaded workspace (many farmers in Tat practiced woodworking) and for storage (motorbikes, rototillers, etc..). The few non-Tây villagers I spoke with in the village did not live in raised homes.

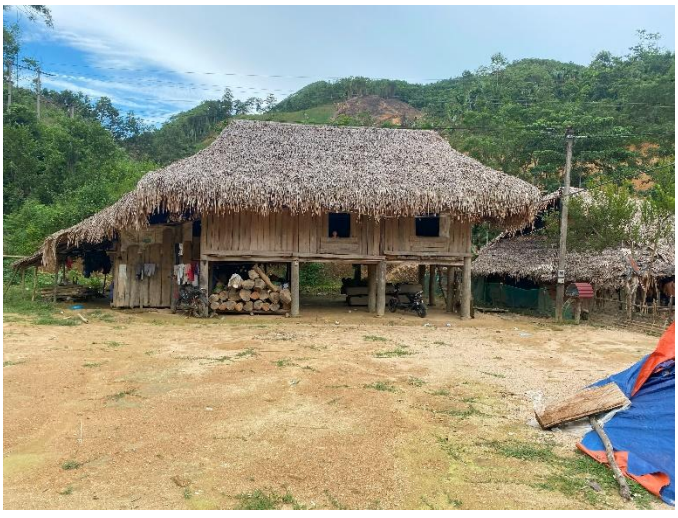

Figure 1.3: Tây-style home (Thomas Chittenden)

Livelihood System

Tat village has limited space for irrigated rice agriculture. Bunded rice paddy fields dominate the narrow valley that bisects Tat from east to west, and the smaller valley to the south. Beyond lowland irrigated rice agriculture, most of Tat consists of steep slopes rising from the central valley to the north and south. Besides a few small attempts at terraced rice farming, these hillsides are the exclusive domain of swidden agriculture. While some other upland ethnic minority groups (such as the H'mong) practice nomadic swidden agriculture, the Tây traditionally practiced and continue to practice rotational swidden agriculture.

Rotational swidden agriculture, also known as shifting cultivation or slash-and-burn agriculture, describes a method by which vegetation is burned to return nutrients to the soil, and then cultivated almost immediately after the burn. After harvest, fallow areas are allowed to regrow into secondary forest or "improved fallow" which often consists of timber monocultures. Swidden agriculture has long been practiced in Vietnam's uplands, as opposed to the widespread use of irrigated rice agriculture by the majority Vietnamese population in deltas and coastal lowlands (McElwee, 2022a). This distinction, often emphasized by lowland dynastic rulers themselves, led to later associations between ethnic minority status and the use of swidden agriculture by the French colonial government and Vietnamese state alike.

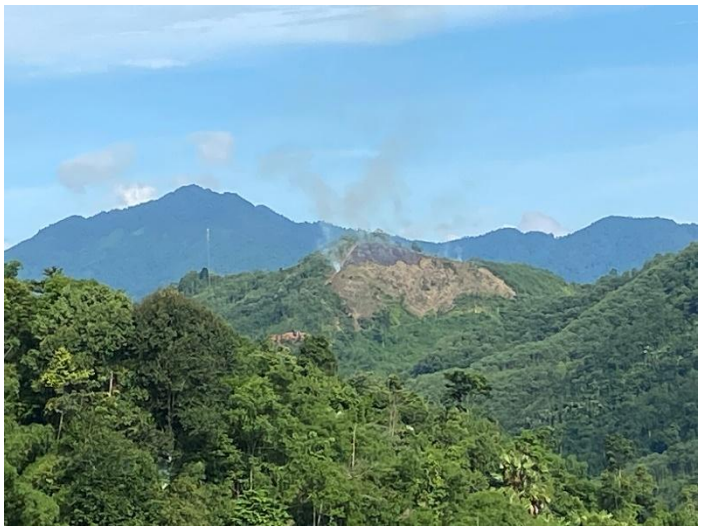

Figure 1.4: Burning swidden field (Thomas Chittenden)

Composite swidden agriculture describes an agricultural system based on the combined use of lowland irrigated rice fields and upland swidden agriculture (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009).

Twenty-three of the twenty-four farmers Khánh and I interviewed practiced composite swidden agriculture: growing rice while simultaneously farming swidden crops such as cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), dryland rice (*Oryza sativa*, rice grown in hillside swiddens), or arrowroot (*Canna indica*). The most important source of income for farmers in Tat, however, are timber crops grown in fallow areas while fields regenerate after being cultivated for agricultural crops, including primarily acacia (*hybrid sp.*) and Siam benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*, or "*bồ đề*" in Vietnamese). Siam benzoin is commonly grown for the harvesting of benzoin gum. Benzoin gum can be used as a fragrance in incense and perfumes. The intentional planting of Siam benzoin has been promoted by French and Swiss companies throughout the northern Vietnamese uplands. In Tat, however, the gum is not harvested, and Siam benzoin is sold as a timber product. Siam benzoin in Tat is tall, thin, lightweight, and slender, with a bright white appearance. The acacia grown in Tat is also tall and thin, but the bark has a darker color, and the logs themselves are heavier than Siam benzoin.

Figure 1.5: Siam benzoin swidden field (Thomas Chittenden)

Siam benzoin and acacia dominate the upland fields and hillsides of Tat. Timber monocultures are grown in swidden fallow areas. Crops such as arrowroot, dryland rice, and cassava are only grown when trees are small, and sunlight can reach the soil. This period only lasts one to two years. Timber crops take seven to nine years to grow depending on conditions. The system by which villagers grow timber monocultures in fallow areas is called "improved fallow." After the introduction of acacia

and Siam benzoin to upland fields, “improved fallows” replaced naturally regrown, secondary forest fallow areas, leading to a domino effect in the local livelihood system. Villagers now profit from the trees grown during the fallow period but lack access to previously abundant forest products common in naturally regenerated fallow areas, such as medicinal plants, bamboo (*Bambusoideae*), mushrooms, bush meat, and firewood (Leisz, 2017, p. 497). Fallow area was additionally used for grazing cattle.

Colonialism, The State, and Đổi Mới

French colonialism began in Vietnam with the establishment of the French Indochinese Union in 1887 (Corfield, 2008). Throughout the colonial period, French authorities characterized uplanders as environmentally destructive, backwards, and uncivilized when compared to Kinh lowland populations (Sikor, 2011a, p. 16). Particularly, swidden agriculture was identified by the French as a major risk to sustainable and efficient agriculture, forestry, and conservation practices (McElwee, 2022a, p. 2). Swidden cultivation lends itself to populations that are nomadic, “scattered, mobile and beyond extensive governmental control” (McElwee, 2022a, p. 3). Without sedentary farming systems, it was difficult for the French (and later the Vietnamese state) to manage upland populations and extract valuable upland resources through taxation (McElwee, 2022a, p. 5). During this period, many upland areas including Tat were subject to indirect rule, whereby local feudal authorities reported to the French. Due to the inaccessibility of Tat, many villagers were forced to provide corvée labor, but intensive resource extraction was not feasible (Rambo and Trần, 2001).

Swidden agriculture did not lend itself well to the tactics of governance employed by the French colonial state, providing the impetus for intervention and reform in the uplands. The mechanisms utilized by the French regime to govern the uplands included forestry, conservation, and land reform. Forestry programs were of particular importance, playing "a critical role in circumscribing the landscape and concentrating the power of the state" until the French regime was ousted in 1954 after the battle of Điện Biên Phủ and Vietnam was split in two in July of the same year (Sowerwine, 2011b, 59). During the revolutionary period, the villagers of Tat were forced to provide tribute and corvée labor to the French (Rambo and Trần, 2001, p. 310). No major battles occurred in Tat, but the Viet Minh set up a guerrilla force in the village. In 1947, the village was burned and two people killed by French soldiers. During this time, many households moved away from the central valley and into the upland forests (Rambo and Trần, 2001, p. 310).

After the split of Vietnam, both the Northern and Southern regimes were concerned with control of upland peoples and resources. The Southern regime, alongside U.S military intelligence and forestry advisors, viewed the agency of ethnic minority uplanders in terms of resistance and opposition to state control and thus sought to manipulate the agency of uplanders via "modernization" and "rationalization" programs (Sowerwine, 2011b, p. 62). The American/Southern logic was that a stable means of subsistence gained from liberalized agricultural activity and access to commodities would direct uplander agency toward "gainful occupation" rather than active resistance (Sowerwine, 2011b, p. 62-63). The link between uplander agency and resistance led to U.S. collaboration with the H'mong in northern Vietnam as an attempt to undermine the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

The Northern Vietnamese regime, however, employed a "unity in autonomy" approach toward uplanders during the revolutionary period (Sowerwine, 2011b, p. 63). Through the creation of "semi-autonomous zones" the Northern government established a "minority-friendly approach" that positioned itself as a powerful counterpoint to American intervention, oppression by the Southern government, and attempts to alter livelihood systems in upland areas (Sowerwine, 2011b, p. 62-63). The construction of the Vietnamese uplands as "outside" and "opposed" to authority worked in favor of the Northern regime, which aimed to consolidate its control over the uplands while simultaneously undermining the Southern regime through guarantees of autonomy to uplanders as constructed "others" (Said, 1979). This approach assumed that autonomy, and the agency that comes with it, would bring about resistance against the State of Vietnam in the South. Despite this "minority-friendly" approach, the DRV implemented the anti-swidden Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Program as an attempt to relocate upland swidden farmers and enforce collectivization (McElwee, 2022a; Sowerwine, 2011b). The program received little funding and lacked comprehensive centralized planning until de-collectivization and forest land allocation intensified in the 1990s.

Although radically different approaches, both the Northern and Southern strategies during the revolutionary period employed the same construction of difference between lowland and upland populations, in line with a similar understanding of uplander agency. This understanding of agency rests on its ability to exist outside and opposed to the dominant relations of power and requires the prescription of state intervention to guide agency toward productive ends that curb resistance, or in the case of the Northern regime, preserve the otherness of uplanders to promote resistance (Said, 1979).

After American forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1973, the capture of Saigon by the Northern Regime ended the war two years later. Following the unification of Vietnam under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) in 1976, the Vietnamese state participated in the continuation of colonial narratives although (somewhat contradictorily) adapted to Marxist-Leninist ideas. The state reversed its "unity in autonomy" approach and dissolved the "semi-autonomous zones" after consolidating control, placing all land under the ownership of the SRV (Sowerwine 2011b, p. 64). Rather than promoting the autonomy of upland areas, the SRV pushed for cultural and social assimilation via fictional stories of common heritage and the erasure of heterogeneous histories (Sowerwine 2011b, p. 64). To this end, the SRV employed extensive mapping campaigns which depicted the uplands as a single bounded region, and reinforced new ethnic categories for identifying upland groups and populations (Sowerwine 2011b, p. 65). Thus, the SRV flipped its policy regarding upland populations when it came into power to direct uplanders away from resistance and to transform uplands into legible objects of control (Scott, 1989). In pursuit of these goals, the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Program was expanded to the south (McElwee, 2022a).

During the socialist period, the Vietnamese state implemented the widespread collectivization of agricultural land. Collectivized land reform, however, was successful only in undermining customary and communal forms of agriculture practiced in the Vietnamese uplands, creating a rampant informal market which capitalized on the lack of constraints previously enforced by traditional land tenure arrangements (Cầm 2011, p. 99). Reforms were most heavily enforced in the lowlands. Evidence shows that some upland areas maintained customary and redistributive systems of land management despite national-level macro changes, including swidden agriculture (Sikor, 2001, p. 923). During this time, the New Economic Zones program

was implemented to resettle Kinh lowlanders to the uplands as an attempt to settle and "civilize" the uplands (McElwee, 2022a).

Although state logging operations were common in the uplands before economic liberalization, timber monocultures became profitable in Tat after the *Đổi Mới* reforms and the following land laws. *Đổi Mới*, roughly translating to "renovation," describes a period of reform beginning in 1986. The state passed the *Đổi Mới* reforms to liberalize the Vietnamese economy and dissolve the system of agricultural collectives instituted via land redistribution throughout the revolutionary (1946 - 1975) and state socialist (1976 - 1986) periods (Sowerwine, 2011b, p. 61-65). Resolution 10 in 1988 ended the collective agricultural system by allowing individual households to hold rights to a plot of land for as long as 15 years (Leisz et al., 2022). The 1993 and 2003 land laws followed expanding the valid length of land-use rights and applicable land-uses (Leisz et al., 2022).

Forest land allocation (FLA) progressed throughout the 1990s to redistribute previously collectivized land to individual households and enterprises (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018). Forest land allocation was overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) for forest management, and the Ministry of Natural Resources and the Environment (MONROE) for land administration at the national level. Enforcement of forest land allocation was handled at the local level by the district Forest Protection Unit (FPU). FPU forest guards supervise the lowest level of administration, the communes, or Commune People's Committees (CPUs) (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018). In Tat, farmers describe varied experiences with the forest guard, as detailed in chapter three. While enforcement is lax for some, the forest guard reprimanded others for clearing protected forest areas. Forest land allocation itself was, and continues to be a messy

process in Tat, rife with overlapping land claims and inconsistent documentation (Rambo and Trần, 2001, p. 316 - 317).

De-collectivization brought with it a new host of government programs and policies, often in direct collaboration with NGOs, to discourage the use of swidden agriculture in the northern uplands. The Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization program was expanded and combined with Program 327, which advocated for planting trees on hills classified as "bare" (McElwee, 2022a). In 1995, the existing New Economic Zones program was integrated as well, with the aim of resettling lowland Kinh to the uplands (McElwee, 2022a). An increase in resettlement reportedly led to a drastic rise in land disputes, "with around 30,000 land disputes documented between 1988 and 1992 alone" (McElwee, 2022a, p. 21). In the year 2000, Program 135 incorporated existing resettlement and sedentarization programs into new initiatives for infrastructure development in the uplands (McElwee, 2022a).

The government subsequently blamed neoliberal-fueled deforestation on swidden agriculture, particularly through media campaigns that criminalized upland swidden farmers as "forest thieves" (Cầm, 2011). More recently, the UN-backed program REDD+ (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) has been adapted in Vietnam to target swidden farmers as culprits of carbon emissions (Sikor and Cầm, 2016; McElwee, 2022a). Contrary evidence shows that swidden, by preserving root structures during burning, is not a major contributor to carbon emissions (Leisz et al., 2007; Ziegler et al., 2012). A new wave of explicitly anti-swidden policy was thus built into the process of de-collectivization, and the incorporation of the land laws. NGO and government-backed programs for sustainable land use rely on state maps of the uplands, which depict forested, mountainous areas where swidden agriculture is actively practiced as "barren" or "unused" land, providing the impetus for

intervention (Leisz, 2017). This method for classifying land dates to the colonial era (McElwee, 2011, p.79).

The land laws were made official through the distribution of land use rights certificates. Land use rights certificates were frequently implemented in lowland areas before upland areas, and they have been distributed in an uneven and discontinuous process ever since. In Tat, villagers reported receiving land use rights certificates late or never receiving them at all. Due to inaccuracies in the original certificates issued in the late 90s, for example, residents of Tat were told by the local Land office cadre to return the books to be corrected. Many, not trusting the cadre to correctly rectify the errors, refused to return the original books (Rambo and Trần, 2001, p. 317). During later reissues in the 2010s, some villagers accepted new certificates, while others refused to take new certificates due to differences in land allotments between original and reissued certificates.

Despite anti-swidden policy, uplanders continue to negotiate the incorporation of new land laws and limitations on swidden agriculture. The long-term effects of economic liberalization in the uplands are the topic of extensive debate in scholarly literature (Lam et al., 2004; McElwee, 2016). Uplanders continue to negotiate the opportunities and challenges of liberalization in highly contextual, diverse ways. In Tat, despite uneven implementation and ongoing contestations, the state has played an increasingly active role in administering the local land use and livelihood system by overseeing land allocation and enforcing the designation of protected forest. Thomas Sikor (2011b, p. 156 - 158) described land allocation in the uplands as "a massive assertion of state control over land," while simultaneously arguing that in practice, control over land is "fragile" at best due to "intense negotiations over use and control rights."

Literature Review

The Vietnamese uplands, then, are a space of negotiation. Policies formed in the lowlands are negotiated, implemented, ignored, or resisted by uplanders themselves in continuous processes of change. Current literature on agrarian transformations in the northern Vietnamese uplands challenges the traditional narrative that uplanders are passive victims or recipients of change (Bonnin and Turner, 2014; McElwee, 2016; Scott 1989, Sikor, 2001; Sowerwine, 2011a). The historical and contemporary relationship between the uplands and the lowlands is best understood as a subject-subject interrelationship, rather than a one-sided subject-object dichotomy (Salemink, 2011). This view is supported by agrarian studies scholars who have redefined the historical relationship between the lowland Kinh (Vietnamese) kingdoms, French authorities, the modern Vietnamese state and upland ethnic minority groups (McElwee, 2022a; Salemink, 2011; Scott, 1989). Breaking down upland-lowland dichotomies brings a close attention to scale. Relationships between actors at multiple levels work together to construct local realities (Leisz et al., 2016; Sikor, 2001). Lines between locals, commune officials, provincial officials, the state, and local companies become blurred. Commune officials are oftentimes community members themselves, embedded in networks of relationships that extend through geographic space, between lowlands and uplands, state and village (Cầm, 2011; Leisz et al., 2016).

Complicating Binaries

The process of post-*Đổi Mới* marketization and liberalization, for example, is experienced differently by uplanders according to context and local responses to shifting macrostructures

(Sikor, 2001). Shifting state macrostructures do not always reflect upland micro-trajectories of change, which can tend toward surprising, ambiguous, or divergent outcomes (Sikor, 2001). In some places, agrarian differentiation has exacerbated existing inequalities, or created new forms of inequality through land parcelization, territorialization, or market reliance (Rambo and Trần, 2009; Sowerwine, 2004, 2011a). In other communities, as demonstrated by Sikor (2001), national policy does not correlate with the underlying reasons for economic differentiation in upland communities. The agency of uplanders themselves plays an important (and often overlooked) role in the trajectory of change in upland areas (Sikor, 2001). Neither is government action even-handed across villages, regions, and ethnic minority groups. The "state," just like uplanders themselves, is not a monolithic, fetishized object (Taussig, 2010). Uplanders interact with the "state" as a network of actors with differing relationships, ties, interests, and goals regarding agrarian change in Vietnam's northern uplands.

The classic upland-lowland dichotomy in Vietnam continues to influence government policies and perceptions of upland land-use practices. Since the French colonial period, various lowland authorities have considered swidden agriculture to be a "backward," environmentally destructive practice associated with upland ethnic minority groups (Leisz, 2017; McElwee, 2022a). According to James C. Scott (1989), French efforts to incorporate uplanders into the fold of French colonial rule led to strict-anti swidden policies. Similar policies were implemented by the Vietnamese state and continue to inform policy. Increasingly, farming systems researchers, agronomists, geographers and environmental researchers highlight the advantages of swidden agriculture as a sustainable land use method when practiced according to customary systems and criticize historical government policies intended to discourage or ban shifting cultivation (Trần et al., 2006).

State authorities define the uplands in opposition to the lowlands, just as Western colonial powers defined the "orient" in relation to the "occident" (Said, 1979). The uplands are representative of "uncivilized" swidden agriculture, poverty, and "backwardness." The lowlands stand in for efficient, large scale irrigated rice agriculture, civilization, and progress (Salemink, 2011). Historians and anthropologists of upland Vietnam challenge upland-lowland binaries by drawing attention to historical connections through trade, mass migrations, and cultural exchange (Salemink, 2011). Before colonization, valuable forest products were traded regularly to lowland areas, then shipped to other parts of the world via maritime trade routes (Salemink, 2011).

With the advent of French colonization, forest industries were established, and large swaths of land were designated specifically to the production of timber (McElwee, 2016). After *Đổi Mới*, timber is not relegated to government-controlled timber plantations but is being incorporated into existing livelihood systems as a source of income, leading to new forms of connections between uplanders, traders, the lowlands, and worldwide markets (Leisz et al., 2016). Redefining these histories provides for a better understanding of contemporary transformations by highlighting that connections between the uplands and lowlands are not just contemporary products of the modern Vietnamese state or of liberalization policy.

Leisz et al. (2016), for instance, use a telecouplings framework to connect land-use changes with policy and locations across broad geographic distances from Vietnam to Laos and Thailand. To understand the local, it is therefore necessary to track globalized flows of capital, commodities, and shifts in governmental policy, all of which exist in conversation with local realities. Famous anthropological examples of these connections include the work of Mintz and Tsing (1986; 2015), who focus on a single commodity (sugar or matsutake) to draw out cultural, social, and livelihood transformations and connections between distant places. Li and Semedi

(2021) apply the same ethnographic approach to the large-scale production and export of palm oil in Kalimantan, Indonesia. Local farmers, officials, traders, capitalists, political elites, and activists are embedded in a web of connections between mutual actors organized by relations of power, culture, kinship, community, and capital (Li and Semedi, 2021).

Peasant Resistance and the State

Overlooking the agency of Vietnamese peasants and uplanders is common in perspectives that rely on civilized-uncivilized binaries, but also on oversimplified resistance-oppressor binaries (Kautsky, 1899/2021; Lenin, 1914/1978). Decolonial and indigenous thinkers undermine colonial ontologies not through the creation of new binaries, but through the destruction of colonial categorizations of the world altogether (Simpson and Smith, 2014). While a resistance-oppressor binary recognizes systemic harm and has the potential to build solidarity, it also overlooks the participation of upland groups in processes of change. Uplanders are not mere victims. Rather, uplanders employ a range of responses to comply, resist, and alter ongoing processes of change to their own benefit, or the benefit of their communities (Scott, 1989). Resistance rarely takes the form of outright, collective refusal in peasant societies envisioned by Marxist peasant studies scholars (Scott, 1989). According to James C. Scott (1989), peasants are much more likely to employ strategies for "everyday resistance" ranging from foot-dragging and noncompliance to poaching, squatting, evasion, or desertion.

The broad range of responses employed by peasants to resist or negotiate new state schemes for upland resource management frequently occur to defend and preserve local "moral economies" that guarantee a right to subsistence among uplanders (Scott, 1976). Moral

economies can include customary land use systems for managing swidden agriculture in the uplands, a constant target of state intervention. Swidden agriculture plays a central role in the livelihoods of uplanders. According to Jameison (1996), uplanders practice swidden "because they must." While lowland authorities characterize swidden as an unnecessary and destructive practice driven by needless exploitation, for uplanders swidden is not a simple choice, but a means of comfortable survival. Indeed, swidden is still prevalent, with estimates of 10-20% of all upland land being utilized for swidden cultivation despite a host of anti-swidden initiatives (Lam et al., 2004; McElwee, 2022a).

State motivations for discouraging or directly enforcing limits on swidden agriculture are varied, with justifications ranging from sustainable agriculture and forestry, reducing carbon emissions, economic development, and securing border areas (McElwee, 2022a; Turner et al., 2016). Turner et al. draw from the work of Scott in *Seeing Like a State* to describe the ways that state policy directed at upland livelihood systems attempt to make both landscapes and people "legible" (2016; 1998). Swidden agriculture, alongside customary systems for upland resource management, occurs beyond the sight of the state. Legibility transforms otherwise external practices into systems that are recordable, standardized, and "readable" (Scott, 1998). Landscapes and livelihood systems that are "readable" are easier to control, tax, and exploit (Scott, 1998). The radical simplification required to achieve legibility mirrors a utopian construction of an endlessly complex social and physical reality. No environment can be made completely legible, and consequentially, informality prevails, sometimes in the form of active resistance. Turner et al. (2016) describe how local officials in northern Vietnam resist, ignore, or alter the implementation of government policy aimed at transforming livelihood systems into legible schemes for state-led resource management.

As previously argued, however, the relationship between the uplands and the state is not so clear-cut. With economic liberalization, uplanders incorporated cash crops into swidden fields, transforming them into valuable sources of income, but also for state and private resource extraction from upland areas. Any bureaucratic structure ultimately relies on a host of informal, de facto processes that could never by codified by authority (Scott, 1998). The informal and continued use of swidden agriculture in the uplands thus exists in a kind of limbo. Both formally discouraged and economically profitable, just as during the collective period, local officials regularly turn a blind eye to the ongoing practice of swidden agriculture, even when it encroaches into protected forest areas.

Past Research in Tat Village

In Tat, direct, collective resistance has not been recorded by past researchers to any great extent. In the absence of direct resistance, forms of "everyday resistance" were often overlooked (Scott, 1989; Rambo and Trần, 2001). *Farming with Fire and Water*, edited by Trần et al. and published in 2009, provides the most comprehensive look into the livelihood and agricultural systems in Tat available in writing. In this book, various authors detail the social and ecological elements of composite swiddening in Tat (Trần and Rambo, 2009; Rambo et al., 2009; Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009; Lam et al., 2009). In Tat, composite swiddening is combined with the use of home gardens, tree gardens, livestock, and fishponds (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). According to Mai and Trần, melia (*Melia azedarach*) and palms (*Arecaceae*) were the preferred fallow crops for villagers, while bamboo was still considered to be profitable and was therefore heavily encouraged via government programs (2009, p. 88). However, bamboo also had a high investment cost and removed nutrients from the soil (Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86).

Siam benzoin was planted at this time, but was not profitable, and as a result was "not popular in Tat hamlet" (Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86). Siam benzoin was sold on occasion for a low price, but was also used for firewood, fencing, and to speed up fallow regeneration (Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86). Siam benzoin was first encouraged by local authorities as a swidden fallow crop during the collective period in 1978. Farmers were permitted to clear swiddens on the condition that they planted Siam benzoin in the fallow area (Rambo and Trần, 2001). This was long before Siam benzoin was considered an efficient use of fallow land by uplanders.

Lam et al. organized livelihood transformations in Tat into three stages, from 1988 – 1994, 1995 – 1999, and 2000 – 2003 (2004, p. 278; also included in Trần et al., 2009). The three stages of change in Tat are characterized by increasing population and economic differentiation, forest land allocation to individual households, improved infrastructure including roads and transportation, agricultural diversification, appearance of local private shops, increased access to electricity, use of hybridized rice seeds, and decreasing total swidden area (2004, p. 278-280). During the final stage, the swidden fallow period decreased to 3-5 years, and agricultural extension programs were encouraging the growth and sale of bamboo alongside other cash crops. With decreasing fallow times, Lam et al. raised concerns regarding the long-term prevalence of composite swidden agriculture in Tat (2004, p. 292). With the resurgence of timber, however, personal observation in Tat from August 2023 reveals a reversal of some of these trends, leading to an increase in fallow time to grow timber in "improved fallows." Bamboo, while still sold, is no longer considered to be profitable. These transformations will be discussed in depth in chapter two.

According to Rambo et al. in chapter two of *Farming with Fire and Water*, agriculture in Tat operates in the context of a household-based system of production and exchange, although

there is some evidence that an “ethos of sharing” may still be practiced between households, as evidenced by village-wide festivals and labor exchange groups (2009, p. 35; T. Chittenden, personal observation, August 18, 2023). Besides this “ethos of sharing” forms of inter-household and inter-lineage interaction beyond competition and conflict are overlooked (Rambo et al., 2009). Rambo et al. (2009) argue that collective action and inter-household cooperation in Tat has been undermined by a long history of domination by outsiders, be they feudal, colonial, or contemporary. This observation was first laid out by Rambo and Trần in 2001, when the authors argued that Tat was “a community, characterized by scarcity of social capital, lack of social cohesion, and limited ability to collectively manage its natural resources” (p. 299). While conflict between neighbors in Tat is common, my own experience in the village demonstrated potent instances of cooperation, and subtle forms of resistance that pervade the agricultural and livelihood system. Where Rambo et al. may fall short in social analysis, however, they (alongside the various authors included in Trần et al.) make up for in ecological and agricultural descriptions of change in Tat based on recent economic transformations taking place throughout Vietnam at the turn of the 21st century (2009; 2009).

Another study, *Bright Peaks Dark Valleys*, partakes in a comparative analysis of five upland villages (including Tat) to better understand how recent environmental changes effect local livelihood systems and land cover in the northern Vietnamese uplands from an international development perspective (Le and Rambo, 2001). Chapter two, written by Trần Đức Viên, provides background information, including demographic and environmental data (2001, p. 43 - 49). Chapter three details the agroecology of each village (Dao et al., 2011, p. 51 - 83). Chapter four addresses land cover and land use (Leisz et al., 2001, p. 85 - 100). At the time of this study in 2001, Tat had 432 residents (Trần, 2001, p. 48). Most income was gained from forest and

agricultural resources (Trần, 2001, p. 49). No primary forest, defined as forests made up of trees over fifty years old, was left in Tat by 2001 due to the extensive use of swidden agriculture for forestry (Dao et al., 2001, p. 53). Descriptions of agricultural practices were similar to those recorded by Trần et al. (2009). Swidden crops included rice, cassava, maize (*Zea mays*), arrowroot, and ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) (Tran, 2001, p. 47). Alongside swidden and lowland rice cultivation, villagers utilized fishponds and tree gardens (Tran, 2001, p. 47). This study found that income and population density were negatively correlated with natural forest cover, likely due to the negative effects of forestry on swidden (Dao et al., 2001).

According to the studies discussed above, gender played an important role in the internal social organization of Tat village in the late 90s and early 2000s (Lam et al., 2004, p. 304 - 305; Le and Rambo, 2001, p. 307; Rambo et al., 2009, p. 33 - 35). Agricultural labor in Tat was divided along gendered lines. For irrigated rice agriculture, both men and women carried manure to the fields, but women were primarily responsible for weeding, transplanting rice seeds, harvesting, and threshing (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 33 - 34). Men prepared the paddy fields through harrowing, as well as uprooting rice seedlings from nurseries to carry them to the fields and carrying grain to store houses (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 33 - 34). Men tended to larger livestock such as buffalo, while women tended to smaller livestock (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 34). Men were primarily responsible for burning and clearing swiddens, but harvesting bamboo for sale was done by both men and women in the village. Illegal logging was done entirely by young men (Lam et al., 2004, p. 305). Collecting firewood, however, was an especially heavy burden for women (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 35).

Within the household, women were responsible for performing most domestic tasks (Rambo et al., 2009, p. 34). The gendered division of labor within the household recorded by

Rambo et al. is corroborated by my own personal observations in Tat. Nhân's wife, Thuận, was primarily responsible for washing clothes and cleaning. Le and Rambo argue that there are substantial differences in decision making power between men and women within households in Tat, with men having the final say in household-based decision making (Le and Rambo, 2001, p. 307). Descent in Tat is traced through the patriline, which impacts land ownership in Tat by women. More recently, however, many women have taken to running stores and small businesses (T. Chittenden, personal observation, August 18, 2023). Based on my limited, ten-day excursion to Tat, I am unequipped to provide an update to gendered divisions of labor, land ownership, and economic mobility. This will be discussed further in the limitations section of the conclusion.

The research detailed above demonstrates the need to draw together perspectives from anthropology, peasant studies, political science, environmental studies, geography, and land use science to better understand recent changes in the Vietnamese uplands after the beginning of economic liberalization in 1986 with the *Đổi Mới* reforms. With the speed of transformations across the uplands, a contemporary study of livelihood change in Tat will provide a much-needed update to the existing literature. In this thesis project, I will build upon the existing literature by closely considering the individual perspectives of villagers in an ethnic-minority Tây community of the Vietnamese uplands. A zoomed-in analysis such as this will bring attention to the diversity of local, bottom-up reactions to land reform policy, and to the actions and responses of uplanders themselves.

Methods

My first visit to Tat was on August 13th, 2023, for a preliminary visit with my host, Nhân, and his family. Two days later, on the 15th, I arrived in Tat with my translator Khánh to start conducting semi-structured interviews and walking transects. I stayed in Tat for ten days, completing 24 semi-structured interviews with villagers, and one additional, shorter semi-structured interview with an official in the commune office located on the eastern edge of Tat. Each semi-structured interview lasted for about an hour.

Figure 1.6: Preparing for a semi-structured interview (Thomas Chittenden)

Interviews started with a series of preliminary questions about age, ethnicity, length of time living in Tat, and when the individual received land use rights documentation. Consistent follow-up questions included information about what each farmer planted in their swidden fields over time, and what livestock they raised. A section of the interview on market information addressed what villagers buy or sell. Many bought agricultural inputs such as chemical pesticides and rototillers, and paid neighbors for extra field labor. Others invested in new homes, motorbikes, or televisions. The primary source of income across Tat came from the sale of timber. Each interview further addressed landscape information, discussing whether farmers in Tat gained or lost land with land reform, what types of land (as defined by official land classifications) farmers cleared for agriculture, conflict over land rights, and the price of land.

A final section of "livelihood and community" questions related to whether social, inter-household relationships changed alongside land reform, liberalization, and landscape transformations. This section posed questions about the operation of collective labor groups during planting and harvesting, how decisions are made in the community regarding when to

plant, how villagers contribute to major yearly festivals in the village, how land disputes are handled, and how villagers assist each other in other aspects of life, such as constructing new homes. These questions pay close attention to temporality, with an eye to how the community changed over time. Besides these questions and general themes, however, each interview differed greatly from the last. While some interviews were rigid and formulaic, others followed the flow of conversation into interesting or unexpected territory. Some farmers used the interview as an outlet to voice grievances about corruption, conflict with neighbors, or other hardships. Other villagers spoke of disputes with local companies over land use rights.

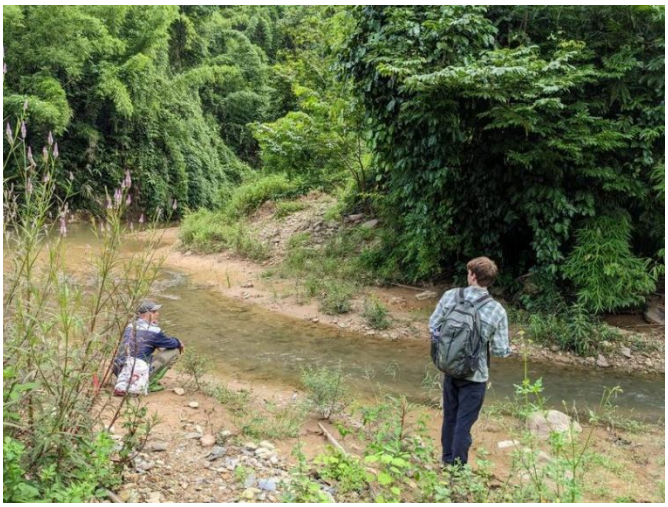

Figure 1.7: Transect walk (Thomas Chittenden)

Alongside the 24 semi-structured interviews, I walked nine transects throughout Tat. Transect walks entail walking through the community with a local (In this case Khánh and I walked with Nhân), to see how specific parts of Tat changed over time. Along the transects, I visited multiple locations where the latitude/longitude points were recorded, and land cover described in 1997 and 1999 by Stephen J. Leisz. I took pictures to compare the landscape to previous photos of the area. These walks not only provided context for the changes farmers described in the interviews but allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of upland swidden agriculture. I observed farmers I previously interviewed harvesting bamboo and timber, foraging for ginger, and watching their cattle as they graze. Returning to Nhân's home each evening, I compiled field notes into daily journals, recording everything from my own thoughts to small talk.

Objectives

The objective of this research is to better understand how economic liberalization and land reform are experienced, interpreted, and negotiated at the local level. Particularly, I analyze how economic liberalization and land reform transformed the livelihood system and inter-household relationships in Tat. The objective of chapter two is to investigate the impact of post-*Đổi Mới* land reform policy on the composite swidden farming and livelihood system in Tat. Chapter two focuses on interview results and personal observation from transect walks to analyze the connection between the continued practice of swidden agriculture and land reform in Tat. The objective of chapter three is to investigate the personal experiences of farmers in Tat as they negotiate the process of land reform by complying, resisting, or ignoring it altogether. The research and analysis presented in these chapters will contribute to an existing literature on the nexus between landscape transformations, agrarian reform, and economic liberalization to better understand how upland farmers act as agents to negotiate processes of livelihood change. This research has the potential to lend insights into how farmers are negotiating agrarian transformations in similar regions of Southeast Asia and potentially the rest of the world.

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Chapter II

FROM EXCLUSION TO INCLUSION:

THE STATE AND INDIGENOUS LAND USE PRACTICES IN THE POST *ĐỔI MỚI* ERA

Overview

During the cooperative period in Vietnam (1957-1986), socialist policy makers attempted to limit swidden agriculture in upland areas and replace these systems with state forest plantations and sedentary farming. During this period, Vietnam's ethnic minorities in the uplands continued to use swidden agriculture (in many cases as their main farming system) as an important source of subsistence in the face of food insecurity. Despite the continuation of state policy opposed to swidden agriculture, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* reforms indirectly led to a changing role for swidden agriculture with the introduction of land reform and liberalized systems for upland resource management. *Đổi Mới* marks the beginning of an informal inclusion of swidden agriculture into new liberalized, market-based livelihood systems as it has de facto been rebranded as "productive forest area." The changing status of swidden agriculture represents shifting local government perceptions of indigenous upland land use practices and their sustainability, albeit through the continuation of colonial-era narratives regarding the relationship between ethnic minority uplanders and the natural environment

Introduction

Located just 15 minutes from central Hanoi by motorbike, the museum complex occupied an unusual amount of space (roughly 4.5 hectares) for the dense infrastructure of the city. “Vietnam Museum of Ethnology” was written in French, Vietnamese, and English on the modern architecture of the building’s stark white exterior. It was only my second day in Vietnam, and I had just visited the Ho Chi Minh Museum and Mausoleum, eager to see what Hanoi had to offer before leaving for the uplands. The main building of the museum was two stories tall, curved in a semicircle around a large central courtyard. Upon entering the building, I was greeted with an eye-catching display of Vietnam’s 53 official ethnic minority groups, color coded and categorized according to five main linguistic families. Smiling pictures filled the walls with brightly colored headwear, clothing, and accessories. A sizeable map flanked the wall of labelled portraits, depicting the meticulously defined areas where each ethnic minority group, first defined by French colonial ethnologists and adapted by the Vietnamese state, was recorded as living. Color-coded ethnic groups separated by stark lines cartographically depicted each ethnicity as living separate from others. Small splotches of color were clustered in the uplands and periphery regions of the map, while a long, swooping territory depicted the lowland domain of the Kinh (Vietnamese). Despite the colonial origins of ethnic mapping projects, the museum displays struck me with the impression of timelessness.

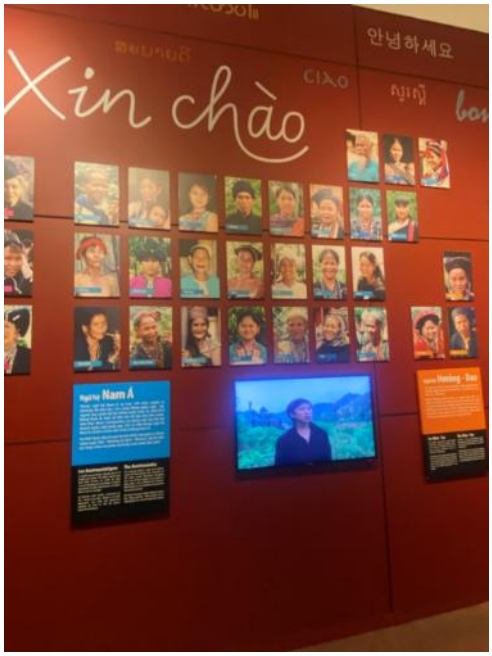

Figure 2.8: Wall of Vietnam's state-recognized ethnic minority groups (Thomas Chittenden)

After the introductory exhibit, a plaque about swidden agriculture noted the supposed destructive tendencies of the practice, highlighting deforestation and soil erosion as two major outcomes. The plaque ended with the following: “where deforestation and soil erosion have degraded the natural resources and conservation efforts are in place, swidden agriculture is being replaced with intensive cultivation and crop rotation.” Swidden agriculture involves the use of slash and burn techniques and is particularly common on hillside slopes. When practiced according to customary land-use systems, swidden can and has been utilized as a sustainable indigenous land-use practice (McElwee, 2022a, p. 30). At the end of the tour through the building, the museum featured an exhibition on “change and development.” A series of informative plaques seemed to laud the adoption of agricultural machines, applying “scientific technology,” and increasing investments in production in upland areas. Due to these changes, some have even become rich.” A display of a marketplace depicted mannequins in ethnic clothing perusing commodities such as toothpaste, towels, shoes, and other products in brightly labelled packaging.

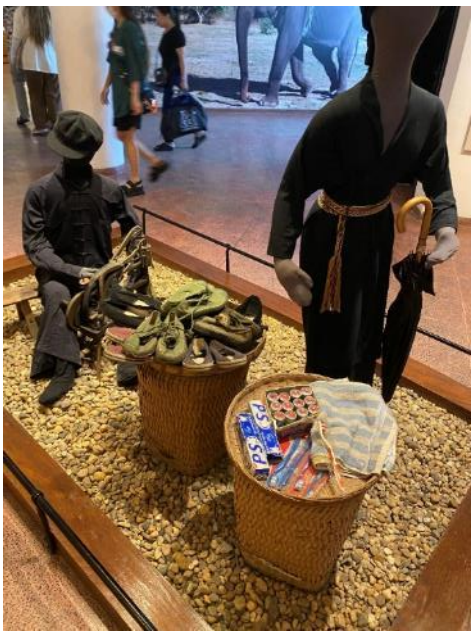

Figure 2.2: Marketplace display (Thomas Chittenden)

Founded in 1997 in collaboration with the French government, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology is a testament to the postcolonial development of the Vietnamese state (VME, n.d.). National museums provide insights into how the state represents itself, its own history, and its identity. The Museum of Ethnology constructs national ethnic identities through “material,” “place rooted, homogenous, and bounded conceptions of identity” dating back to colonial French

systems of ethnic classification (Macdonald, 2012). Despite the colonial origins of Vietnam's 53 state-recognized ethnic minority groups, ethnic classifications are depicted as scientific, objective, and above all static and unchanging. Pamela McElwee (2022b) captures the essence of Vietnamese ethnology well, arguing that the state "treated these groups much as a natural history work might treat various species of birds, in their descriptions of quaint customs and colorful costumes." This is reflected by the Museum of Ethnology, in which ethnic groups are characterized as feminized, infantilized children in relation to the paternalistic guidance of the Kinh-Vietnamese nation state (Sowerwine, 2011, p. 63; McElwee, 2022b).

State authority figures attribute any developments that do occur among upland groups to the guidance of the state (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). This is particularly true in relation to land-use and livelihood transformations. The practice of swidden agriculture among upland groups has served as the impetus for the application of land reform and agrarian policy in upland areas. Upland groups were/are treated as objects of intervention. Supposedly unsustainable, environmentally destructive, inefficient, and traditional practices such as swidden are replaced with modern, scientific land-use strategies. French colonial authorities were the first to characterize swidden agriculture as an unfavorable land use practice. The French considered the practice to be a major source of deforestation (Sikor, 2011a). Such characterizations persisted through the revolutionary and state socialist periods, during which collectivized land policies excluded swidden agriculture altogether (Rambo and Trần, 2009). During collectivization, local authorities in the uplands regularly turned a blind eye to the continued practice of swidden agriculture due to its importance for local livelihoods (Sikor 2001, p. 923). In the present, anti-swidden programs, in many instances, have been expanded alongside ongoing processes of land reform (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018).

Đổi Mới, roughly translating to "renovation" describes a period of economic reform beginning in Vietnam in 1986. In response to economic collapse, stagnation, and food shortages (alongside various other internal and external pressures) the Vietnamese government attempted to remediate these issues by implementing a range of policies to reform the economic sector and dissolve the collectivized agricultural system. Agricultural reform included the rise of cash crops (including tree crops) in upland areas, through which government agencies and companies discovered the usefulness of swidden agriculture for the purpose of resource extraction.

Agricultural reform was facilitated by a series of land laws. The post-*Đổi Mới* land laws emphasized household-based land tenure, effectively breaking up cooperatives by leasing land to households for a specific number of years. The land laws dictated what each household could do with their land parcels based on a set of land classifications for both agricultural and forest land. Rather than simply marking forest land as off-limits, forest land is classified as either productive, protected, or special use, thus defining the range of acceptable commercial and subsistence forest activities by households. Special use forests, however, are not managed by individual households, instead designating land that is managed directly by the state for special uses, such as national parks. Today it is common for households to hold land use rights for both productive and protected forest areas in the uplands. The designation of forest land is heavily influenced by slope, with hillsides classified as forest, and flat lowland areas classified as agricultural land (Sikor, 2011a). The association between slope and land cover type has roots in French colonial forest administration (Sikor, 2011a).

On productive forest area, farmers continue to practice swidden agriculture, which while not officially encouraged or allowed, is informally permitted by some local leaders. On protected forest land, clearing the land for swidden agriculture is forbidden and risks punishment via fines

from the forest guard. However, many farmers are still awarded small payments from the forest guard for protecting the forest and maintaining tree cover, even if the tree cover consists of timber cash crops. With *Đổi Mới*, forest protection has thus been individualized, with local authorities using monetary incentives to compel uplanders to protect and preserve forest land on the household-level according to state-defined conceptions of sustainable forestry. Over time, uplanders are increasingly influenced by post-*Đổi Mới* policy, and incorporated into processes of state-sanctioned land reform and marketization.

The objective of this chapter is to investigate the impact of post-*Đổi Mới* land reform policy on how land is used, and how its use impacts the farming system, commodity production, and resource extraction. Pursuing these objectives will serve to illuminate how colonial narratives continue to influence government policies for upland resource management. Further, I will argue that upland livelihood transformations emanating from the *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986, despite ongoing anti-swidden programs, have had the informal effect of reinforcing the continued practice of swidden agriculture within new systems of upland resource management and extraction.

Upland Transformations

I left Hanoi for a preliminary visit to Tat on August 13th, 2023. The taxi arrived early in the morning, and I was accompanied by Dr. Phong and Dr. Thang, professors from the Vietnam National University of Agriculture (VNUA) who were kind enough to introduce me to my future host, a swidden farmer named Nhân. Both middle-aged researchers, Thang was soft spoken and always looked as though he was pondering something. Phong, on the other hand, liked to talk

and smiled often. He carried with him an air of importance. Phong sat in the front seat, pointing out directions to the taxi driver. Thang sat in the back with me. Within ten minutes of driving from hotel Vang Trang, we already crossed the Red River, running high during the rainy season, and inched our way through the French colonial infrastructure of central Hanoi.

In just 40 minutes, we had left the city behind altogether, and the flat plains of the Red River Delta gave way to the initial hills and karst upthrusts of the midland slopes. Later, the steep mountains of the Northern Mountain Region (NMR) rose from both sides of the narrow roads. The trip to Tat has decreased from a one-day journey in the 1990s to only two hours from Hanoi thanks to the construction of paved roads in the early 2000s. The weather of the rainy season was no longer an inhibitor to access, although the constant risk of landslides still made any driver cautious through the months of May to October. Despite the risk, large buses ferried passengers across the mountains, timber trucks lumbered precariously down the narrow byways, and motorbikes sped by, transporting both goods and people between the cities and the slopes.

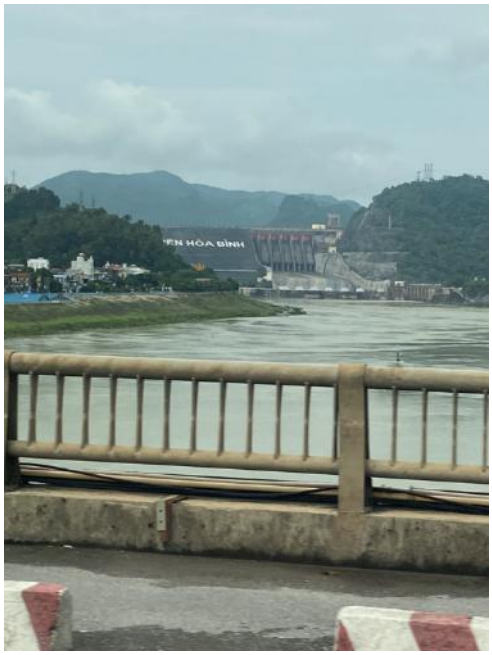

Figure 2.3: View of the Hòa Bình Dam (Thomas Chittenden)

After roughly an hour and a half of driving, we arrived in Hòa Bình City, the provincial capital of Hòa Bình province in which Tat is located. The imposing Hòa Bình Dam, completed in 1994, cast a long shadow across the Black (Da) River, bisecting the city from north to south. The Hòa Bình Dam is one of the largest state-led construction projects in Northern Vietnam to date, leading to the displacement of thousands of uplanders from the creation of the reservoir. Three

households in Tat consist of Kinh farmers displaced from the creation of the dam (Rambo et al., 2009).

Upon leaving Hòa Bình City, the transition from urban to rural was not as gradual as the outskirts of Hanoi. The road quickly narrowed through the river valleys, and the landscape transformed into a patchwork of steep mountainside swidden fields and fallow regrowth. The limited areas with level surfaces were dominated by paddy fields. Closer to the road, cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), arrowroot (*Canna indica*), corn (*Zea mays*), and dryland rice (*Oryza sativa*) grew on the slopes. For the most part, however, large monocultures of acacia (*hybrid sp.*) and Siam benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*, or "*bồ đề*" in Vietnamese, is grown in the uplands as a high-value and lightweight timber) covered the landscape. Timber was everywhere, sitting on the roadside, and stacked in large trucks passing us as we made our way to Tat. Despite the official stance of discouraging the clearing of sloping land associated with swidden, swidden continues to play an obvious and visible role on the landscape as a place to plant trees for timber. In the lowlands, the timber is processed into wood products such as furniture for export. New to field research, it was my first time seeing many of the agriculture and tree crops in person. As the taxi passed by different varietals, I would point out the window, confirming with Dr. Phong or Dr. Thang each plant I was able to identify. When we reached cassava, Phong turned from the front seat.

"Have you ever tried cassava?"

I couldn't remember. Too embarrassed to admit that I could only recall consuming cassava in the form of tapioca pearls in bubble tea, I responded that I may have tried it before, but I wasn't sure. Interested in the tone of his question but not quite sure how to carry the conversation, I followed with a vague yet open, "what do you think of it?"

"I'm tired of cassava," Phong explained. He had not eaten the tuber in years.

"Why?"

Phong studied me for a moment, and then with a brief nod he spoke in English, "Before *Đổi Mới*, there was no rice. We could fill up only on cassava. It is because of *Đổi Mới* that we have rice. That is why I am tired of cassava. I ate it too much as a child."

Phong proceeded to explain the method his parents used to grind down cassava and add it to meals to add extra calories or consume it alone as a soup. Phong's reference to *Đổi Mới* was likely prompted by previous conversations we had at the university the day before, where I expressed an interest in the relationship between changes in Tat and economic liberalization in Vietnam. Phong's statement made it abundantly clear that I did not do a particularly great job at hiding my critical stance toward economic liberalization, despite my best efforts. Regardless, his response revealed much about his personal experiences with changes in livelihood, subsistence, and economic well-being.

Figure 2.4: Cassava growing in a Tat swidden field (Thomas Chittenden)

Cassava, also referred to as manioc, yuca, or tapioca, is a starch-filled root tuber native to South America. Cassava thrives best in the tropics, and can be grown in very poor, low-nutrient soil conditions (Cock and Connor, 2021). The general resilience of cassava in the tropics has led to its widespread use as a low-risk subsistence crop in food-insecure areas throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Central America, South America, and Southeast Asia. Typical

international uses include cassava flour, chips, and boba. Cassava notoriously has very little nutritional value, and the presence of cyanide makes it dangerous to eat when it is raw or prepared incorrectly. In food-insecure areas, cassava is only meant to fill empty stomachs and do little more. Phong related the crop to hardship, hunger, and necessity, suggesting a strong relationship between memory, food, and post-socialist imaginings of the past. Since *Đổi Mới*, very few farmers in Tat consume cassava as they did during the collective period, opting instead to sell it or shred it into dried strips and use it as animal feed. In upland areas of Vietnam, the small areas of flat land in the valleys are allocated exclusively for rice agriculture. Thus, cassava, like arrowroot and dryland rice, is only grown on hillside swidden fields. These fields are periodically left fallow to regenerate, after which they are burned to return nutrients to the soil.

Phong, Vietnamese and from the lowlands, likely had a much different experience during the collective and post-*Đổi Mới* period compared to upland ethnic minority groups. During collectivization, swidden agriculture played a crucial subsistence role for ethnic minority groups in the northern uplands, and uplanders consumed cassava regularly. Although swidden agriculture was discouraged as an upland land use practice throughout the collective period, local authorities tolerated or allowed it due to its important role in supplementing diets when rice yields were low, an advantage not available in the lowlands where swidden agriculture is not practiced (McElwee, 2020). In fact, due to the widespread use of swidden, many uplanders fared better than their lowland counterparts during the collective period, enjoying greater food security and access to forest resources resulting from diversified subsistence strategies (Rambo and Trần, 2009). The continued practice of swidden agriculture during this period was not moderated by the state, and thus was managed by local, customary systems of resource management that preserved common resources (Rambo and Trần, 2009).

The introduction of *Đổi Mới* in 1986, however, kicked off processes of parcelization and commodification that turned land into a limited and profitable source of capital via the growth of valuable timber crops. Varying modes of resistance by some continue to refute this process, while others embrace it. Although the results of *Đổi Mới* were positive for Phong and many others, I found that outcomes vary significantly in Tat. My initial drive to Tat made the transformations in upland swidden agriculture apparent, depicting the shift away from subsistence agriculture toward market-based timber production and household-based land ownership. Transformations to the form of swidden agriculture practiced in Tat represent not only changing livelihood strategies but also changing views of upland ethnic minority land use practices and the use of new discourses surrounding land use and land tenure. These preliminary observations, both in the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology and on the way to Tat, primed my senses for the transformations I would discuss with villagers throughout the next ten days in Tat. Infrastructural development programs at the turn of the century strengthened upland connections to lowland areas, creating the conditions for rapid social, cultural, environmental, and economic change as upland ethnic minority groups negotiate the process of state reform.

Tat Village

I arrived in Tat for a preliminary visit on August 13th, 2024. Two days later, I began my field research on the 15th. I was graciously welcomed by Nhân and his family, who agreed to house me for my time in Tat. The home was a small, two-story

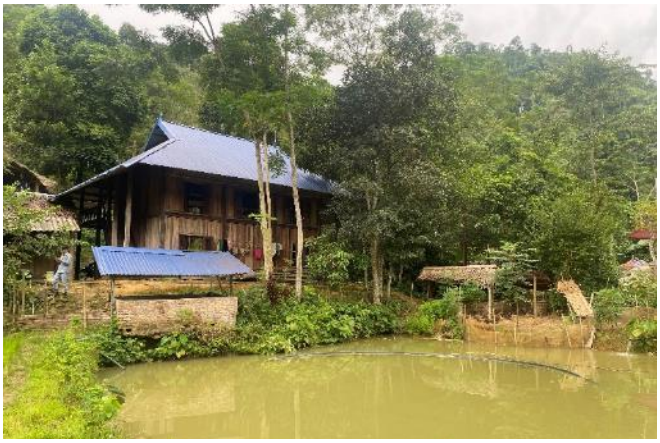

Figure 2.5: Modified traditional house in Tat (Thomas Chittenden)

wooden house with a blue tin roof. Formerly raised as is the traditional style for Tây homes, the home was rebuilt and the area underneath converted to living space, complete with sleeping areas, a TV, and a wooden table. Nhân and his family own 1,400 square meters of lowland paddy rice in Tat. Nhân plants Siam benzoin, acacia, blindness tree (*Excoecaria cochinchinensis*, or "*cây mu*" in Vietnamese), and bamboo (*Bambusoideae*) on hillside fields classified as forest area.

Nhân belongs to the Tây ethnic minority group, as do most of the villagers in the small upland village of Tat. The Tây ethnic minority group is primarily concentrated in the northern uplands of Vietnam. In Tat, the villagers refer to themselves as Đà Bắc Tây, relating to the Đà Bắc district in which the Tây villagers reside. The language spoken by the residents of Tat differs significantly from the Tây dialect spoken in Cao Bằng province, where the vast majority of Tây live in Vietnam. "Tat" translates to waterfall, referring to the small waterfalls that trickle into the river that bisects Tat from east to west along the road. Between the streams and slanted on the slopes are swidden fields, comprising the vast amount of agricultural area in the village. Relegated to the limited space in the valleys are rice paddy fields. All but one villager I spoke to in Tat worked varied amounts of both hillside swidden fields and lowland rice fields, as does Nhân. Differences in access to irrigated rice fields or hillside swiddens is often related to lineage-based land claims that migrants lack as relative newcomers to the village.

The combined use of both hillside swiddens and lowland rice paddy is referred to as composite swidden agriculture (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). Composite swidden agriculture is the dominant livelihood system in Tat (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). Before *Đổi Mới*, swidden agriculture was focused on the growth of subsistence crops such as arrowroot, cassava, and dryland rice. After the crops were grown, the field was left to regrow into secondary forest. In the meantime, the farmer would clear secondary forest elsewhere while the previously harvested plot regenerated. Rotational swidden was made possible by a flexible land-tenure system whereby villagers would collaborate between households to designate agricultural land (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). The fallow forest area was used by villagers to graze cattle, and to collect forest resources such as bamboo, ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), firewood, mushrooms, bush meat, medicinal plants, and various other forest products. Some farmers nostalgically remembered this time, during which the forests felt wild, and people practically "gave each other land just to have neighbors."

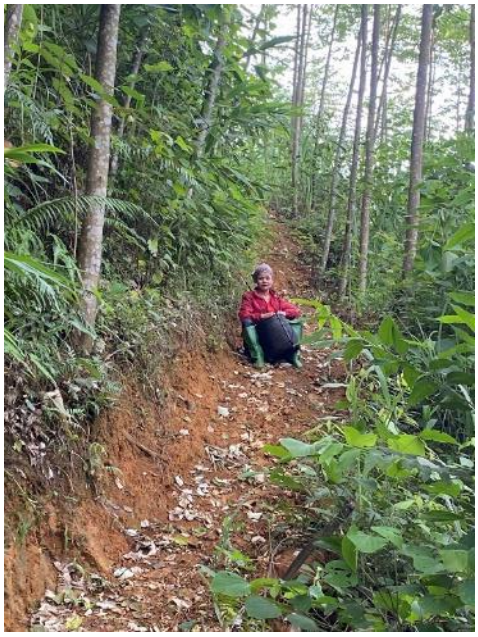

Figure 2.6: A resident of Tat foraging for ginger (Thomas Chittenden)

Outcomes in Tat Village

Impact on Swidden Agriculture

About halfway through my stay of ten days in Tat, I visited a portion of the village where many farmers reported less access to lowland irrigated rice fields. These villagers lived on the west

side of the village, primarily in wooden homes with palm frond roofs. Villagers here reported lower paddy acreage than villagers who lived closer to the center or east side of the village. I arrived early in the morning with Nhân and Khánh, only to find that most of the adults were out collecting bamboo shoots in the forest. Gathering for subsistence is still an important livelihood strategy employed by some villagers, but not others. Nhân, for example, casually stopped at multiple points as we hiked up the slopes of the village to collect bamboo shoots as a side dish for meals of chicken, pork, and rice. Nhân no longer relied on bamboo for subsistence due to his income from selling timber, indicative of the partial transition to market-based livelihood activities. The partial shift away from subsistence gathering activities emphasizes the uneven outcomes of economic liberalization in Tat. Previously, forests were important sources of forest resources including bamboo and for grazing livestock. (McElwee, 2020)

When we returned home, Nhân sliced and boiled the bamboo shoots into a salty stew. At times bamboo shoots would be served alone, at other times bamboo would be combined with chicken organs as a side dish. In recent history, bamboo was an important commercial forest product. From 1997 – 2010, a government initiative part of the 661 Program for forest rehabilitation encouraged the intentional planting of bamboo (Leisz et al., 2022). The government believed that bamboo (particularly *Dendrocalamus brandisii*, or *luồng* bamboo) could be sold to traders as a source of income and doubled as valuable building material throughout the village at that time (Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86). The government argued that planting bamboo (like planting Siam benzoin in

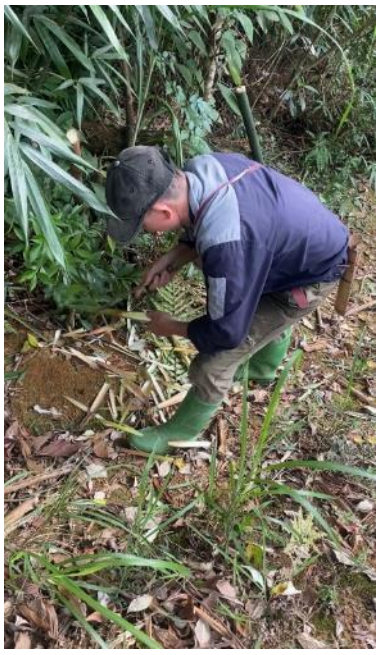

Figure 2.7: A resident of Tat harvesting bamboo (Thomas Chittenden)

recent times) could provide both environmental and economic benefits to uplanders. Slowly, wood, tin, and increasingly concrete became common building materials, and bamboo failed to provide as much of an income for villagers in Tat. Although some villagers continue to sell it, most bamboo is foraged when it is needed, particularly by those who are food insecure and rely on bamboo shoots to supplement their diets. During this period, Melia (*Melia azedarach*) and palm (*Arecaceae*) were also important swidden fallow crops (Mai and Trần, 2009, p. 86).

Siam benzoin and acacia replaced bamboo as the dominant swidden fallow crop around 2010 as a more profitable alternative. Although villagers in Tat continue to practice composite swidden agriculture (and never truly stopped during collectivization), the system has transformed according to the incorporation of acacia and Siam benzoin. Timber trees began to dominate the landscape in the mid-late 2010s. Villagers reported that timber is more profitable than other crops grown in the past such as bamboo. Additionally, the government encouraged the growth of timber trees as reforestation through payments for ecosystem services. Payments are determined by tree cover to encourage reforestation in upland areas.

Siam benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*) is a tall, white, slender tree that is lighter and more profitable than acacia. Siam benzoin, also called Siam benzoin, was previously encouraged by local authorities as a swidden fallow crop in 1978 during the collective period. During this time, authorities permitted clearing for swidden on the condition that Siam benzoin was planted in fallow areas (Rambo and Trần, 2001). This was long before Siam

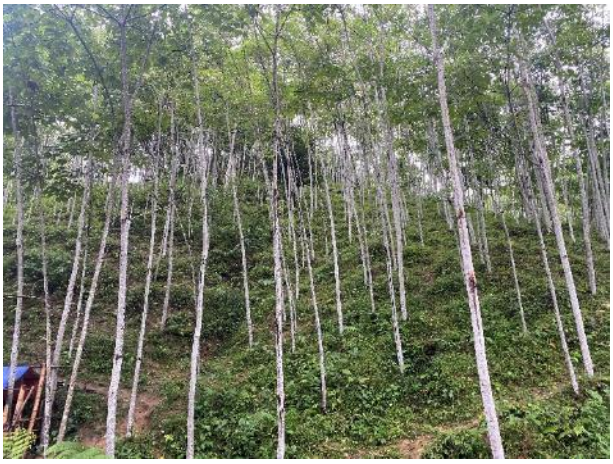

Figure 2.8: Siam benzoin *field (Thomas Chittenden)*

benzoin was considered an efficient use of fallow land by uplanders, however. In other areas of the northern uplands, Siam benzoin is commonly tapped for benzoin gum. Benzoin gum is sold internationally as an ingredient in perfume and has been promoted in the northern Vietnamese uplands by Swiss and French companies in collaboration with local government agricultural programs. In Tat, however, Siam benzoin is grown only as a timber product. None of the farmers reported harvesting benzoin gum. Acacia has a dark brown trunk and is heavier than Siam benzoin. Although Siam benzoin is more profitable, villagers alternate between Siam benzoin and acacia on their upland fields as a risk minimizing strategy. Villagers gave multiple reasons for why alternating the trees minimized risk, one being that acacia is better for the soil than Siam benzoin. According to Nhân, the leaves of acacia trees return nutrients to the soil. However, while the leaves may return some nutrients to the soil, acacia are nitrogen fixing plants and enrich the soil through nodules on their roots (Brockwell et al., 2005).

Acacia and Siam benzoin are both planted as fallow regrowth, and other crops such as cassava, arrowroot, and dryland rice are now only cultivated in the short period of time (one to two years) when trees are still small. This system is called “improved fallow” and, like composite swidden, is practiced by nearly every villager I interviewed in Tat (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). Previously, fallow regrowth emerged naturally as the field regenerated over time to create diverse secondary forests. In the 2010s, “improved fallow” systems encouraged the intentional planting of acacia and Siam benzoin monocultures in fallow

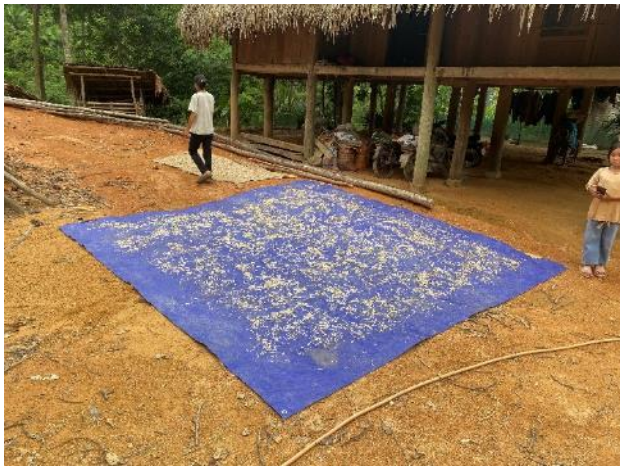

Figure 2.9: Cassava drying for use as animal feed (Thomas Chittenden)

fields (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). The income generated from tree monocultures quickly became more valuable than crops planted after clearing for subsistence, leading to an increase in fallow time from five to seven years when conditions for tree growth are good, and nine when conditions are bad. While dryland rice is still consumed by some, cassava (an important source of subsistence during collectivization) is rarely consumed and is often grown to be dried and used as feed for livestock or sold to middlemen who transport it to starch production factories located in the lowland and delta areas of Vietnam (ASEAN Cassava Center, n.d.). Agricultural transformations in Tat represent a shift from swidden as a subsistence activity, to a market-based activity.

Alongside agricultural crop transformations, new land reform policies privileged the planting of acacia and Siam benzoin. Preference toward timber cash crops is based on the government view that planting timber monocrops constitutes reforestation in production forest areas, providing wood for the growing furniture and construction industries. In Tat these trees are planted in areas where swidden has been practiced, and thus the swidden-fallow system has informally been accepted by the local government leadership. The ongoing, informal practice of swidden agriculture in the uplands has survived a long history of anti-swidden interventions.

During the French colonial period, state forestry was directed toward the elimination of swidden agriculture in upland areas, and swidden agriculture's replacement with monocultures conducive to large-scale logging (Sowerwine, 2011). For the French, "cartography, ethnography, and forestry played a critical role in the classification, bounding, and representation of landscape and cultural difference" to establish "state authority" (Sowerwine, 2011). Colonial authorities saw swidden as an obstacle to both the rule of upland groups, and to logging projects throughout the uplands (McElwee, 2016). The demonization of swidden agriculture was largely kept

consistent into the state socialist period and informed the process of collectivization in upland areas (Sowerwine, 2011). Colonials considered state logging to be sustainable, and swidden to be an unsustainable risk to the "natural" forests of upland Vietnam (Sikor, 2011a, p. 12). The colonial creation of a dichotomy between the anthropogenic effects of swidden agriculture on a victimized and objectified construction of nature persisted into the collective period. State socialist authorities once again perceived swidden as an obstacle to the goals of the state, although this time in relation to the transformation of uplanders into collectives of rice farmers (McElwee, 2016).

After *Đổi Mới*, nowhere does government policy state that swidden agriculture is acceptable (and in fact, anti-swidden programs are still abundantly common), but it has been de facto incorporated into new systems of forest management at the local level. This change came about alongside the implementation of economic liberalization in upland areas. After 1986, uplanders have been increasingly reconceptualized as contributors to new market mechanisms and state goals for the extraction of commodities from upland areas, rather than as obstacles. By planting cash crops in fallow regrowth, swidden has proven to be profitable to lowland markets, cementing its practice in a post-*Đổi Mới* world. The government considers the planting of timber cash crops to be reforestation and compensates villagers in Tat for maintaining tree cover in their productive forest area, despite the lack of biodiversity in "improved fallow" monocultures compared to natural secondary forest regrowth. Nhân, for example, earns about one million VND a year for planting either Siam benzoin or acacia in his upland fields, equivalent to roughly $40 USD, not an insignificant amount for a resident of Tat. The Vietnamese government thus combines the seemingly opposing goals of reforestation and timber production by encouraging the growth of timber and classifying timber monocultures as forest area.

The informal inclusion of swidden agriculture into new schemes of land reform may seem like a reversal of previous colonial narratives by state authorities. However, after *Đổi Mới* the government combined the "Project for Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization and New Economic Zones" and Program 327 to manage the use of unoccupied hilly areas, and to sedentarize nomadic upland swidden agriculturalists (McElwee, 2022). Both programs total $8.5 –10 million USD per year in state investments (McElwee, 2022). Field observation in Tat indicates that swidden agriculture is, in many cases, informally accepted by the government insofar as it is rotational swidden, not nomadic swidden, and fits within the neat, bounded land parcels established by state authorities. In Tat, swidden agriculture has traditionally been and continues to be practiced rotationally; clearing takes place throughout the community on a yearly basis and rotates from one location to another in order to allow specific areas to regenerate (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009). A customary, lineage-based system still operates in Tat to designate swidden fields in negotiation with new household-based land use rights, as demonstrated in chapter three. After *Đổi Mới*, an initial decrease in fallow times led previous researchers in Tat to raise concerns about the future viability of swidden agriculture (Lam et al., 2004). With the introduction of timber cash crops into the rotational swidden system practiced in Tat, however, fallow times have begun to increase. Subsistence crops are now of secondary importance.

Farther north in H'mong communities and amongst multiple groups in the central highlands, however, nomadic swiddening was and continues to be heavily restricted by the state, as it was previously by colonial authorities (McElwee, 2022a, p. 16). Nomadic populations are harder to govern, tax, and incorporate into the state (Scott, 1998). Former efforts to transform mobile uplanders into sedentary rice farmers attempted to prevent swidden agriculture altogether (Sowerwine, 2011). As illustrated in this research, though, new attempts appear to focus on

sedentarizing the practice of swidden agriculture itself through forest protection policy that informally incorporates the practice into new systems for forest resource extraction via household-based land rights.

For many uplanders, state interventions into forestry are even more involved in their daily lives than was previously the case. Liberalization and land reform transform indigenous land use practices into methods of commodity production through their incorporation into broader, state-led methods for upland resource management. During collectivization, it was common for uplanders in the Central Highlands and Northern Mountain Regions to avoid state intervention altogether and continue practicing swidden agriculture without interference. During this time, swidden was excluded both formally and informally and was beyond the grasp of state management for the purpose of resource extraction. All forest land was considered off-limits, and households were not officially recognized agents in forest resource management.

Đổi Mới brought with it large infrastructural improvement projects that linked the uplands to the lowlands with the creation of new road networks. These projects not only made it easier for the state to exert authority in the uplands but also allowed for new connections to be formed with lowland marketplaces (Leisz et al., 2016). Subtle forms of resistance persist, and the process of liberalization is by no means an even process. Liberalization, however, has been a widespread process that affects previously peripheral areas (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). For example, throughout my interviews I found that many villagers continue to abide by customary arrangements for swidden agriculture rather than new systems of land tenure, leading to multiple instances of villagers being reprimanded for clearing protected forest areas (instead of productive forest area) for swidden agriculture.

The de facto change in State treatment of swidden agriculture in upland areas does not represent a break with former colonial perspectives or narratives, but rather their continuation. State policy aims to control the practice of agriculture as a sedentary livelihood practice that only takes place in specially designated productive areas and out of state-classified protected forest areas. New policies toward upland agriculture are accompanied by a rapidly changing infrastructure and the proliferation of market interactions between the uplands and lowlands to facilitate the extraction of timber and other upland products such as cassava. Outcomes include widespread landscape transformations as the landscape becomes increasingly dominated by tree monocultures, a shift to market-based swidden agriculture and land use, and transformations to the general livelihood system. Despite this, ongoing negotiations occur throughout every step of the process, as villagers balance increasing market integration with their own needs (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). Transformations to the landscape affect all other aspects of the livelihood system, including the economic lives of villagers and their agricultural practices.

Impact on Cattle

Throughout Tat, I observed cattle grazing alongside the road and trudging through upland fields, watched by their owners from small, shaded thatch roofed huts. To graze cattle, villagers often climb the narrow valleys to areas with thick, diverse vegetation. While hiking up one of these paths with Nhân, he pointed to a line of crushed vegetation descending a hillside. On a particularly rainy day a cow slipped while climbing the slope, tumbling to its death. Khánh and I took this as a lesson, repeating the motto “don’t be the cow” when climbing up the slopes on hands and knees, leech ridden as Nhân trudged ahead with ease.

New tree crops altered the livelihood system in Tat by encouraging "improved fallow" and creating large timber monocultures on the fallow land that limited space for other livelihood activities such as raising cattle. Previously, cattle were an important store of wealth for villagers. Cattle were a powerful investment, directly associated with one's level of prestige and wellbeing. When I asked Nhân why many people in the village stopped raising cattle, his simple answer was "we ran out of space, then sold them all." Cattle previously grazed in natural fallow regrowth areas and secondary forests, containing grasses and shrubs ideal for grazing livestock (Rambo and Nguyễn 2009). Now, fallows are covered with timber crops, and the parcelization of the landscape through land reform and the establishment of protected areas limits the areas where grazing is permitted.

Other villagers noted a decrease in the labor available to raise cattle as a major reason for a decrease in cattle throughout the village. Many of the young go to urban centers (mainly Hanoi and Hòa Bình City) to work in wage labor positions and send money back to their families. Additionally, the remaining cattle are grazed in areas with other cattle. The resulting close contact between cattle has led to an increase in livestock disease. The risks associated with raising livestock have thus increased, and the medicines needed to prevent disease decrease the profitability of raising livestock. Workshops were held by the commune office to recommend and instruct on the use of medicine for livestock (including cattle, pigs, chickens, and ducks). Numerous farmers I spoke with, however, lacked the extra savings to afford the medicine.

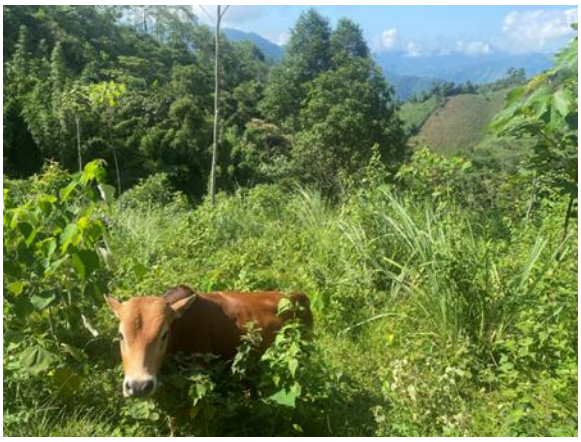

Figure 2.10: Cow grazing in an upland field (Thomas Chittenden)

Solutions offered to livestock diseases require an increased reliance on the market to provide for expensive inputs.

The sudden decrease in the practicality of raising cattle led to their widespread sale. Villagers spent money they earned from selling cattle into new concrete homes, motorbikes, and other amenities. Those who could afford to do so bought or rented rototillers for their fields as a replacement for animal labor power. Rather than storing wealth in cattle, villagers increasingly open bank accounts and take out loans. It is common for villagers to take out large loans to build concrete homes. Multiple villagers I spoke with are still paying off these loans and have found themselves in continual debt. A decrease in raising cattle is a major outcome associated with changes to the swidden agriculture system. The de facto integration of swidden agriculture into forest management impacts the entire livelihood system, which can lead to a variety of outcomes for villagers in Tat. While many sold all their livestock, others hold on to livestock and continue to invest in cattle. Nhân's son, for instance, still owns six cows.

The link between swidden agriculture and cattle grazing emphasizes the diverse nature of upland livelihood systems. Villagers rely on multiple sources of income and subsistence to support their livelihoods. Nhân, for instance, planted both lowland paddy rice and hillside swidden crops, raised ducks and chickens, managed a fishpond (also encouraged via government programs), and foraged for forest products in his spare time. Other villagers invested in goats, geese, palm, cassava, dryland rice (rice grown in swiddens rather than paddies), *chau* (a timber crop much like Siam benzoin) and more. Villagers reacted to land reform and the introduction of new cash crops that followed in diverse ways. Some farmers hold on to cattle and ignore new land use designations. Others adapt to new circumstances by selling cattle and investing in agricultural inputs available via the market. A shift away from owning cattle, however, is largely

indicative of increased market integration and the individualization of land ownership and conservation in the uplands.

Impact on Rice Agriculture

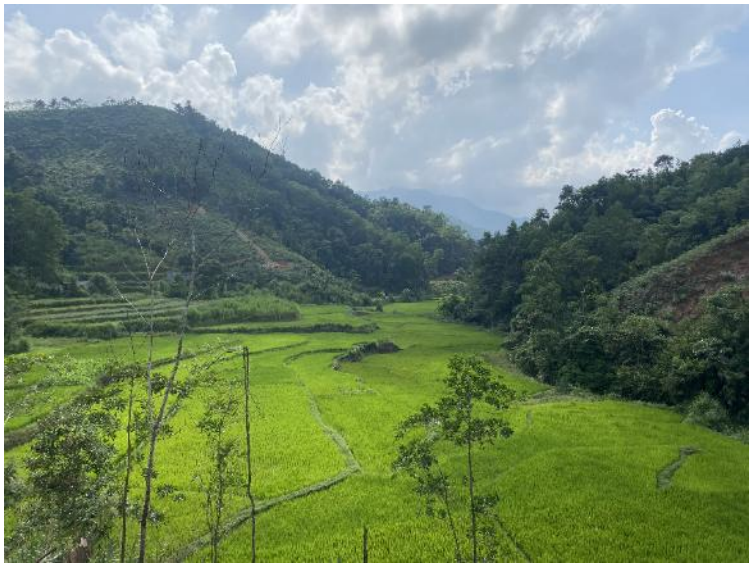

Figure 2.11: Bunded irrigated rice fields in Tat (Thomas Chittenden)

I arrived in Tat roughly a month and a half before harvest. In mid-august, the rice fields were still a verdant green. The hillside swidden fields were abuzz with activities, and as Khánh, Nhân, and I hiked, we ran into familiar faces from interviews busy planting, cutting down trees, grazing cattle, or trudging up the steep slopes to find wild ginger or bamboo. The bunded rice fields in the valley bottom, on the other hand, were quiet this time of year. There were no labor groups moving through the fields bent at work planting rice seed or harvesting. Rather, occasionally I could spot a lone farmer walking through the sea of green paddy fields with a large tank on their back, spraying a mist of chemical pesticide.

The farmers in Tat plant two rice crops a year in their irrigated fields. Like cattle, rice agriculture has undergone transformations associated with the integration of the uplands into state schemes for economic liberalization. The introduction of new hybridized seed varieties alongside chemical pesticides and fertilizers has greatly increased yield, and for those with

adequate access to paddy rice area, has greatly decreased food insecurity in Tat. Although feedback was varied, multiple villagers stated that there was an increase in rice disease associated with the introduction of more efficient hybrid rice varieties in the 1990s. Villagers now purchase fertilizer for both rice crops in the year and apply pesticide three times per crop.

Villagers' increased dependence on the use of expensive agricultural inputs has led to an increase in market reliance. Multiple villagers reported that they experienced troubles with saving money for future investments and repeatedly spent all their savings at the beginning of each new rice crop. A new reliance on buying agricultural inputs from the market makes it difficult for many uplanders in Tat to accrue wealth over time. Households with greater access to land found more opportunity for growth than did households with weaker lineage-based land claims, leading to increased economic differentiation in the village, made visible by spatial differences throughout the village in the prevalence of concrete homes, motorbikes, and tin roofs as opposed to thatch or palm frond roofs.

Agricultural labor has become increasingly difficult to find with the choice of many households to send young family members to the city for wage labor. The funds sent back increased the comparative wealth of many households in Tat but also resulted in labor shortages. Labor shortages in Tat resulted in a rise in the frequency of wealthier villagers hiring others to work on their fields, both paddy and swidden. Villagers without adequate access to swidden fields often rely on this type of labor for extra income, while wealthier villagers rely on hired

labor (from less wealthy villagers) in the absence of help from their children. Some also found new careers running stores that sell goods from the lowlands.

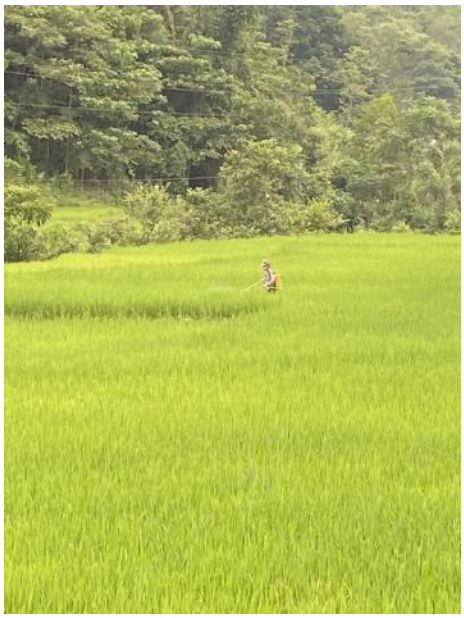

Figure 2.12: Rice farmer spraying pesticides (Thomas Chittenden)

The integration of new trees into swiddens based on new land use policy gave villagers the means to generate an income and buy new agricultural products. New agricultural practices had widespread effects on the livelihood system in Tat, including rice agriculture, livestock, and social relationships. The parcelization of the landscape, introduction of cash crops, and environmental programs supporting market-oriented agricultural practices facilitated the incorporation of Tây uplanders into the market. Market integration came with improved road infrastructures to increase the ease of transporting goods to lowland markets, transformations to agriculture and livestock, and new forms of labor. Market integration also brought with it new forms of inequality through which the less fortunate may sell their labor to neighbors, or struggle to grow wealth due to a reliance on expensive agricultural inputs. The introduction of new tree crops not only transformed subsistence farmers into producers, but also into consumers in budding markets. For rice agriculture, this process was facilitated via the introduction of hybrid rice seeds and chemical fertilizers in upland areas, which farmers in Tat now rely on to reach an adequate rice yield.

Conclusion

The *Đổi Mới* reforms transformed the role of swidden agriculture in upland areas. While previously swidden agriculture was discouraged and those who practiced it were actively punished by the government, swidden is now de facto accepted. The process of land reform has led to household management of productive forest areas whereby timber trees are planted and harvested in swiddens on a rotational basis. This change, facilitated by land reform, has widespread effects on the overall livelihood system. The changing status of swidden agriculture represents shifting local government treatment of indigenous upland land use practices, albeit through the continuation of colonial-era narratives regarding the relationship between ethnic minority uplanders and the natural environment. These narratives frame uplanders as destructive and naturally opposed to sustainability and conservation.

New household-based land laws, however, are designed to incentivize uplanders to protect the environment (or, more appropriately, make the environment economically productive) through monetary rewards, either as payments for ecosystem services or the sale of timber. Areas that were devoted to swidden agriculture are now classified as "productive forest area" and moderated by a monetary incentive structure which encourages farming for income, tree cover, and timber production rather than subsistence. The results of this transition include widespread land cover transformations (but not land-use change, land is still used for cultivation and fallow, albeit covered in a tree crop) and increased market integration. *Đổi Mới* reforms and the subsequent land laws have thus altered nearly every aspect of the livelihood system in Tat to some degree, including practices not only related to swidden, but also to irrigated rice agriculture and livestock raising. The process of integration, however, is a contested and ongoing process with differential outcomes for villagers in Tat, who employ various strategies to negotiate the process of reform.

Đổi Mới therefore marks a transition from the exclusion of upland indigenous land use practices such as swidden agriculture to a de facto inclusion of these practices into broader state-controlled land use systems. Under both French colonial authorities and the Vietnamese state, authorities conceptualized swidden agriculture as a "backward" practice that is ultimately a nuisance to resource extraction (McElwee, 2022a). This has not changed after *Đổi Mới*, however, agricultural practices that are associated with swidden agriculture have become powerful tools for the extraction of valuable timber products such as acacia and Siam benzoin from upland areas according to newly incorporated, household-based systems of land use and ownership. The de facto inclusion of swidden agriculture practices into market-based resource extraction systems to facilitate the production of timber within productive forest areas has accompanied the introduction of new discourses surrounding land use rights. New discourses on land management reshape the ways some uplanders conceptualize land and argue for their own rights to the landscape.

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Chapter III

RESISTANCE AND NONCOMPLIANCE:

REACTIONS TO LAND REFORM IN THE NORTHERN MOUNTAIN REGION OF VIETNAM

Overview

Following the *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986, the Vietnamese state implemented nationwide land reform policy that ended the collectivized agriculture system in favor of household-based land use rights. In Tat, a small village in the northern Vietnamese uplands, land reform is a highly contested, ongoing process of change resulting from both the uneven implementation of land allocation by local authorities, and the responses of villagers. Farmers in Tat employ a range of strategies to negotiate the process of land reform, including outright resistance, subtle forms of everyday resistance via noncompliance, or alternatively, the incorporation and alteration of land reform into existing livelihood systems. Outcomes for villagers in Tat include either loss of rights to land, conflict over rights, or the implementation of new land laws as a protection of their land use. Land reform has thus led to a situation in which some land rights recognized by the state do not correspond with customary household land usage.

Introduction

Even after nineteen interviews (out of a final twenty-four), I was frustrated to be left with more questions than answers. According to the story of Vietnamese policymakers, land reform began

in 1986 with the *Đổi Mới* period of economic liberalization, and shortly after, land use rights certificates were distributed by the Vietnamese state as the collectivized system of land ownership dissolved in favor of household-based rights to specific land parcels (Leisz et al., 2022). This narrative suggests a neat binary between state policy and upland land use practices that left me utterly unprepared for the complexity I encountered in Tat. My initial conversations with villagers suggested a messy, ongoing process of land reform rife with conflicting interests, outcomes, and perspectives amongst villagers, and between villagers and local authorities.

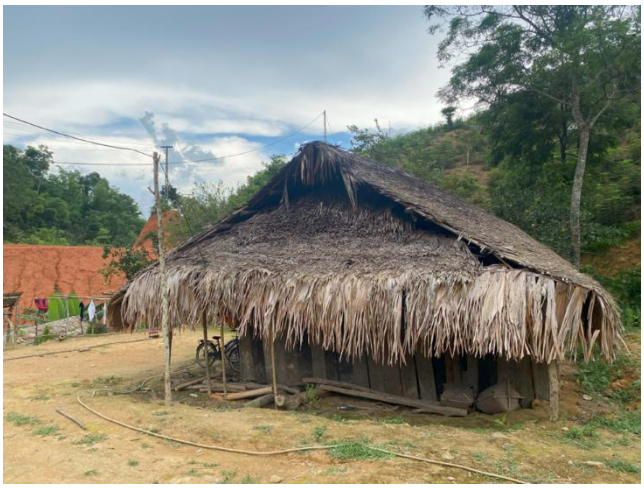

Figure 3.9: House with a palm frond roof in Tat (Thomas Chittenden)

At the time of my nineteenth semi-structured interview, I had been in Tat for five days. The interview was on the west side of the village, where homes maintained the traditional Tây construction style, raised from the ground on large wooden stilts with palm frond roofs. My translator, Khánh, and I introduced ourselves to Viên and Phùng, an elderly couple in their early sixties. Viên was born and raised in the village. Phùng moved from nearby Voan Ket village around the year 1970. Their grandson, likely around eight years old, sat on the floor between us, staring at me with wide eyes. Their son, a young adult, lay on a wooden bed in the corner, facing the wall and unaware of our presence. After drinking tea and settling in, we began the interview. At this point in the process, I had increasingly become confused about the distribution of land use rights certificates in Tat, and I scribbled some bullet points on my interview guide sheet to try and clear up my confusion. I flipped to the questions, self-conscious of the way I shuffled back and forth between my notes and interview guide. I was somewhere

between organized and casual, without really managing to be either. Nonetheless, I found my place and initiated a conversation about their land use rights certificates. I asked about when they received documentation, whether they ever received reissued documentation, and whether the amount of land designated on their papers changed.

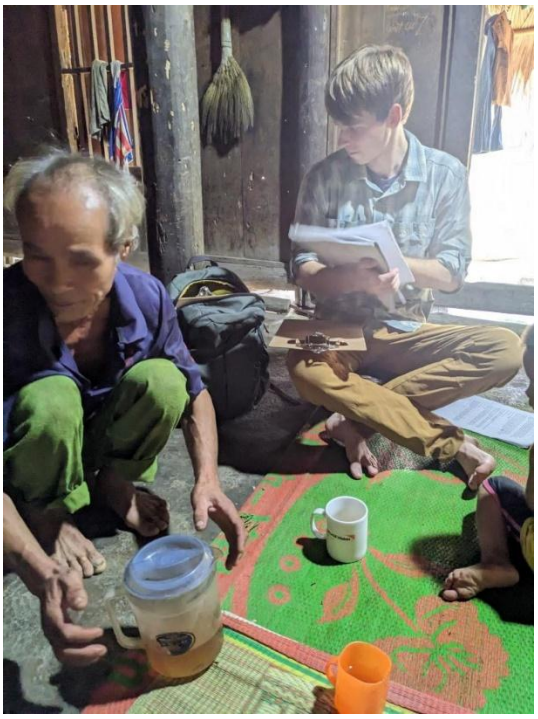

Figure 3.10: Preparing for an interview in Tat (Thomas Chittenden)

I was quickly met with an equal response of shuffling papers and documents. Struggling for memory, Phùng stood up and rummaged through old land use documentation, trying to find out when they received the certificates, how much land was on them, and if they ever accepted reissued documentation. What I thought would be a straightforward answer turned out to be a process of discovery for everyone involved as Phùng sifted through disjointed papers stuffed in a drawer along the back wall. As to not cause any undue work, I quickly told them that I did not need anything specific. Approximate answers would be fine. Viên and Phùng knew that they received their first "green book" (which is what the official forest land deed, or certificate, is referred to) around 1996 but received a second green book later and could not remember when. The amount of land in the book decreased between the first and the reissue, but they could not remember by how much. This gave me the impression that, despite the authority of the documentation, Viên and Phùng did not acknowledge or refer to the documents in their everyday land use practices.

The baffling meshwork of interrelationships and negotiations embedded in land reform are expressed through people's treatment of land use rights certificates, referred to colloquially as the green book for forestry land and the red book for agricultural and residential land. Green books are divided into three forest categories, including protected forest, productive forest, and special use forest. All the forest and swidden (slash and burn agriculture) area in Tat is either classified as protected forest or productive forest, both of which individual households hold rights to according to different land-use rules. There is no special use forest in Tat, as it designates nature reserves and national parks. Red books identify lowland agricultural and residential areas and are most important for allocating land use rights for paddy land. Designations were initially approximate outlines of land parcels. With successive reissues, however, the papers increasingly include quantitative measures of areas and specifically define land holdings.

Many (but not all) conversations on land use change in Tat funneled back to a conversation about red books or green books. Pinning down a timeline of land certificate distribution in Tat was irritatingly difficult at first, and it was not until I carefully reviewed my interview notes that I was able to discern a pattern. Villagers varied considerably in regard to when they first received documentation, when or if they received reissued documentation, or if they ever received anything at all. Initially, this appeared to me to be a problem of distribution to villagers from local authorities. The idea that villagers "received" certificates that were "distributed" to them is inappropriate, however, as it overlooks the agency of villagers in the land reform process. Rather, villagers made active decisions whether to accept or deny documentation at various times based on subsistence needs and conflicting land claims.

Respect for uplander agency requires a reframing of what is meant by resistance in the uplands, which often presupposes a subject-object relationship, or a dichotomy between oppressor and oppressed. This dichotomy is common in Marxist interpretations of peasant resistance formulated around early 20th century, but dominated academic discourse in anthropology and political science surrounding peasant movements (particularly in the Vietnamese uplands) throughout the 70s and 80s, and even into the 90s and early 2000s (Kautsky, 1899/2021; Lenin, 1914/1978; Scott, 1976; Wolf, 1999). The state does not act upon the uplands as an external force. The relationship between state policy and the uplands must be understood as a subject-subject interrelationship between mutual actors in an ongoing and dynamic process of negotiation, although according to unequal power relations. To this end, the objective of this chapter is to investigate the personal experiences of farmers in Tat as they negotiate the process of land reform, and to specifically investigate how they have responded to land reform policy. Thus, this chapter explores the diversity of ways community members responded to new land use rights documentation, including compliance, noncompliance, and resistance.

Inconsistencies

Land reform began in Vietnam shortly after the *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986. *Đổi Mới*, roughly translating as "renovation," describes a period of liberalization and de-collectivization that opened the Vietnamese economy to global trade and economic influence (Caouette and Turner, 2009). Although Decree 100, passed by the Vietnamese government in 1981, allowed for some limited land-use rights within collectives, Resolution 10 in 1988 marked the final blow to the collective agricultural system by allowing for households to hold rights to a plot of land for as

long as 15 years (Leisz et al., 2022). The 1993 and 2003 land laws followed expanding the valid length of land-use rights and applicable land-uses (Leisz et al., 2022). De-collectivization and land reform occurred alongside a broad range of official anti-swidden policies and programs (McElwee, 2022a). The land laws were made official through the distribution of land use rights certificates beginning in the late 1980s, paving the way for widespread forest land allocation to individual households (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018).

Land use rights certificates were frequently distributed in lowland areas before being distributed in upland areas and they have been distributed in an uneven and discontinuous process ever since. In Tat, Inaccuracies in the books themselves, and in their distribution have been a problem since the beginning of land allocation. In the late 90s, for example, residents of Tat were told by the local Land office cadre to return the original land use rights certificates to be corrected for inaccuracies. Many, not trusting the cadre to correctly rectify the errors, refused to return their books (Rambo and Trần, 2001, p. 317). Land allocation in Tat represented a newfound assertion of state control over land, bringing about diverse responses and contestations to the designation of protected areas, and "intense negotiations over use and control rights" (Sikor, 2011b, p. 158). During the collective period, land management in Tat, particularly the ongoing and illicit use of swidden agriculture, was systematically ignored by local authorities (Rambo and Trần, 2001).

My first chance to flip through a land use rights certificate was during dinner at my host Nhân's home after a tiring day of interviews. Khánh, Nhân, and I sat in a circle on a woven mat in his wooden house, illuminated by two fluorescent bulbs that hung from the ceiling. We ate chicken that Nhân slaughtered earlier that day, partnered with *rượu,* a strong Vietnamese rice wine. After hearing Nhân's neighbors (including Viên and Phùng) talk about their experiences

with land use rights documentation, I grew interested in the variety of local responses to land reform. Nhân, a relatively affluent member of the community, appeared to have benefited from recent changes in the commune. Nhân had both more paddy area and forest land than many of his neighbors. Between 1997 and 2023, Nhân invested in two motorbikes, a tin roof, a television, and cattle for his son. Not all villagers prospered, and I wanted to determine whether, in addition to the benefits of collaborating with researchers, Nhân's new investments were facilitated by land reform, pre-existing wealth from lineage-based land claims, or other recent transformations in the local economy.

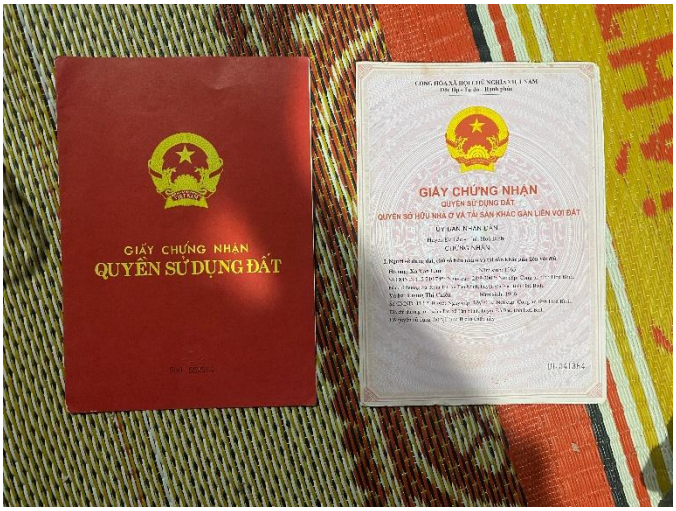

Figure 3.3: Red Book (left) and Green Book (Right) (Thomas Chittenden)

Perhaps annoyed by my constant questioning, Nhân finally stood up, went outside, and shuffled down the stairs. When he returned, he was carrying two thin booklets, one red and one pink. The red booklet, or "red book" was a land use rights certificate for residential and agricultural land, while the pink booklet, or "green book" was a land use rights certificate for forestry land. The fronts of both booklets were adorned with the seal of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in a bright golden yellow. The seal contrasted with the solid, communist-red background of the red book. The green book (only called "green" in reference to forest land) was pink, with a circular design spiraling to the center of the thin booklet. Nhân received his red book in 2001, later than some of his neighbors who received red books in the mid-nineties. Inconsistencies in timing were common. The green book, received when forestry certificates were reissued in the late 2000s/early 2010s, was dated to 2013.

Originally, Nhân claimed that he only received the second, reissued green book, and never had forestry documentation before 2013. According to Nhân, the amount of land in his documents never changed. This is not unusual in Tat and was the case for many of the farmers I spoke to during my 10-day visit. I did not think twice about it until Nhân rose again and went downstairs. He returned with a much older green book issued in 1986, the same year as the *Đổi Mới* reforms, which kicked off economic liberalization and land reform in Vietnam. This was the oldest green book I heard of in the village, and it shared the same stylistic motifs as the red book Nhân received in 2001. The difference in productive forest area allocated to Nhân increased by more than double between the first and second green books, from 2 to 5 hectares. Besides Nhân, no other villager I spoke with gained land between their first and second green books. The others, even affluent villagers, either lost land or experienced no change. This interaction only left me with more questions. Did Nhân simply forget, or did he choose to exclude his original green book when showing me his land use rights certificates? Why did he initially exclude it from our conversation?

When I asked Nhân why the amount of land changed between books, he explained that the methods for quantifying land parcels had become less approximate, and more exact over time. He appeared nonchalant about the changes, stating that he always just farmed the same land regardless of what the certificates said. When I asked other villagers why they lost land, responses ranged from accusing local governance of corruption, to simply stating that "this is just how it is for everyone." Different responses to, experiences with, and interpretations of inconsistencies in land documentation was a source of conflict in Tat, both between neighbors, and between villagers and local authorities. In the face of these inconsistencies, villagers employed multiple strategies to comply, resist, or ignore land reform policy. Viên and Phùng, for

example, chose to ignore land use rights documentation when it was no longer relevant to their livelihood activities, relying instead on the myriad informal understandings and agreements among villagers that constitute the local customary land tenure system.

Noncompliance

The ambiguities detailed above are the result of inconsistent documentation, alternate interpretations of documents, compliance with customary land use arrangements, and the individual livelihood choices of villagers. When livelihood choices diverge from the confines specified by land use rights certificates, villagers utilize a broad range of strategies to subtly resist land reform and local authorities. Noncompliance represents one of these strategies and was a form of "everyday resistance" employed by both Viên and Phùng in the face of new land use policies (Scott, 1985).

Viên and Phùng's lack of familiarity with their own documentation, and yet detailed knowledge of their everyday land use practices suggests that in their case, the red books and green books were simply ignored and stashed away. According to James C. Scott (1986, xvi), willful ignorance of this type is a prevalent form of "everyday resistance" in agrarian societies and is a more common alternative than outright rebellion or organized political action. "Everyday resistance" expresses the ways "relatively powerless groups" use subversive, subtle, and often unspoken strategies in their daily lives to resist authority (Scott, 1985, xvi). Rather than protesting to the local commune office or outwardly disobeying, Viên and Phùng chose to simply ignore the new documentation altogether. Later in our interview, Phùng insisted that they work the same amount of land that they always have, and that all the land they work is designated on

their land use rights certificates, despite also stating that they lost land between the first and reissued green books. Inconsistencies such as these were a common occurrence in the stories of the twenty-four households I spoke with in Tat, including my host, Nhân.

Scott's insights on everyday forms of peasant resistance lends itself to a better understanding of the diverse ways farmers react to land reform according to varied goals and outcomes. Rather than depicting farmers as a single, homogenized force, Scott's insights bring attention to the plethora of strategies employed to resist land reform, including "foot dragging," "false compliance," and "feigned ignorance" (Scott, 1985, xvi). While Scott describes these activities under the broad umbrella of "resistance," I have chosen instead to refer to the employment of these strategies in Tat as "noncompliance." Noncompliance is distinct from outright resistance in that it is not meant to outwardly defy authority, and yet still undermines, ignores, or refutes it. Scott considers noncompliance to be a form of intentional, yet covert resistance (Scott, 1985). Noncompliance, however, is not always intentional, premeditated, or targeted at authorities.

Neither Viên nor Phùng seemed to care about the commune government, or about the fairness of the certificates. Their certificates were ignored from the time they were received and did not reflect their land use practices. Thus, the term "resistance" does not accurately describe this circumstance. The form of noncompliance practiced by Viên and Phùng shares similarities with the strategies employed by other households and individuals in Tat, often in relation to customary land arrangements. Noncompliance, however, can lead to differential outcomes for households according to their relationships with local authorities and their neighbors, as exemplified by the story of Hoàng.

Hoàng

Hoàng lives north of the road, on the Western border of the village. I first met Hoàng not for an interview, but after hiking up the steep trails behind his home to the swidden fields of Siam benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*, or "bồ đề" in Vietnamese), acacia (*hybrid sp.*), and cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) that patterned the hillside into a mosaic. Nhân, Khánh, and I parked our motorbikes in front of his home before hiking to previously recorded latitude / longitude locations (recorded using GPS in 1997 and 199) up the hillside that delineated different land-covers identified during past fieldwork done in Tat. The hike was short but strenuous, and when we returned, Nhân did not hesitate to grab a chair in front of Hoàng's home, shaded by a tin roof. Hoàng quickly came out of his home with more chairs and some water and pointed a fan in our direction before joining us on the porch. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the water was cold as I sipped it next to the fan. Hoàng kept it in a small electric fridge next to the wooden doorway.

At 61, Hoàng was a jovial man, and one of the few non-Tây members of Tat. Ethnically Kinh, he originally moved to Tat in 1982 after being displaced by the Hòa Bình Dam project, the largest dam in Vietnam until the construction of the Son La dam in 2012. While some villagers were hesitant to talk to me, Hoàng was happy to share his memories of, and observations about Tat. After a slightly uncomfortable (yet humorous) conversation on my marriage status, Hoàng began smoking from a bamboo pipe he made himself, and pridefully pointed to a small chopping block resting in the yellow dirt of his front yard.

The chopping block was small and unassuming, but sturdy. Hoàng explained that it was *nghiến* wood, and despite looking like a trunk, it came from the branches of the large *nghiến* tree (*Burretiodendron hsienmu*). It was known for its hardness, size, and rarity. In the past, he

reminisced that they used to chop them down to use the wood as a durable building material for stilt houses, making his slab exceedingly rare indeed. Back then, he continued, wild boar, bears, tigers, and deer were still common in the forests surrounding Tat. Now, tree monocultures dominate the swidden where before natural regrowth was the norm. The state established protected forests, but the large mammals that used to roam the uplands surrounding Tat were gone. Despite arriving in the village as a displaced farmer in 1982, I could tell that Hoàng developed a deep appreciation for the village and the landscape.

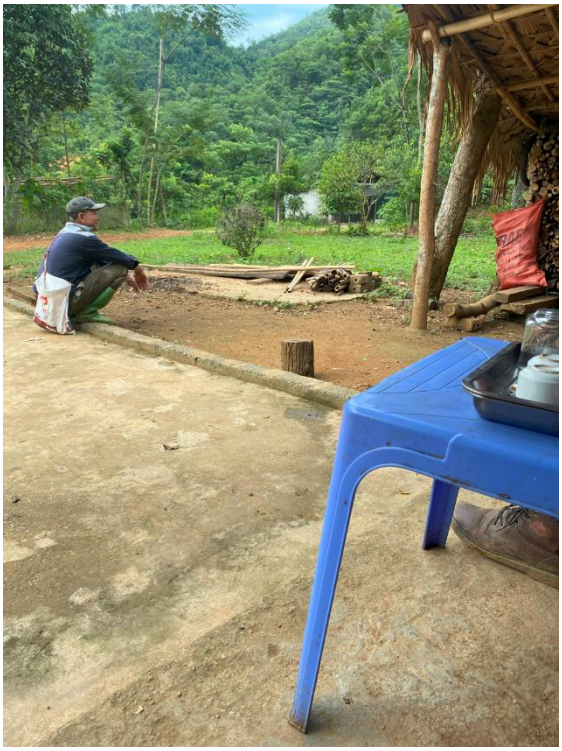

Figure 3.4: Nghiến wood chopping block at Hoàng's house (Thomas Chittenden)

With no connection to a historical lineage in the village, however, Hoàng lacked land for planting irrigated rice in the valley bottom and relied solely on income generated from hillside and swidden crops such as Siam benzoin, acacia, and bamboo (*Bambusoideae*). Previously, he grew palm (*Arecaceae*) for his roof before he replaced it with a tin one. He also cultivated dryland (upland) rice (*Oryza sativa*), corn (*Zea mays*), and cassava in his swiddens for subsistence purposes, but now buys all his food rather than growing it. Likewise, he stopped raising cows and goats for subsistence when he began planting Siam benzoin and acacia for income. With economic liberalization and land reform the growth of trees was increasingly profitable, and it limited the space for grazing land on his fields.

Despite his complete reliance on forested hillside land, Hoàng only had rights to protected forest area. Hoàng received his first green book in 1992 with five hectares of protected forest land, and his second green book in 2007 with three hectares of protected forest land in place of the original five hectares. None of Hoàng's land is classified as productive forest area. Having land use rights to protected forest area is common in Tat, and for preserving the tree cover in protected area, households are entitled to small yearly payments from the forest guard. Unlike productive forests, clearing protected forest areas is prohibited and can result in fines from the ecosystem service. Hoàng's documentation places him in an impossible scenario. If he were to conform to the land use designated in his land use rights certificates, Hoàng's only sources of income would be the small yearly amount allocated from the ecosystem service for protecting the trees and maintaining tree cover, and the payment he receives from neighbors for working in their hillside swidden fields.

Instead, Hoàng spoke openly about routinely clearing protected forest areas to plant high value Siam benzoin and acacia trees. I immediately assumed that this would lead to conflict with the forest guard but was surprised to find that Hoàng was unconcerned with fines or punishments for clearing protected forest area. He still earns income from the ecosystem service for tree cover, even though the trees consist of Siam benzoin monocrops. According to Hoàng, the forest guard comes when he clears the land, but they "can't do anything." Like Viên and Phùng, Hoàng chose to simply ignore the information on his official documents and continue to plant what he pleased, with little consequence from the commune government or forest guard. Hoàng's choice of noncompliance is based on an adherence to pre-existing customary livelihood arrangements. As is the case with many of his neighbors, Hoàng is involved in an ongoing conversation with the forest guard regarding what constitutes tree cover. Thus, it is apparent that in some situations,

the forest guard recognizes, acknowledges, or at least tolerates land use arrangements made between villagers themselves.

These arrangements, however, are not always harmonious, and Hoàng experienced regular conflict with his fellow community members. Fond of remembering the past, Hoàng jokingly recalled a time when land was less limited, and people would "give each other land just to have neighbors!" He argued that land was more scarce, expensive, and less available than it was in the past. Hoàng struggled to find time to plant his own fields because he increasingly spends much of his time working on other farmer's fields for pay. Paid labor has increased within the village since *Đổi Mới* and the shift away from subsistence swidden agriculture. The longer he leaves his field unplanted, the more his neighbors slowly encroach on his land over time, partly due to his weaker ties to lineage-based land claims as a non-Tây community member.

Hoàng's experiences demonstrate the process of negotiation between uplanders and local authorities, and between neighbors themselves, out of which customary systems evolve and are constantly updated by villagers to reflect the reality of the situation on the ground (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). Negotiations between actors at multiple scales draw and redraw the landscape according to the livelihood decisions of individual households, aims of policy makers, and decisions made by local authorities. Not only is the physical landscape contested, but the meanings and classifications attributed to it are formed and reformed.

The state regularly attributes reforestation in Vietnam to the growth of large monocultures for timber, despite the lack of diversity when compared to primary or even secondary forest (McElwee, 2016). Through the incorporation of new high value timber cash crops into the uplands, the Vietnamese state was able to speak the language of reforestation and conservation while still profiting from the extraction of substantial amounts of timber. In Tan

Minh, the commune in which Tat is located, remote sensing imagery suggests that forests have noticeably regenerated since the onset of *Đổi Mới* in 1986. Forest regeneration, however, very rarely constitutes ecologically diverse, naturally regenerated forest.

In the case of Hoàng, he was still paid by the forest guard for protecting the forest despite clearing it and replacing it with Siam benzoin and acacia. Since nearly all the land in Tat has been active swidden area for many years it is unlikely that the cleared area constituted primary forest and was rather a secondary forest mix of various tree species (of various ages), bushes and shrubs, grasses, and bamboo (Fox et al., 2000; Leisz et al., 2009). This area, however, was still more ecologically diverse than the monoculture that replaced it, despite Hoàng's continued compensation from the forest guard for tree cover. Thus, the forest guard considered the tree cover but not the condition of the forest itself. This was not the case for all the villagers, some of whom had different experiences with local authorities that were not nearly as lenient. For Hoàng, noncompliance was a low-risk strategy that did not refute authority, but rather subtly subverted it to his own needs (Scott, 1985). It is necessary to draw a distinction between noncompliance and resistance because some villagers' reactions to new land reform policies are not as covert or indirect.

Customary Land Tenure

Before addressing how noncompliance may transform into resistance, it is important to discuss the systems villagers *do* comply with in their everyday land use practices, because it is when these systems are undermined that villagers are most likely to resist local or provincial authorities. The customary land tenure system in Tat is constituted of the myriad negotiations,

understandings, and agreements between villagers and households. While forms of noncompliance are commonly directed toward de jure, legal systems of land management, villagers routinely collaborate with their neighbors in evolving relationships to designate and compromise on land use, manage agriculture, and share resources.

When asked about changes in the sizing of land parcels, as with Nhân, most villagers noted that they farm the same land that they always have, despite fluctuating amounts of land on official land use rights certificates and documentation. Although the customary land tenure system has changed (and continues to change) with the introduction of cash crops, pre-existing lineage-based arrangements between households survived throughout the history of Tat, particularly regarding the designation of land for swidden agriculture. During the collective period, for instance, it was commonplace for local authorities to turn a blind eye to swidden agriculture, which was (and still is) widely discouraged by the state (McElwee, 2020). The continued practice of swidden agriculture during the collective period allowed for customary methods for managing land and resources to exist into the present, even surviving modern-day land reform.

Beyond swidden agriculture, in Tat these strategies can include inter-household cooperation during planting and harvesting. Before planting lowland irrigated rice, villagers meet to decide when to plant, what variety of seeds, and what type of fertilizer/pesticides to use to prevent pests from targeting any one

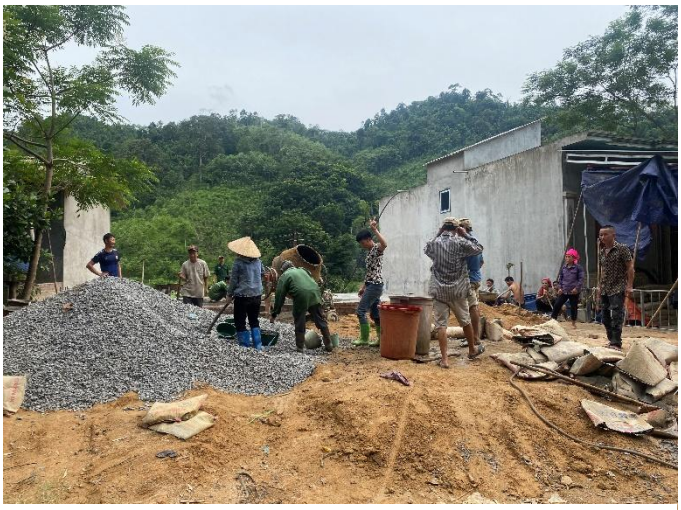

Figure 3.5: A group of villagers in Tat laying the foundation of a new concrete home (Thomas Chittenden)

household. During planting and harvest, villagers join labor exchange groups to work on the fields of other households. These institutions for labor exchange also extend into the construction of new concrete homes, representing an ongoing spirit of reciprocity embedded in the process of economic liberalization. It is common practice to bring gifts of rice wine and rice to celebrate the successful construction of a new home. Neighbors pitch in by spreading concrete for the foundation, with the future expectation that their neighbors will do the same for them.

For upland swidden fields, previous researchers in Tat noted that village leaders (family heads/lineage heads) traditionally met to discuss which hillside fields should be planted and which should be left fallow (Rambo et al., 2009). With the introduction of land reform, however, it is unclear how much influence village leaders have over their neighbors' upland fields. Rather, lineage-based claims over land are respected collectively, but on an informal, ever-evolving basis embedded in new land reform discourses. It is when conflict occurs that households will leverage state-recognized land use certificates, particularly when the information on the certificate serves to solidify a claim to land the household either already farms or that a neighbor farms. In the absence of conflict, or when little is gained from acknowledging new land classifications, the certificates are largely ignored.

Those with the most precarious access to land are non-Tây villagers who lack lineage-based land claims connected to the customary livelihood system. Two of the villagers I spoke to, including Hoàng, were ethnically Kinh and arrived in the village within the past forty or so years. Both Kinh villagers described ongoing conflicts with neighbors and occasional run-ins with the forest guard over land, although with different outcomes. These villagers had less land than their neighbors, and a tenuous grasp on their claims to hillside fields. In the case of Linh, a Kinh woman living in the Southwest portion of Tat, land insecurity led her to question the legitimacy

of local authorities, the fairness of the land-use rights certificates, and even accuse the commune office of corruption.

Resistance

At what point does noncompliance turn into resistance? In the short-term, direct forms of resistance are not desirable actions for either authorities or resisting groups (Scott, 1985). Resistance is risky for those involved and poses a threat to authorities. Noncompliance avoids the risky outcomes of outright resistance, which can lead to citations, fines, or physical violence. For those in power, resistance can lead to the loss of legitimacy in local power structures, and the loss of control over land and land-based resources. For this reason, authorities will sometimes opt to ignore or turn a blind eye to disobedience to prevent the advent of organized resistance movements, or widespread food insecurity (Scott, 1985).

When swidden agriculture was repressed during the collective period, for example, socialist authorities routinely turned a blind eye to the practice of swidden agriculture in the uplands (McElwee, 2022a). Swidden agriculture played a significant role in supplementing diets at a time when food scarcity was common (McElwee, 2022a). This fact was acknowledged by local authorities, who allowed for customary land tenure systems to continue operating to curb hunger, malnutrition, and discontent. In Tat, local authorities continue to allow local land tenure arrangements to take precedence over new land laws, although in a constant state of negotiation, sometimes resulting in contention.

Vietnam has a rich tradition of peasant resistance of different types, be it violent resistance during the French colonial period (1885 - 1954) and the revolutionary period (1946 -

54 throughout the whole country, and in the south 1954 – 1975), or non-violent resistance as during the state socialist period (1976 - 1986), or the post-*Đổi Mới* era (1986 - present) (Caouette and Turner, 2009). Widespread peasant resistance against French colonialism in the north until 1954, and against the southern government until 1975 captured international public and scholarly attention (Trang, 2009). Resistance movements, studied extensively by James C. Scott, Samuel L. Popkin, Eric Wolf, and others played a key role in shaping peasant studies as a field of inquiry in anthropology, political science, sociology, and geography (1976, 1979, 1999). Early peasant studies scholars were interested in the factors that led to effective, widespread peasant resistance.

The question of peasant resistance has origins that harken back to early Marxist thought. The formulation of the "agrarian question" by Karl Kautsky questioned the role of peasants in the revolutionary transition to communism, and their relationship to the rural proletariat (1899/2022). Marx gave precedence to the urban proletariat as the driving force of revolutionary change, focusing primarily on the conditions of workers in Germany, England, and France at the time of his writings. Thus, the work of Kautsky was particularly relevant to Lenin as he adapted Marxist thought to the context of Russia, which was largely a peasant society at the time of the October Revolution in 1917. After Lenin wrote *The Agrarian Question in Russia*, the topic of peasant resistance came to the foreground of budding international communist and anticolonial movements in agrarian countries (1914/1976).

In China, Mao's *Red Book* expanded on Marxist-Leninist thought to privilege peasants in the transition to communism, greatly influencing Ho Chi Minh in his resistance to French imperialism in Vietnam (1964/2017). In the 21st century, political scientists in agrarian studies including Moyo et al. (2013), Patnaik et al. (2011), McMichael (2006), and Bernstein (2011) assessed the applicability of the agrarian question in relation to 21st century neoliberal capitalism.

Concurrently, peasant studies research influenced by anthropology focused on the relationship between peasants and revolutionary change, although with an emphasis on subsistence, agriculture, customary land tenure, and cultural norms of reciprocity (Scott, 1976; McElwee, 2007; Sowerwine, 2011).

According to Scott (1976), peasant resistance is rooted in disruption to the rural "moral economy" associated with customary systems for land use and resource management. The moral economy guarantees a right to subsistence to peasants by maintaining economic principles of redistribution, reciprocity, and obligation (Scott, 1976; McElwee, 2007, 58). Scott argued that disruptions to the moral economy would lead to peasant resistance in the name of a reliable, sufficient form of subsistence (1976). Thus, Scott's argument attributed resistance in upland Vietnam to a model of peasant behavior based on strongly held social and cultural values guaranteeing reliable livelihoods from customary systems of resource management (1976). Popkin, on the other hand, was a political scientist who famously refuted Scott's argument by using a rational-choice model of peasant resistance to argue that peasants are "individualistic" and "profit-minded" decision makers (1979; McElwee, 2007, 58). According to this alternative model of peasant behavior, resistance is based on a rational cost-benefit analysis between multiple strategies (Popkin, 1979).

While both models rely on generalizations of peasant behavior that do not always hold true between contexts, Popkin's argument leans too heavily on oversimplified, economistic models of behavior to be of any continued use, particularly when applied to the complex circumstances of resistance in Tat. Scott's argument, on the other hand, may provide some useful insights into the motivations for noncompliance and resistance among villagers in Tat. Indeed, it is apparent that Hoàng chose to ignore new land reform policies out of consideration for his own

ability to subsist on the landscape. It is unclear to many past researchers in Tat, however, whether strong social institutions still play (or have played) a significant role in guaranteeing a right to subsistence in Tat (Rambo and Trần, 2009, p. 182).

One of the few comprehensive social and cultural descriptions of Tat is provided in the volume *Farming with Fire and Water* (Trần et al., 2009). The volume, featuring chapters by multiple authors including Trần Đức Viên, A. Terry Rambo, and Nguyễn Thanh Lâm, focuses primarily on transformations in the composite swidden agricultural system practiced in Tat, which combines lowland rice agriculture with hillside swiddens to diversify subsistence strategies and mitigate risk (Rambo and Nguyễn, 2009, p. 47). In an analysis of the contemporary and historical social organization of Tat, Rambo and Trần characterize the village as a "loosely structured community" in which "solidarity among its component households is poorly developed and it has few effective institutions to organize collective action to achieve community aims" (2009, p. 182). Rambo and Trần argue that the household is the "maximal unit in which trust among its members is strong and altruistic behavior is expectable," that there is "no social safety net" and that people have "little sense of trust in the honesty and integrity of their fellow villagers" (2009, p. 179 - 182). In a previous article published in 2001, Rambo and Trần stated that Tat was "a community, characterized by scarcity of social capital, lack of social cohesion, and limited ability to collectively manage its natural resources" (p. 299).

Looking to history to explain the perceived lack of social cohesion, Rambo and Trần claim that the imposition of rule from outside authorities (be it feudal lords, French colonials, or the Vietnamese state) led to the complete absence of "locally evolved institutions for collective action" (2009, p. 182). In fact, the authors go as far as to compare the social situation in Tat to the "amoral familism" coined by sociologist Edward Banfield to describe communities with a

lack of trust in social institutions beyond the immediate kin group, leading to difficulties when organizing cooperation or collective action (Rambo and Trần, 2009, p. 182; 1967). Banfield is best known for his pertinently titled work *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1967).

According to Rambo and Trần (2009), Tat not only lacks a moral economy guaranteeing a right to subsistence but has lacked any form of social institution that guarantees a stable livelihood and wellbeing at least since the colonial period. Further, Tat is characterized not by the agency of the villagers who lived there throughout history, but by outside authorities that impose their will on the uplands as the sole actors in a one-sided narrative of domination and control, resulting in a Hobbesian state of nature in which each household fends for itself (Rambo and Trần, 2009, p. 183). Similarities to Popkin's construction of the "rational peasant" abound (1979). Tat is thus characterized as "a dependent 'peasant' society rather than belonging to an autonomous 'tribal' society" (Rambo and Trần, 2004, p. 305). The dichotomization between dependent peasant and autonomous tribal societies ignores the ongoing importance of customary land arrangements in Tat, while simultaneously disregarding peasant-studies literature that emphasizes the bottom-up, cooperative organization of labor and resources often found among rural peasants (Scott, 1976; McElwee, 2007).

Rambo, Trần, and Nguyễn describe and discount the same forms of contemporary and historical social cooperation I observed in Tat, including labor exchange during planting and harvest, the payment of bride price, customary land management, and an "ethos of sharing" among households that prevents economic differentiation (2009, p. 35 - 36). Not mentioned by the authors are the social institutions for labor exchange when building homes, or the meetings before harvest to decide when to plant and which seeds to use. Before Dai Doan Ket, the largest celebration in the village for the new year, villagers each pitch in 100,000 VND to buy and

slaughter a cow for the celebration, a large investment for many households. In the face of land reform, multiple forms of cooperation formed between villagers with similar grievances, which will be discussed below. This has occurred despite Rambo and Trần's claim that "relations among unrelated households are rarely close and spontaneous cooperation among them infrequent" (2001, p. 322).

Rather than focusing on essentialized models of resistance, modern scholars working in the Vietnamese uplands build on Scott to analyze the diverse, agentive ways peasants defy authority (Bonnin and Turner, 2014; McElwee, 2016; Sowerwine, 2011b). Spatially and socially uneven processes of market integration led to diverse outcomes and necessitated diverse responses from upland groups (Bonnin and Turner, 2014). Drawing attention to the agency of uplanders in choosing how to best respond to new state policies challenges "the patent victimization trope" present in the work of Rambo and Trần, as well as Popkin (Bonnin and Turner, 2014; 2009; 1979). A rising attention to scale considers the negotiations taking place at multiple levels throughout the process of land reform, through which peasants form relationships with local authorities, companies, and the state (McElwee, 2016).

Instances of trust and cooperation in the face of land reform abound, as do instances of conflict and strife. Right to subsistence and the degree of confidence in customary land tenure systems influences whether a villager in Tat chooses to resist or not, and whether they choose to participate in everyday forms of resistance via noncompliance. Increasing economic differentiation, the commodification of swidden agriculture, and the individualization of social problems via household-based land use rights certificates have all contributed to undermining collective action and customary systems of land management in Tat.

The erosion of collective action does not entail that Tat has no "social safety net," or that the people there are historical victims to the pressures of outside forces (Rambo and Trần, 2009, p. 183). Unified resistance against authorities is instead replaced with complex interrelationships between local officials, villagers, and neighbors themselves. The type of unified resistance often expected by researchers (and feared by policy makers) is rare and risky. While resistance does appear in the village, diversity in aims and perspectives only occasionally transforms it into a unifying force. At times, however, pockets of resistance emerge from noncompliance in Tat, utilizing various strategies to reach divergent goals and outcomes. Such a phenomenon is illustrated by the stories of Linh, Nong, and Lương.

Linh

To understand the degree of economic differentiation in Tat, one need only to walk down a dirt path near the western border of Tat, cross the stream, and climb the hill to the cluster of palm frond roof homes south of the road. In this area, the same place where Viên and Phùng live, many struggle with food insecurity and have poor access to land and resources. This time, however, I was visiting a woman named Linh. In other homes the sounds of children playing, rice milling, or music emanating through portable speakers filled the air. In Linh's home the atmosphere was quiet.

From the moment I sat down with Linh for the interview, I could sense her discontent. Linh, like Hoàng, was one of the two Kinh villagers I met with, both relative newcomers to the village who lacked a strong lineage connection guaranteeing a stable access to land and resources. Now 54 years old, Linh has lived in Tat since 1987. Khánh and I sat in a circle on the

wooden floor of Linh's home, cushioned by a decorated straw mat. We drank lukewarm tea out of plastic cups, and Linh refilled them whenever we ran empty. Linh was talkative. The interview offered her a small opportunity to voice her grievances about land reform, access to resources, and her relative economic status within the village.

Linh received her first green book in 2006 with 2 hectares of productive forest. Linh only chose to receive a second green book in 2013 after losing the first one. The second green book, however, had no productive forest and only contained 2.8 hectares of protected forest, on which she is not allowed to perform swidden agriculture. With only five square meters of paddy fields for subsistence, Linh felt that she had no choice but to clear protected forest area to grow food and cash crops, even if she gets caught doing so. Linh decided to clear one hectare of the protected forest area in her green book. Unlike Hoàng, Linh has had a contentious relationship with the forest guard and has been reprimanded on multiple occasions for her transgressions.

According to Linh, the commune is corrupt, and they have given land use rights to her neighbor for the two hectares of productive land that she previously relied on. Further, she argued that funds meant to be allocated to the poor were instead been siphoned off to the family members of local officials, and that she never received the 40,000,000 VND owed to her through a government aid program. These circumstances, alongside some failed investments in cattle, led to difficulties with income, and it is hard for Linh to afford seeds or fertilizers to keep her small area of paddy productive. Linh repeated the above story at multiple points throughout our interview. I could tell that Khánh was growing increasingly exasperated after translating the same story multiple times, but it seemed important to Linh that we knew, even if she understood that we could not help improve her situation.

Linh and Hoàng's divergent experiences with the ecosystem service demonstrates the alternate experiences with land reform between households in Tat. While the forest guard did not punish Hoàng, Linh was accustomed to reprimands for clearing protected forest area that intensified her accusations of corruption at the commune level. Like Hoàng, however, she still receives payments for tree cover on protected land. Both had negative relationships with neighbors because of land reform, but Hoàng's laid-back approach varied considerably to Linh's interpretation of, and reaction to the conflict.

Linh's example demonstrates that if authorities push back against noncompliance, it can often lead to villagers questioning the legitimacy of local institutions themselves. Since the *Đổi Mới* reforms, pockets of regional resistance surfaced at multiple points to challenge authorities, often with claims of corruption and malpractice leveled at specific policymakers. Notable instances include the Thái Bình protests in 1997, and unrest in the central highlands in both 2001 and 2004 (Trang, 2009). The Thái Bình protests involved widespread rural resistance against the handling of land redistribution by corrupt local government officials after *Đổi Mới* (Malarney, 2001). While Linh's case does not represent resistance, it suggests a pathway from disenfranchisement to discontent that can eventually lay the seeds for direct, intentional disobedience.

Resistance in Action

Nong

Nong's home was a large concrete house near the center of the village. With some ingenuity, he managed to divert water from a nearby stream with bamboo pipes to fill a sizable grey concrete pool. He just finished taking a dip when we sat inside the dimly lit home for an interview, listening to the pleasant sounds of running water outside. Nong sat across from Khánh and I smoking a pipe, shirtless and dripping with water from the local stream. His face was locked in a stern expression, his answers initially terse. He never looked directly at us during the interview. He slowly opened up as the conversation progressed, particularly when the topic turned to local conflicts with a company called Phú Thịnh.

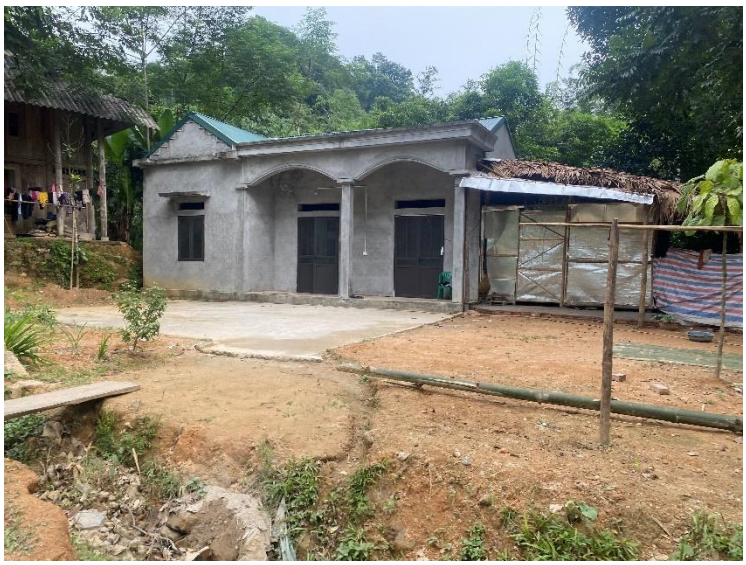

Figure 3.6: A typical concrete home in Tat. (Thomas Chittenden)

Nong was the former village head. He received a small salary for this role from 2003 until he stepped down in 2022. This early on, I did not have a basis for understanding the discrepancies and conflicts embedded in land reform, so I was surprised to hear that Nong continued to plant fields no longer designated on his own green book, but on that of a neighbor's. As a village leader, I expected that he would oversee, enforce, or serve as an example of adherence to new land laws. On the contrary, I heard the soon-to-be familiar response of "I farm the same land I always have" representative of the de facto (customary) land use system through which land is connected to lineage and distributed to sons. Even though Nong used land for swidden agriculture allocated to a neighbor on state documentation, he claimed that this is not a

source of conflict for him as it often is for others. His neighbor has not pressed their claim to the land.

Perhaps sensing that I was interested in whether there was any local conflict in Tat, Nong became more talkative and told me about local resistance to a company called Phú Thịnh. According to Nong, this company bought land in Tat but faced resistance from locals. Nong himself cooperated with other households to prevent Phú Thịnh from taking and using land, which villagers never sold to the company and were still actively farming. As the village head, Nong appealed to local officials at the commune office, but they explained that none of the villagers had official rights to the land which gave Phú Thịnh the legal right to buy it. At this point my curiosity piqued. I rummaged through my bag for my map of Tat and Nong pointed to the portions of the village where Phú Thịnh bought land, the majority of which was in the Southwest.

Phú Thịnh, or the Phú Thịnh Joint Stock Company, purchased land use rights certificates for 980 hectares of land from the Hòa Bình Provincial People's Committee in 2008 (Ủy ban Nhân dân tỉnh Hòa Bình, 2020). Phú Thịnh purchased land use rights in Tân Minh (the commune in which Tat is located) as part of a forest protection and reforestation project. In 2019, the total area of the land lease decreased to about 780 hectares due to overlapping land allocations with local farmers (Ủy ban Nhân dân tỉnh Hòa Bình, 2020). Despite ongoing land disputes that put the project at a complete halt, provincial authorities decided that the land was leased to Phú Thịnh according to regulations, and have since upheld this decision (Ủy ban Nhân dân tỉnh Hòa Bình, 2023).

After my interview with Nong, I made a habit of asking each villager about their knowledge of Phú Thịnh, and I chose to interview multiple households living in the portion of

the village Nong identified as being closest to land bought by Phú Thịnh. In addition to these interviews, I decided to meet with a local official at the commune office to clarify why Phú Thịnh bought land use rights to forested area in Tat. According to the local official, Phú Thịnh rented rights to land south of the river in Tat from province level authorities to plant medicinal crops and lead sustainable forestry efforts. The province selling the land use rights to Phú Thịnh as opposed to the commune was an important distinction, as it absolved local officials of blame otherwise directed at them by villagers. The commune government thus framed the issue as a problem to be solved between Phú Thịnh, the province, and the villagers themselves.

Across Vietnam, there exists an extensive scholarship detailing accounts of both public and private land acquisitions associated with economic liberalization, and a longer background of land acquisition either by French colonial authorities for logging, the state during collectivization, and now NGOs, the government, and private environmental companies (Chau, 2019; McElwee, 2016; Sikor and Cầm, 2016). According to researcher Lam Minh Chau in a paper detailing a case of rural resistance to land grabs in Thái Bình, since economic liberalization in 1986, "Vietnam has become a site of dramatic mass protests against land appropriation projects initiated by provincial and district authorities" (2019, p. 343). Instigating factors of the Thái Bình protests in 1997, for example, involved rampant corruption and land grabbing in the wake of de-collectivization, which endangered the livelihoods of farmers (Malarney, 2001).

Widespread resistance movements demonstrate ongoing contestations with new forms of state "territorialization," household-based land tenure, and the commodification of land (Sikor and Cham, 2016). NGO environmental projects such as REDD+ (reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) bring to light sometimes contentious conversations about justice, equal access to land and resources, and the environmental efficacy of ongoing processes

of enclosure (Sikor and Cham, 2016). Further, the designation of protected areas and national forests, such as the Ba Vì national forest, has in some cases led to notable instances of resistance from dispossessed ethnic minority upland groups (Sowerwine, 2011b). Such processes are not relegated solely to the uplands or rural fringes of Vietnam but are also major sources of conflict on the edges of urban centers, where farmers are dispossessed of land as urban development consumes the surrounding countryside (Harms, 2016).

In Tat, responses to Phú Thịnh were varied. Just as with the establishment of protected areas, many villagers employed forms of "everyday resistance" to ignore Phú Thịnh and continue performing swidden agriculture on acquisitioned land (Scott, 1989). Others ranged from only hinting at corruption, to organizing with other villagers to directly resist the company. Some, however, were either completely unaware of the company, or were not personally affected and thus did not care about the conflict (a perspective that was privileged in the work of Rambo and Trần). As I spoke to villagers, I learned more about the conflict with Phú Thịnh, the conditions of the acquisition, and the goals of the company.

Although most of my interviews in Tat were with older family members and heads of households, many of them inevitably turned into conversations with whole families who chimed in and out to provide thoughts and add context. During one interview in the Southwest portion of the village identified by Nong, I spoke with a family in the shade under a raised wooden home, surrounded by woodworking tools and handcrafted furniture. As we spoke, the daughter (perhaps in her mid-late twenties, I never managed to get her name) of the elderly couple Khánh and I were interviewing hovered close by, brushing her younger sister's hair, and preparing to leave on her motorbike. When we arrived at the topic of Phú Thịnh, the daughter suddenly became

animated and visibly upset. I waited eagerly for Khánh to translate, and as he did, she sped off on her motorbike before I could ask her any further questions.

Khánh seemed reluctant to translate the full extent of her words, but what he did leave me with suggested a link between the green books and the land sold to Phú Thịnh. The young woman was angered that villagers lost land between the first and second green books, while shortly after, land use rights to "community land" (land officially owned by no-one and therefore managed directly by the commune to be redistributed to villagers) were sold to Phú Thịnh. This was explained as an unfortunate coincidence, but the anger in her voice left me with the impression that she harbored a deep feeling of injustice related to the issue. The eight hectares of land the family held land use rights to via their green book are still planted by villagers rather than Phú Thịnh, but the daughter described an ongoing conflict with a neighbor over the land, leaving them with four of the eight hectares to plant.

The case of Phú Thịnh represents the nested, overlapping land claims and conflicts occurring in Tat. For any one area, multiple villagers may lay claim to specific fields in addition to outside interests. Villagers, local authorities, and Phú Thịnh not only work with varied understandings of the local landscape and land use rights but will advocate for their rights to land according to divergent strategies. While some villagers employ informal, subversive methods of resistance, others increasingly adopted the language of land reform to argue for rights to land through official channels, sometimes in collaboration with neighbors.

Lương

The concept of "rights" was of major importance in Tat. I first came to this realization in conversation with Lương, a sturdy 68-year-old man with a penchant for old camouflage clothing and pet birds. One of the kindest people I met in Tat, Lương would later invite me onto his porch to share tea after a tiring transect walk through overgrown secondary forest. He was not shy to share his opinions on recent changes in the village, particularly concerning the encroachment of Phú Thịnh on lands where villagers are actively performing swidden agriculture. According to Lương, since none of the households owned land use rights certificates to land acquisitioned by Phú Thịnh, the province interpreted the land as unused and sold the rights. As demonstrated, however, most of the land in Tat is managed via customary land tenure systems, which are unacknowledged by the state.

Phú Thịnh's project was on an indefinite pause due to the resistance of locals. While some farmers continue to work the land without actively resisting, Lương led an effort to sue Phú Thịnh directly for encroaching on the existing land use rights of villagers. Out of the community members I interviewed who attended a previous meeting on the question of Phú Thịnh, Lương was by far the most enthusiastic and the most convincing. Lương argued that if Phú Thịnh did not buy the rights to the 891 hectares of land, farmers in Tat would make 200,000 - 300,000 VND per hectare a year in payments from ecosystem services for preserving protected forest area and maintaining tree cover. Additionally, Lương claimed that out of the (roughly) 170 households in Tat, seventy already lack sufficient land for agriculture.

Despite Lương's convincing rhetoric, however, only six households in total decided to join Lương and sue the company, including Nong. While some of the households I spoke to were uninformed of or unaffected by Phú Thịnh, others simply continued to work on land that Phú Thịnh bought rights to without paying any heed to the company whatsoever. Linh, for example,

did not know about the ongoing conflict with Phú Thịnh. Other households chose to level complaints to the commune office, only to be ignored. Local authorities, rather than intervening in the conflict, characterized it as a problem to be solved between province level officials, Phú Thịnh, and the affected villagers, thus deflecting any responsibility. A lack of bureaucratic accountability is a common strategy to deflect blame in Tat, and within the Vietnamese government. Since the collective and post *Đổi Mới* periods, the state has repeatedly deflected blame for policy failures to local corruption or outside influence (Trang, 2009).

Lương's action against Phú Thịnh demonstrates the mobilization of new discourses around land use rights to fight for the rights of local villagers to the land. The meanings and interpretations attached to rights are contested amongst villagers, local and provincial officials, and companies such as Phú Thịnh. Although land reform began shortly after the *Đổi Mới* reforms in 1986, the alteration of the landscape according to land use rights and land use rights certificates is an ongoing, contested process representing negotiations at multiple scales. The action (and inaction) of Lương and his neighbors show that land and agricultural policy may be formulated in the lowlands, but is shaped, implemented, and negotiated in the uplands by farmers themselves. Through other interviews, however, I learned that many were upset with Phú Thịnh but were not participating in Lương's lawsuit. Rather, some suggested that corruption led to the acquisition of land by Phú Thịnh.

To contest changes to the landscape, Lương adopted newly formulated discourses on "rights" embedded in the language of land reform policy to sue Phú Thịnh. While Linh and others either ignore or subtly question the legitimacy of new institutions altogether, Lương exercises resistance through discourses shaped by new structures of power. Both methods avoid the risk of

direct resistance by either ignoring local authorities, or working through newly introduced, de jure channels of resistance.

Conclusion

Land reform in the northern Vietnamese uplands is a highly contested, ongoing process of change resulting from both the uneven implementation of land reform by local authorities, and the responses of villagers. Ongoing negotiations led to divergent interpretations, outcomes, and strategies employed by uplanders. Responses include subtle forms of everyday resistance via noncompliance and resistance, or, alternatively, the incorporation of land reform into existing livelihood systems. Strategies for noncompliance are based on low-risk choices to ignore the information on land use rights certificate, while resistance entails the outright contestation of official policy.

Resistance to the implementation of de jure land tenure rules in Tat takes multiple forms, either resistance by ignoring the legitimacy of established institutions, or working through institutions to argue for rights. Outcomes of noncompliance and resistance can include conflict with neighbors or local authorities but can also lead to the preservation of customary land tenure. These ongoing negotiations demonstrate that policy is written in the lowlands, but it is reformed, interpreted, and implemented in the uplands by farmers themselves. This process is mediated via the interactions between people, and through the various ways villagers utilize or ignore land use rights certificates in their everyday land use practices.

Viên, Phùng, Nhân, Hoàng, Linh, and Lương represent the different ways villagers in Tat have encountered and navigated the process of land reform, which has brought about instances of

both conflict and cooperation between villagers. The individualization of land parcels has made collective action difficult in Tat, but as demonstrated by the efforts of Lương, Nong, and their neighbors, cooperation to fight against the negative consequences of land reform is still possible and occurs in the uplands. Thus, it is inappropriate to utilize oversimplistic models of competition or rational choice to characterize the nature of upland peoples in relation to state intervention. Rather, uplanders actively negotiate the land reform process based on multiple social, cultural, individual, and livelihood-based factors.

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Chapter IV

CONCLUSION

Illusions of Order

Before I went to Tat, I spent innumerable hours looking at maps. Aerial imagery of the Tan Minh commune, in which Tat is located, suggested sweeping land cover transformations associated with economic liberalization beginning in the late 1980s. Ethnic maps depicted the color-coded, bounded domains of ethnic minority groups in the northern, central, and southern highlands (Itō, 2013). Historical maps showed the sprawling domains of the Nguyen dynasty, French Indochina, a Vietnam split in two, and finally a united Vietnamese state. Maps turn complex, varied landscapes into simplified, legible frames of reference, often for the purposes of administration, central planning, or development (Scott, 1998). Maps are as useful as they are dangerous, imbued with an objective finality that creates reality rather than reflecting it (Monmonier, 2018).

Cartographic methods were used by the French to identify potential problems in need of state intervention, and to cement upland-lowland boundaries to solidify the uplands as a circumscribed object of intervention (Sowerwine, 2011a, p. 59; McElwee, 2016). French mapping was detailed and systematic, encompassing the entirety of French Indochina and documenting ethnic borders, forestry, agricultural zones, and the borders between the uplands and the lowlands (Sowerwine, 2011a, p. 59). Maps themselves carry the weight of scientific authenticity and objective legitimacy, which transforms them into powerful tools in the construction of ethnic, cultural, and environmental narratives regardless of their accuracy.

The Vietnamese government continues to use contemporary maps to legitimize intervention in the uplands through the identification of specific problems. Notably, the Vietnamese government has identified active and productive swidden areas as "barren" or "unused land," providing the impetus for development, conservation, or forestry initiatives through Program 327 (Leisz, 2017; McElwee, 2022a). Mapping programs such as these led to contemporary misunderstandings of the uplands, particularly regarding the use of swidden agriculture. The interpretation of swidden agriculture as destructive and its absence from Vietnamese government land use maps inform regressive policy decisions aimed at altering upland livelihood systems.

The illusion of a neat, tidy order to the uplands quickly disintegrated the moment I began talking to farmers in Tat. In the two body chapters of this thesis project, I attempted to demonstrate the ways that the process of economic liberalization and land reform in the Vietnamese uplands is not only contested by, but relies on, the informal and ongoing practice of swidden agriculture according to customary land tenure systems despite official land laws. Such livelihood systems are dynamic, changing alongside economic and political circumstance to reshape the lives of ethnic minority farmers in the Vietnamese uplands.

The aim of chapter two was to address the ways that post-*Doi Moi* government policy, including the introduction of new land laws and economic liberalization policy, altered the practice of swidden agriculture, livestock raising, and rice farming in Tat. I argued that these transformations represent an informal, de facto integration of swidden agriculture into newly introduced systems for upland resource management and extraction. The informal integration of swidden agriculture is occurring despite the official stance that discourages swidden as an upland land use practice, based on colonial understandings of forestry and sustainability.

The aim of chapter three was to complicate the focus on "integration" by demonstrating the diversity of responses to the uneven process of land reform in Tat, ranging from compliance to resistance and subtle forms of noncompliance. The diversity of responses to land reform in Tat demonstrate an ongoing negotiation between uplanders, local authorities, and the government of Vietnam that transcends the local. Both chapters rely on field notes, semi-structured interview data, and personal observation from transect walks through the village during the ten days I spent in Tat in August of 2023. The extent to which the aims of each chapter were achieved will be addressed in the following discussion on findings and limitations.

Key Findings

Swidden agriculture is a contentious topic. In the face of continued pressure by the Vietnamese government on swidden agriculture against the backdrop of a history of anti-swidden initiatives, many agroforestry researchers, political ecologists, and other environmental researchers take a defensive stance (Lam et al., 2004; McElwee, 2022a). Such a stance defends the merits of swidden against the encroachments of the state, marking the existential threat land reform and economic liberalization pose to swidden, emphasizing decreasing fallow times and the disappearance of shifting cultivation in many parts of the uplands (Lam et al., 2004). Anti-swidden policies, most notably through the expansion of the Project for Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization, proliferated alongside the implementation of land reform and forest land allocation (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018; McElwee, 2022a). Throughout the northern uplands, land parcelization, resettlement, and forest guard enforcement led to adverse outcomes in many communities (Sowerwine, 2011b).

Jennifer Sowerwine (2011b), for example, noted negative outcomes for Dao uplanders near the Ba Vì national park, who have been limited from planting and clearing land in the national park. Local Dao groups were subject to resettlement to lower-elevation areas, and an influx of lowlanders posed new difficulties with local access to land. This process, however, was met with a host of informal mechanisms for preserving local "moral economies" by invoking customary patron-client relationships, and by continuing to engage in swidden agriculture within the national park (Scott, 1976; Sowerwine, 2011b)

Alongside formal processes of land reform and anti-swidden enforcement exists a host of informal mechanisms negotiated at the local level that reinforce the place of swidden agriculture and customary systems as livelihood strategies. In Tat, the survival of swidden agriculture, despite reports of its long-term endangerment (Lam et al., 2004), did not occur in complete opposition to the process of market liberalization in the uplands. Rather, swidden agriculture in Tat has been used as an informal tool by uplanders, local government, and companies to grow and sell valuable timber cash crops. The creation of a strict separation between state-led economic liberalization and the continued practice of swidden agriculture risks overlooking the ways uplanders adapt swidden according to rapidly changing circumstances. Swidden agriculture in Tat has therefore been informally integrated into broader systems of resource extraction and marketization, leading to holistic transformations in the local livelihood system.

Livelihood Transformations

Livelihood transformations come as a result of the "improved fallow" system in Tat, whereby naturally regrown, secondary forest fallow areas are replaced by timber monocultures, and

swidden crops such as cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), arrowroot (*Maranta arundinacea*), dryland rice (*Oryza sativa*), and maize (*Zea mays*) are only grown for the one to two years when trees are small enough to allow light to reach the forest floor. Siam benzoin (*Styrax tonkinensis*, or "*bồ đề*" in Vietnamese) and acacia (*hybrid sp.*) replaced bamboo (*Bambusoideae*, particularly *Dendrocalamus brandisii*, or "*luồng* bamboo") and natural fallow as the dominant use of swidden fallows sometime in the 2010s. Siam benzoin and acacia account for most timber monocultures in Tat, alongside a few less profitable tree species. After a fallow period of seven to ten years, the trees are harvested and sold, the underbrush is burned to return nutrients to the soil, and swidden crops are planted again. This system, managed according to an ongoing negotiation between lineage-based land claims and newly introduced land laws, has had widespread effects on the total livelihood system in Tat.

Because of the replacement of natural secondary forest fallow with "improved fallow" of acacia and Siam benzoin, villagers in Tat have reduced access to previously prevalent forest products such as ginger, bush meat, bamboo, and mushrooms (Leisz, 2017, p. 127). Naturally regrown fallow was also an important source of grazing land for cattle. Today, across the board, it is less common for villagers to keep cattle. Most cattle in Tat were sold when villagers ran out of space for grazing, using the funds to invest in rototillers, motorbikes, or concrete homes. These changes came alongside an increase in livestock disease, which exacerbated the economic risk of raising cattle. Cattle were previously an important store of wealth, and further research could be done on the shift to storing wealth in bank accounts, or in investments like newly introduced timber monocultures.

In the lowlands, irrigated rice agriculture changed according to the introduction of chemical pesticides, fertilizers, and hybridized rice varieties. Rice farming requires community-

wide decision-making regarding when to plant to prevent any one household from attracting more pests than the others. Furthermore, collective labor exchange groups are a common occurrence during planting and harvesting in Tat, with all villagers pitching in on each-other's fields. With increased marketization and economic differentiation in Tat, however, wealthy villagers increasingly hire their neighbors to harvest upland fields for a wage. Farmers with strong attachments to lineage-based land claims benefit more from this process than do recent, non-Tây immigrants in Tat. Hoàng, for example, had to buy extra rice, and had no access to lowland paddy fields. The increase in paid labor mirrors a potent labor shortage in Tat, whereby young adults leave the village to find wage labor in the cities, sending money back to their families.

Economic differentiation in Tat is reflected by the construction of concrete homes, affordable to households with stronger lineage-based claims to hillside forest land where valuable timber crops are planted, regardless of official land use rights documentation. Lam et al. argue that during the cooperative period, there was little economic differentiation between households (2004). By the early 2000s, economic differentiation had already become widespread via the intensification of existing inequalities regarding access to land and resources. Just as in the case of the Dao near Ba Vì national park, however, the process of economic liberalization is itself negotiated by mechanisms for redistribution and reciprocity (Sowerwine, 2011b). In Tat, for example, the construction of new concrete homes has become a communal undertaking, with neighbors bringing gifts of rice and rice wine and assisting with the construction of concrete foundations. After construction is complete, a party is prepared with the gifts.

Responses and Contestations

The process of change in Tat has been contested and negotiated in a variety of ways, both subtle and direct. For many farmers in Tat, such as Viên and Phùng, new land laws are simply ignored. When asked if the amount of land a villager farms has changed over time, the most common response was “no change” or “I farm the same land I always have” regardless of changes in the amount of land a household has on official land use rights documentation. Similar treatment was directed toward the establishment of protected forest land in Tat, although with different outcomes for different farmers.

Given no other option, Hoàng nonchalantly continued to clear and plant trees on protected areas, claiming that the forest guard “can’t do anything.” He continues to collect payments from local government for maintaining tree cover in protected forest area, even though the trees consist of Siam benzoin and acacia monocrops. Linh, however, had a very different relationship with the forest guard, facing reprimands on multiple occasions for clearing protected forest area. Linh was animated and talkative during our interview, accusing the local commune government of corruption in a land dispute with her neighbor resulting from inconsistent land use rights documentation. Linh’s situation suggests that land use rights certificates are referenced primarily when there is a dispute over land and are otherwise ignored.

This was certainly the case for Lương, who led an effort alongside multiple other households to sue the Phú Thịnh Joint Stock Company, a company that bought land in Tat from the Hòa Bình Provincial People’s Committee in 2008 for the purpose of sustainable forestry, reforestation, and medicinal crop growth. The company failed to acknowledge the ongoing practice of swidden agriculture taking place within the 780 acres leased to Phú Thịnh, or the land use rights already allocated to local farmers. By contesting the company through officially recognized channels, Lương adopted state-recognized discourses of land use to argue for his own

rights to the landscape. Other villagers, even when impacted by Phú Thịnh, however, simply continued to farm the land without acknowledging new claims, effectively putting Phú Thịnh's project on hold. In an interview with a local Tân Minh commune official, it was clear that the officials did not take blame for the conflict, instead deflecting local complaints to province-level administration.

Discussion

This thesis project revolves around two central themes. On the one hand, I make the argument that swidden agriculture, alongside the customary lineage-based livelihood system that continues to dictate its practice, has become integrated into broader, state-led efforts at resource extraction, marketization, and liberalization. On the other hand, I argue that the process of integration is contested and negotiated at every step of the way by uplanders themselves, who ultimately define policy by implementing it from the bottom-up based on their own needs, be they subsistence-based, social, or cultural.

This underlying tension is integral to the way swidden has been incorporated into new systems of resource extraction. According to the late James Scott, "any production process depends on a host of informal practices and improvisations that could never be codified" (1998, p. 6). Swidden agriculture, by the very nature of its exclusion from state land management schemes, has simultaneously served as the ongoing justification for state intervention in upland areas, and has provided the informal, bottom-up practices on which the state ultimately relies for the process of economic liberalization to take place in the uplands. The exclusion of swidden

agriculture, therefore, is fundamental to its de facto inclusion into new methods of resource extraction in the northern Vietnamese uplands.

The continual official exclusion of swidden agriculture from state agricultural and sustainability projects rests on colonial constructions of ethnic minority uplanders as "others" (Said, 1979). As objects of intervention, ethnic minority uplanders can never truly be integrated into the state. Likewise, state forestry projects are designed from the top-down, originating from centralized authorities, and "applied" in the uplands over traditional livelihood systems. The condition of exclusion is thus necessary to the construction and implementation of government forestry projects. Intervention in the uplands is justified by the denigration and "problematization" of swidden agriculture as a "backward," destructive livelihood practice that should ultimately be replaced with sustainable forestry or sedentary agriculture (McElwee, 2016). Swidden agriculture, as a sometimes nomadic, flexible system of agriculture that often operates according to customary systems of land management, has historically and contemporarily been illegible to the state, and therefore difficult to manage, measure, and control (Nguyen and Masuda, 2018).

Efforts for legibility (how something is "made visible" by the state) explain the historical problematization of swidden agriculture in the uplands, leading to swidden's criminalization since colonial times (Scott, 1998). Because uplanders rely on swidden agriculture for survival, whole populations are transformed into criminals, or "forest thieves," subject to selective state intervention and surveillance (Cầm, 2011). Other researchers, including Li and Semedi, observed similar methods of criminalization embedded in state legibility projects in Kalimantan, Indonesia, whereby large-scale palm oil plantations criminalize locals who use the landscape for alternate purposes (2021). By simultaneously reinforcing swidden through the introduction of

market mechanisms and providing the basis for its criminalization, lowland authorities in Vietnam reap the benefits of the spontaneous, creative adaptations of swidden by uplanders according to new economic circumstances while still denigrating its use as a means to exert control over upland people and resources.

"Legibility," and the form of pure, bureaucratic order that comes with it is a utopian ideal (Scott, 1989). As argued by Scott in *Seeing Like a State* (1989), when state programs for improving the human condition rest on complete order both in nature and in society, they fail in disastrous, often spectacular ways. Efforts such as these were endemic to state socialist programs, resulting in widespread suffering in Vietnam during the collective period, but also to greater degrees in China during the Great Leap Forward, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and the former USSR. During the collective period in Vietnam, the use of swidden agriculture, alongside informal methods for obtaining resources, allowed for survival at the local level (McElwee, 2022a). The continued practice of swidden agriculture during the collective period mitigated the worst effects of top-down, bureaucratic land management in the uplands of Vietnam.

Likewise, the concept of the "market economy" is equally utopian, providing a structure of reality based on rational, profit-maximizing individual consumers against the backdrop of equal competition (Scott, 1998, p. 8). The continued use of state intervention based on colonial constructions of the uplands, and the survival and strengthening of programs such as the Fixed Cultivation and Sedentarization Program, demonstrate that despite broad economic transformations after *Đổi Mới*, state views of ethnic uplanders and their relationship with the landscape remained largely the same.

Utopian conceptions of legibility and order are inherently unreachable. There will always be informal, creative, excluded practices, and thus there will always be a justification for

intervention. The difference between the collective and post- *Đổi Mới* periods rests on how the state benefits from upland land use practices. During collectivization, swidden was necessary for survival but was ultimately not beneficial to state appropriation of resources. After *Đổi Mới*, and particularly after the 2010s in Tat, swidden became a tool for the transformation of hillsides into capital.

Significance

Contemporary political ecology, geography, and environmental anthropology focus heavily on the concept of "agency" regarding the role of local people in the process of conservation, economic transformation, and livelihood change (Davis, 2016; McElwee, 2016; Tsing, 2015). In McElwee's *Forests Are Gold*, for example, uplander agency plays a central role in the enforcement of "environmental rule" (2016, p. 5). "Environmental rule" refers to the general tendency for state programs aimed at restructuring the environment, to instead aim at restructuring people, social relationships, and livelihoods (McElwee, 2016, p. 5). "Agency" in this sense, relates to the role of uplanders in reinforcing or contesting newly introduced power relations as citizen-subjects (McElwee, 2016). Government schemes for forest conservation and sustainable development are thus conceptualized in a Foucauldian sense, as encompassing grids of socially reinforced power relationships (McElwee, 2016).

While a useful framework, the fixation with Foucauldian, postmodern power relationships poses serious limitations. By 'integration" I do not suggest that customary livelihood systems and indigenous land use practices have been subsumed by hegemonic state narratives of control existing in subjective, self-reinforcing networks of governmentality. Rather,

I mean to demonstrate the ongoing, dynamic, bottom-up strategies that challenge, incorporate, and alter state policies according to local circumstances. In the case of Tat, the alliance and integration between swidden agriculture and state strategies for economic liberalization is organic, and subject to constant change and negotiation.

Further, environmental discourses are not hegemonic, but rather co-produced in uneasy, evolving relationships between uplanders and local officials from the ground-up. While postmodern, Foucauldian environmental researchers in Vietnam are right to point out that the binary between the state and uplands is arbitrarily contrived (McElwee, 2016; Sowerwine, 2011b), it is fallacious to then subsume the latter under the conduct of the former. Doing so robs uplanders of creativity, spontaneity, and bottom-up innovation embedded in the process of economic liberalization itself, which is too often conceived purely as a subsuming set of power relationships (McElwee, 2016). An eye to informal spontaneity, the type that could never be subsumed by the state, either through the creation of citizen subjects or forestry programs, remains open to future possibilities for autonomy and the development of liberatory ontologies. The informal, bottom-up pressures on which the state relies also have the potential to bring about the total transformation of the system itself.

Anna Tsing (2015) advocated for an anthropology that brings attention to the "cracks" in the pavement of modernity, capitalism, and the state. In this project, I attempted to bring to attention the "cracks," the organic and unexpected developments, in the process of land reform in Vietnam's uplands. These unexpected developments are not only the result of land reform but ultimately define the process of land reform as a whole.

In Tat, previous studies were first and foremost ecological (Dao et al., 2001; Lam et al., 2004; Leisz et al., 2001; Mai and Trần, 2009; Rambo et al., 2009). These studies provided rich

descriptions of land cover and land use transformations, and to the extent that they did address social and cultural change in Tat, it was primarily as supporting evidence to environmental research. The central goal of this project was to provide a small look into the perspectives and experiences of farmers living through unprecedented economic, social, and environmental change. This goal lent itself well to the first-person, ethnographic writing style showcased throughout the thesis, inspired by the "thick description" of Geertz (2008). Furthermore, the shift to planting acacia and Siam benzoin in Tat brought with it wide-ranging changes to the livelihood system not recorded by previous visitors to the village (Lam et al., 2004, Rambo et al., 2009). This research not only fills a gap in the Foucauldian-dominated field of political ecology but also provides a much-needed update to the particular situation of farmers in Tat.

Limitations

This research project was subject to a host of limitations, the two biggest of which being the timeframe and language barrier. Although I was able to complete 24 semi-structured interviews, the length of my stay in Tat was limited to only ten days, an insufficient amount of time to truly understand a place, culture, and people on an ethnographic level. Despite this limitation, I employed ethnographic methods while taking field notes and while writing about the stories I heard and places I visited in Tat.

The language barrier was a constant difficulty. Besides the occasional "hello!" from local children, the only English available to me during my stay in Tat came from my friend and translator, Khánh. Beyond basic greetings and pleasantries, my Vietnamese was woefully underdeveloped. I lament the missed nuances in inflection, tone, and wording that could have

enriched the scope and detail of this thesis project. In an interview with a woman near the western border of Tat, Khánh reluctantly translated to me “when you are in Vietnam, you speak Vietnamese.” I couldn’t help but agree with her.

Beyond these boundaries, fundamental limitations were posed by my positionality as a white, male foreigner in the uplands. In Tat, my positionality not only existed between me and those I met but preceded me. There is value to being a cultural outsider to a place, completely out of one’s own context. When fundamental differentials in power based on histories of colonial exploitation and foreign intervention enter the mix, however, it can create chasms that are difficult to bridge.

My position as a male was additionally fundamental to my experience in Tat. Meals were always masculine gatherings during my stay. Nhân’s wife and kids are largely absent in this thesis, because frankly, I didn’t spend as much time with them as I would have liked. Nhân’s wife brought our food upstairs every evening, and after Nhân, Khánh, myself, and any visitors were finished eating, returned to take the remaining food and dishes away. Both social organization within the home and agricultural activities in Tat are gendered. I was able to interview eight women during my stay, but due to identity-based limitations and the scope of my research, considerations regarding changing gender relationships with economic liberalization are absent from this project.

Future Research

Future research in Tat should take the form of a longer-term, ethnographic study to better-illuminate the socio-cultural outcomes of land reform, and the nuanced ways villagers relate to

the landscape according to new environmental discourses. A study like this should go beyond the passive application of theory to upland processes of change but should engage in drawing out the shifting theoretical worldviews of Tây uplanders themselves.

The findings of this research project pose new questions regarding the long-term use of swidden agriculture in upland areas in relation to ongoing processes of economic liberalization. Future projects should continue this work by comparing the differential outcomes of economic transformation across the uplands, according to local context and circumstances. Comparative research will provide a better understanding of how land reform impacts different ethnic minority groups, living in different environments, with different pre-existing systems for managing resources.

Increased market integration via the introduction of valuable timber cash crops poses a variety of questions related to the future role of cattle in upland areas. Are other areas seeing a decrease in the raising of cattle? As a formerly important store of wealth, how are uplanders finding new ways to store wealth and invest in their futures? It would be interesting to investigate the role of timber as a new store of wealth, particularly considering the long period of time it takes to grow and sell timber, and the risks involved with drought or other extreme weather. Changing economic circumstances additionally raises questions about changes to the gendered division of labor in Tat, particularly regarding the relationship between land reform and land ownership by women, economic mobility, and wealth compared to men.

Concluding Remarks

It is not possible to do justice to the richness of life and diversity of perspectives displayed in Tat in a brief research project such as this. Despite this, by conveying the stories of the people I spoke with in Tat from my own perspective, as well as describing the livelihood transformations I observed while there, I hope to offer a small glimpse into the rhythms of life in a small upland ethnic minority community in northern Vietnam. The perspectives conveyed to me in Tat carry wide-ranging implications for the trajectory of change across the northern uplands. No political system can be fully understood without a deep understanding of the people who implement and negotiate policy on the ground. With attention to scale, bottom-up histories and ethnographies enrich our worldviews by shedding light on the overlooked peripheries and cracks of processes that on the surface, appear to be driven by centralized actors such as presidents, politicians, international organizations, and states. The main drivers of change in the Vietnamese uplands are uplanders themselves.

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