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'My Grandmother Never Told Me That Before!' Collaborative oral histories with ethnic minority youth and elders in northern Vietnam

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ABSTRACT | Hmong ethnic minority populations in Vietnam's northern borderlands have a long history of oral tradition and story-telling. Yet with an historical absence of literacy and no self-created written archives, the first-hand knowledge and experiences of Hmong elders is seldom communicated beyond their kin. At the request of a Hmong community member we developed a collaborative, intergenerational oral history project that would allow stories of Hmong elders to be shared on the internet. Concurrently, we trained Hmong youth in research methods, helping to improve their English skills and contribute to inter-generational knowledge transfer. Drawing on debates regarding collaborative North-South ethnography, positionality and critical reflexivity, and feminist fieldwork approaches, we contemplate our roles as two Global North researchers interacting with Global South ethnic minority youth and elders, and the degree to which we were able to help support the creation of subaltern counter-narratives to Vietnamese state discourses of upland minority histories.'

Keywords: Oral histories; Positionality; Collaborative research; Fieldwork in Vietnam; Hmong.

Introduction

The collaborative research project that we reflect upon in this paper emerged from a conversation the first author, Sarah Turner (hereafter Sarah T.), had with a long-time Hmong woman friend, Shu Tan, in a small town in the northern Vietnam uplands. In this conversation, Sarah T. asked Shu what Sarah could do as an outsider – who had worked alongside Shu for many years – to better champion Hmong culture. Shu was the Director of Sapa O'Chau, a social enterprise supporting minority children to participate more fully in the Vietnamese state education system, training minority youth to become trekking guides while improving their English skills, and operating a trekking enterprise, small café, and backpacker hostel based in Sapa town, Lào Cai Province. Shu was concerned that local Hmong youth were increasingly unaware of their local family and community histories, and that traditional craft techniques were being lost. It was from this conversation that the Hmong Voices Project was born. In 2013, in consultation with Shu and Sapa O'Chau Social Enterprise, with considerable input from our research assistant Sarah Delisle (hereafter Sarah D.), and with financial support from National Geographic US, this project was designed to document oral histories and traditional knowledge in Hmong communities while bringing together youth and elders in a collaborative research project. We took this specific approach because oral history is argued to be an important tool for studying the 'hidden histories and geographies, the place-based lives and memories of disadvantaged people, minority groups, and others whose views have been ignored or whose lives pass quietly, producing few if any written records' (George and Stratford 2016: 190-191). More broadly, as Reinke (2019: 100) notes in her field reflections of collaborations with NGOs, we also wanted to 'examine the possibilities of collaboration as a way to subvert asymmetries in access to knowledge production'.

In brief, the two authors worked with eight young Hmong men and women trekking guides connected with Sapa O'Chau and taught them the basics of interviewing elders in an oral history style (detailed below). The guides – or youth interviewers – then co-designed and completed an oral history interview with someone of an older generation whom they already knew. These interviews with an elder in their family or a long-time neighbour in their village focused upon the changes that the elder had witnessed and/or experienced in their lives. From these oral history interviews emerged reflections and personal stories of changing political landscapes, strategies for creating sustainable upland livelihoods, and the challenges of globalisation and shifting family structures. Each interview was taped and then reworked to make a continuous story script. This script was then returned to the elder for participant validation. The revised and participant approved script was then recorded by the Hmong youth interviewer in English as an oral history story, so as to reach as broad an audience as possible (including members of the international Hmong diaspora who speak different dialects). The finished recordings are available on the Sapa O'Chau website (<http://sapaochau.org/sapa-trekking-and-homestay/hmong-voices/>). While not the focus of this paper, a second aim of our project was to record and archive traditional Hmong craft and musical techniques for younger generations to access. For this we interviewed and filmed community members weaving hemp fabric, dyeing cloth with batik methods, designing Hmong jewelry and playing the *qeej*, a traditional Hmong woodwind instrument. These videos are also available on the

website (<http://sapaochau.org/sapa-trekking-and-homestay/hmong-voices/traditional-crafts-/>), in the hopes of retaining and disseminating this traditional knowledge.

While Shu encouraged us to undertake the project and remained interested in it throughout, she was not actively involved in running the project due to her responsibilities directing Sapa O'Chau and many trips to Hanoi to promote the enterprise. Therefore, our collaborations took on a multi-scalar approach, with the initial ideas raised by Shu and with Sapa O'Chau lending 'local political weight' to the project (see below), while hands-on collaborations then followed with the youth interviewers and the Hmong elders with whom we worked alongside.

In this paper our aim is to critically reflect upon our attempts to produce possible subaltern counter-narratives to mainstream Vietnamese state discourses of Hmong culture and history (Kennemore and Postero 2020). We focus on the oral history segment of this project while detailing the collaborative process we developed, highlighting the strengths and drawbacks of our approach. To start, we briefly review recent oral history work in Asia while critiquing the lack of collaborative approaches, before introducing the Hmong community with whom we worked and their oral traditions. We then outline the five-step process we followed to try to create a 'performance-based collaborative form of writing' involving Hmong elders and youth (Brooks 2005: 182). We include vignettes drawn directly from our interactions with both Hmong elders and youth to highlight key exchanges and emerging themes. We critically reflect on our positionalities regarding this process, and the positionalities and commentaries of the youth interviewers and elderly interviewees. We conclude with some thoughts on undertaking such a collaborative oral history project with minority individuals in Vietnam and on our success – or not – at hoping to contribute to the creation of revisionist histories that challenge dominant state narratives.

Recent Oral History Projects in Asia: Room for Intra-family and Collaborative Approaches?

There is a rich collection of materials reflecting on the process of undertaking oral histories in the Global South, and more specifically in the Asia region. If we limit our focus to publications regarding Asia-based oral history projects from the late 1990s onwards (due to the sheer scope of the field) we can still find a broad array of endeavours. However, what we have been unable to find are examples of oral history projects in which members of the same families are involved in planning and undertaking oral histories. What we have found – and these have been instructional for our own initial planning – are examples of relatively large projects including the 'Bengali Intellectuals Oral History Project', a digital archive of life histories of intellectuals born towards the end of colonial period and who were active through the decolonisation period (Bose 2018), while in Malaysia an oral history project in the UNESCO World Heritage Site of George Town, Penang, has focused on safeguarding the city's intangible cultural heritage, while increasing public awareness (Musa and Feng 2016). Other projects contrast the usages of oral history among scholars in China, Japan, India, and Thailand, while then showing how oral history can challenge hegemonic historiographical paradigms (Bowie 2018). Meanwhile, Na Li highlights the rising popularity of oral history in China since 2000 and calls for a more critical analysis of the diverse and dynamic oral histories in the country (Li 2020). One such example is the work

of Angela Tsang, Pauline Chan, and Lixi Zhang, who examine the life stories of women leaders in the People's Republic of China since the late 1970s (Tsang et al. 2011).

At a more intimate level – in line with our own approach – recent works have focused on how former sufferers of leprosy construct the history of this disease in contemporary Singapore and Malaysia (Loh 2011). In the Philippines, Boris Verbrugge has explored the relationships between the growth in artisanal and small-scale mining and broader rural transformations, drawing on what the author calls 'thematically oriented oral history interviews' (Verbrugge 2016: 110), focusing on a particular aspect of the respondents' lives. Another nuanced oral history project documents one family's story of survival and eventual escape from Cambodia's genocide (Haberlin 2016). Meanwhile, Nathalie Nguyen explores the representations of cross-cultural relationships after the end of the Vietnam War in the narratives of Vietnamese women now married in Australia (Nguyen 2018). Also with regards to the Vietnam War, Heonik Kwon has written a powerful creative ethnography of the presence of ghosts in wartime and postwar central Vietnam (Kwon 2012).¹ Moving to Laos, Pierre Petit details how Tai highlanders experience mobility (and stability) while drawing from oral histories that highlight the need for migration studies to go far beyond just the start of one's mobility to better understand these experiences as a whole (Petit 2015). Yet, despite this rich tradition of documenting oral histories in the region, we have found no studies based in Asia that take a cross-generational intra-family approach to the creation and implementation of oral histories.

The only work we have found from the region that has trained community members to undertake oral history projects – as we hoped to do – is that of Benjamin Ku, studying the life histories of Miao ethnic minority women in rural China (Ku 2011). For that project, 23 local women were recruited to be 'study partners' and 'took part in formulating the research topics, collecting oral testimonies, and interpreting the narratives of other women's living experiences' (Ku 2011: 27). The study partners received training in conducting oral testimonies, designing questions and using voice-recorders and went on to record 103 oral stories between 1993 and 2003. Benjamin Ku noted 'we employed oral testimony as a tool to encourage participation and inclusion, as well as to facilitate the analytical abilities of local peoples and empower them to plan and undertake sustainable action' (Ku 2011: 26). Unfortunately we were unaware of this Miao project when designing our own collaborative approach, but reflecting on our approach and this one in tandem raises interesting themes, explored below, after we briefly introduce the Hmong communities we worked with.

Context: Hmong Communities in Northern Vietnam

In the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 53 groups of 'national minorities' (*các dân tộc thiểu số*) have been officially recognised since 1979, with the number of minorities living in Vietnam's northern midlands and mountainous provinces recorded at over seven million at the time of the 2019 census (General Statistics Office 2020). A discourse of 'selective cultural preservation' best categorises the state's approach to these upland minority communities, with cultural performances, material culture, and tourist-focused objects seen as the elements of minority culture worthy of preservation. Simultaneously, 'unsavory' practices such as swidden agriculture or expenditures for rituals and shamans are strongly

discouraged, with upland ethnic minorities continuing to be poorly understood by the majority of Kinh (the lowland majority) (McElwee 2004, World Bank 2010). State officials, especially those closer to the center of power in Hanoi, tend to regard ethnic minority communities living in the country's mountainous frontiers as 'lazy' and 'backwards' (Koh 2002, Sowerwine 2004, Turner 2013a, van de Walle and Gunewardena 2011). The prejudices that government policies replicate in assuming that these populations are in need of modernisation limit the degree to which their historical knowledge is circulated and celebrated.

The Hmong, at the core of this paper, are one of these 'minority' cultures. They are a kinship-based society living primarily in the uplands of southwest China, and the northern mountainous areas of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (Lee and Tapp 2010). Hmong living in Vietnam's northern uplands are predominantly semi-subsistence farmers growing core crops of rice or maize, supplemented by small home gardens, and sometimes cash cropping or wage work (Turner et al. 2015). These communities are highly adaptive to policy changes, economic opportunities, as well as environmental change, as they have been for generations. Although seldom in positions of political power or financial wealth, neither are they passive victims of the changing circumstances interweaving economic liberalisation with an ongoing centralised authoritarian political structure. In many ways, these upland farmers and oft-small scale traders continually contest or negotiate 'the rules' of the lowland ruling majority, while being well aware of the importance and suppleness of culture, history, and social relations.

Most societies in these uplands, including the Hmong, have no self-produced written archives (the exception being Tai-speaking minority groups e.g. Thái, Tày, and Nùng). Hmong culture and language are overwhelmingly embedded in oral tradition, with an historical absence of literacy (Lee and Tapp 2010, Michaud 2020). Moreover, Hmong are one of the stateless, kinship-based societies that have no common writing system, with over 24 different scripts having been created for the language (Michaud 2020). Meanwhile, Hmong 'have a very developed oral tradition' including many rich origin stories (Lee and Tapp 2010: 49). This means that without emic written archives, records, or stories, what is known by and shared with outsiders regarding the histories of Hmong communities in Vietnam is relatively minimal.

Producing History in a Multi-step Collaborative Process

Editing notes:

In the process of creating the recorded oral history stories, we smoothed out wording that might have been confusing or misunderstood. We initially used ~~strike-through~~ for wording we deleted, and added italics for those we added. When we were told additional details during the participant validation process that were appropriate to add for additional nuance or clarity, we included them (underlined). Sometimes other changes were also needed, for example 'embroidery' was changed to 'needlework' in the following excerpt of an oral history because of pronunciation problems for the youth interviewer completing the final recording.

Excerpt from Za's oral history story

My name is Za. I'm almost 70 years old. I married my husband when I was 15 and moved to Cat Cat village from my parents' in Ta Phin village. My parents were farmers. We had a lot of rice paddy so we had enough food to eat. We had a big family. I had 2 brothers and 4 sisters. One of my sisters stayed in Ta Phin and three married and moved to Ma Cha village. Growing up I spent my time doing ~~embroidery~~ *needlework*, taking care of buffalo and taking care of my younger siblings.

When I first came to Cat Cat village there were only 14 houses. There was lots of forest around the village and only a few rice paddies. Now there are more than 100 houses. That's too many. There's not enough land for so many people. For some families with less land, it's difficult to grow food. My family had lots of land but when my sons got married we had to share it with them, so now it's little. We can't get more land now unless we want to buy more. Everywhere belongs to someone. Most people don't want to sell because without land they cannot grow food and they will be hungry.

Now most of the forest in the village is gone and there are many rice paddies. Before, the soil was rich and we could plant crops. Now the soil is poor and we need to use chemical fertiliser or nothing grows. Sometimes we don't have enough money to buy fertiliser. We need 800 kilograms per year. This costs about 6 million dong. We use our cardamom money to buy fertiliser. My son sometimes also works as a porter for treks to Fansipan and gets money from that.

As noted in the introduction, through the Hmong Voice Project, we aimed to provide a space for Hmong elders to share their life stories. The project was also a way for younger Hmong men and women to learn more about their heritage, by being a core part of the project. Working with Sapa O'Chau, eight young Hmong men and women were recruited to take part in the project, all with basic or intermediate English comprehension and oral skills. This collaboration with Sapa O'Chau was facilitated by a strong trust relationship between Shu and Sarah T., developed over a number of years. While Sarah T. has completed ethnographic fieldwork with Hmong and other minority communities in Sapa district since 1999, she has also worked alongside Shu to develop funding proposals for Sapa O'Chau, to help recruit overseas interns, and to organise an international advisory board. The second author, Sarah D. helped with the management of this advisory board, including running virtual meetings for it for two years, and previously completed her Master's thesis on ethnic minority livelihood change in the district. The five steps of the Project that we developed are detailed next.

1) Recruitment of Youth Interviewees and Co-designing Oral History Guides

Youth involved with Sapa O'Chau who were 18 years old or older were informed about our project by Shu and those who were interested were invited to a training session. In total, eight trekking guides completed the training and participated in the project, seven as interviewers and one helping with Hmong to English translation. These youth included three men and five women ranging in age from 18 to 31. Five had been involved in research projects prior to this oral history

project, one with Sarah T. and four with Sarah D., so we had already developed a good rapport and the other youth soon seemed to feel comfortable as well.

The initial training covered the basics of interviewing elders in an ‘oral history’ style. Topics ranged from ethical practices, including gaining consent and how to build rapport, to different ways to ask questions. The discussions about ethical practices and consent centered on the importance of asking for permission and ensuring that the elder was aware of what would happen with their words and story. Likewise, confidentiality was also stressed, with discussions focusing on the importance of keeping people’s names and interview details secret and not sharing these with others. The youth interviewees were mindful of these concerns. For example, Chi stated that she was apprehensive that people in her elder’s village might find out what the elder had said and not like it; a concern that was overcome when it was reiterated that all elders would be given pseudonyms before their histories were published (as we have also done for the youth interviewees here).

The training was very interactive and included Sarah D. and the youth taking turns asking and answering possible oral history questions that were then added to, reworked, or eliminated depending on the youths’ feedback. In this way, the youth were both introduced to the oral history process and helped shape and validate the questions. Although they did not have many proposals for additional questions, they did suggest a number of modifications to those we developed, especially altering wording so that elders would (hopefully) understand the core ideas more clearly.

The youth were then asked to think of older family members who they thought would be comfortable being interviewed. Some youth questioned how old someone needed to be, to be an ‘elder’, as a few no longer had living grandparents. The group agreed collectively that even if someone was in their 60s they would have lived through the American War (as the Vietnam-America war is locally called), socialist collectives, and a number of other major changes in the area, and hence they would be a suitable candidate for inclusion.

Five youths interviewed family members ranging from a parent, in-laws, to grandparents, while the remaining four interviews were conducted with long-time neighbours or family friends. Five youths collected the oral history of one elder each, and two youths collected two oral histories each, for a total of nine. Elders ranged in age from their early 60s to 94 and included five women and four men from five different communes in Sapa District (see Table 1).

Through the training process it became apparent that the youth already knew certain aspects about life in the past, especially about difficulties older generations had faced. Many talked about their grandparents and parents not having enough reliable food sources and needing to eat banana trees, ferns, or other gathered foods, or needing to walk to Lào Cai City (33km) to buy goods before there were well-stocked shops in Sapa Town or in the villages. This led to a conversation about the need to let the elder answer the questions being posed, even if the youth thought they knew the answers, as the elder’s response could be different or include additional details.

The training session also included question-asking/translation practice to gauge each youth’s comfort level with translating English questions to Hmong and then translating the answers back to English. Some youth struggled with certain vocabulary which was explained or modified, but all the youth

interviewees remained keen to be involved in the project so it was decided that, if needed, one of the youths with very good translation skills would assist with reviewing the recorded oral histories.

Table 1. Details regarding Hmong youth interviewers and the elderly interviewees

Youth interviewer name [pseudonym]	Youth interviewer age	Youth interviewer sex	Interviewee's relation with youth interviewer	Interviewee age	Interviewee sex
Nhia	23	Man	Long-time neighbour	60s	Woman
Chen	19	Man	Grandfather	67	Man
			Long-time neighbour	60s	Woman
Kee	23	Man	Grandmother	80s	Woman
Chi	18	Woman	Brother's mother-in-law	67	Woman
Lan	27	Woman	Grandfather	90	Man
Tau	31	Woman	Sister's mother-in-law	94	Woman
			Father	77	Man
Hua	31	Woman	Long-time neighbour	61	Man
Kai	23	Woman	Reviewed translations and helped with recordings		

2) Initial Oral Histories

The next step involved each youth meeting with Sarah D. individually at Sapa O'Chau early one morning to trek together to the elder's village. Before setting out, a pre-interview was completed with each youth gathering details on their age, village, brief family history, their experiences as a trekking guide or research assistant, and so on. These were later supplemented with an exit-interview as the project wound up that included reflexive-focused questions such as whether they would describe their own life as easier or harder than the lives of those they had interviewed, whether they had learned anything about their family's history or the history of the area during the process, whether they thought the elder had been anxious at all during the interview or participant validation, and so on (Turner 2013b). Details from those reflections are included below.

Upon arrival at the elder's home we introduced the project, explained why we were hopeful that the elders would talk with us, and asked for/gained consent. We also specifically asked for consent to digitally voice-record the discussions, so that we could create more precise oral histories. While the elders were curious as to why we were doing this project, they did not express concerns about participating. A couple were rather doubtful that they would have anything interesting to tell us, but spoke with us anyway after we reiterated that we were keen to hear their stories. The interviews started with Sarah D. asking a couple of questions. The youth interviewer typically then became more confident and was encouraged to take the lead, as well as to ask follow-up questions. The oral

histories included broad questions about the elder and their family, such as age, number of people in the family including children and grandchildren, parent's hamlet (if a married woman), family history, and livelihood activities. These were supplemented with questions about changes the elder had seen or experienced in their life, and recollections of any specific historical periods or events (e.g. the American war, the Vietnam-China border war of 1979, and growing restrictions on growing opium in the early 1990s). Elders were also asked about the future and whether they had specific concerns with regards to their children or grandchildren and the source of these concerns.

As with all interpretation activities, there were some common difficulties, such as a couple of minutes of response by an elder being reduced to a few words in English by a youth interviewer. The content of the interviews thus depended heavily on the skills of the youth interpreting the interview. For example, during one interview in which Sarah D. tried several times to reformulate a question in the hopes of gaining a more detailed response and with the youth struggling to interpret, the youth finally responded that maybe his grandfather did not care about these topics which was why his answers were 'not good'. Several times youth recommended not asking certain questions – such as about widowhood – to protect the elder, which was immediately respected. When asked about this post-interview, one youth interviewer replied that he did not want to ask about the elder's late husband because he did not want to make the elder feel sad. Managing the presence of other family members also proved challenging when they interjected with their own replies.

At other times, the interviews flowed well, especially when both the youth and elder were fully engaged in the process. One of these sessions ended with the elder 'interviewing' Sarah D., requesting that the youth ask questions about Sarah's background and life story. Sarah D. noted in her field journal afterwards:

The visit went really well. Chi is a really good interviewer and it felt more like we were having a nice conversation than we were conducting an oral history interview. It was clear Chi enjoyed it because she was equally engaged in the process: she asked follow-up questions without prompting and seemed keen and interested throughout. [The elder] was also quite talkative which helped too! One of the nicest parts for me was at the end when we asked if [the elder] had any questions and she proceeded to ask me questions similar to those we asked her: 'was I poor like her when I was younger? How did I make money?' etc. It felt nice to be able to share like that and when we finished I felt less like we'd been interviewing her and more like we had been exchanging life stories (Sarah D., field journal notes).

At the end of each visit we thanked the elder(s) repeatedly for their time and gave them some fruit and meat. This was purchased in advance from a local market with the youth interviewer's guidance as to what was appropriate.

3) From Transcripts to Oral History Stories

Once the initial oral history was completed, the recording was transcribed by Sarah D. The original recordings ranged from 1 hour to 1.5 hours but were not always easy to follow due to background noise (family members talking, sounds

outside, children playing/yelling) and other in-the-village realities. For sections of the recording in which the youth had struggled to interpret or when the interpretation was unclear, these underwent a quality check by Kai, one of the youth interviewers with advanced English skills. This involved Kai listening to short excerpts and comparing them against the transcripts. This was a valuable exercise as Kai indicated that each youth had done a very good job interpreting – overall there were no major changes to make and only a few details to add.

Once this quality-check was completed, the transcripts were re-worked into coherent story scripts by Sarah T and Sarah D (see the excerpt from Za's oral history earlier). One of the challenges of collecting and making these oral histories publically accessible was that in recounting their memories elders often jumped back and forth chronologically, making the transcripts difficult to follow. In addition, as the youth interpreted and asked for clarifications, further digressions in timelines occurred. To make a continuous script we thus smoothed or 'tidied the transcriptions via naturalised transcription (Bucholtz 2000, Henderson 2018). We then undertook a form of storytelling, mildly editing the transcripts into chronological order (Christensen 2012). While we are cognizant that this meant we were imposing our own structure and modifying the original, it nevertheless allowed us to 'present findings in ways that *make sense*, that *speak to* and *speak with* the communities in which the research takes place' (ibid: 233, emphasis in original). The edited story script was then returned to the elder for participant validation.

4) Oral History Story Participant Validation

Participant validation or member checking is increasingly used as a tool for establishing credibility in qualitative research and for upholding the integrity of research findings. Results are returned to participants for them to determine and approve that the completed scripts accurately portray what the participants initially conveyed. Using this form of internal authentication is argued to act as a qualitative proxy for traditionally quantitative evaluations of rigor (Barbour 2003, Baxter and Eyles 1997, Turner and Coen 2008). Due to these arguments, we wanted to take our oral history stories back to the elders so that they could confirm that the scripts accurately portrayed the information they had provided. We also wanted to make sure that the elders were absolutely comfortable sharing the information contained within their oral history stories. This was especially important to us due to the fact that ethnic minority-state relations in Vietnam are such that minority individuals can be easily harassed or persecuted for speaking out against the state or for voicing opinions that are not considered positive regarding any (vaguely) political topic (McElwee 2004, World Bank 2010).

Returning to elders with their edited story scripts proved to be extremely valuable as they often took the opportunity to clarify certain elements or add further details. For example, during an initial interview an elderly woman had not provided many details about the 1979 China-Vietnam border war, but during the return visit she elaborated that together with her husband and two children she had fled the village and stayed in the mountains for 10 days, surviving on corn flour they had taken with them. An elderly woman in a different village added more details about her second husband and children, and about her worries for the future, including the bribes they were expected to pay at the local hospital. After this participant validation step, such additional information and clarifications were

worked into the story scripts with the elder's permission. We also decided to add dates of key historical events for the recordings, so that the oral history stories would be comprehensible to a broader audience.

5) Youth Re-recording in English the Oral History for the Elder they Interviewed

As Kai is practicing the script she suggests that I read a line and then she will repeat/read it after me. We try this for the first sentence and it goes quite well! Basically I start the recorder and press pause, read out a sentence and then un-pause when Kai repeats. ('Wait for the beep!') It sounds a lot less like reading and more like someone is just speaking. Great! (Sarah D., field journal notes).

The final stage of the oral history story creation involved having each participant-validated script recorded in English by the youth interviewee, to be placed on the Sapa O'Chau website. Members of the Hmong diaspora in the west are not necessarily able to easily understand the Hmong dialect spoken in northern Vietnam, and we hoped non-Hmong speaking individuals might want to listen to these as well. This step was a learning opportunity for the youth interviewees since they were able to practice their English reading and pronunciation/enunciation skills; useful for their work as tourist guides. The initial idea was to have the youth read the story script, but some struggled and the resulting recordings were stilted which distracted from the elder's story. After several different attempts, we decided that one of us would read one sentence of the story script at a time and the youth interviewee would repeat the sentence while being recorded. This worked well for all the youth involved.

While preparing the oral history scripts to be linked to the Sapa O'Chau website we also created background information for the web page to help contextualise the stories, and discussed with Sapa O'Chau employees where to best place the Hmong Voices Project page for maximum visibility. The final location (within the tourism section) was not where we would have placed them necessarily, but we let Shu and Sapa O'Chau employees make that ultimate decision.

Discussion: Critical Reflections of Positionality and Power Relations

Positionality, or the recognition that 'all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins' relates to all those involved in a research process, not just researchers (Valentine 2002: 116). In this case, we needed to be mindful of the impacts that the positionalities of the elderly interviewees, youth interviewers, and ourselves would have on the research process and outcomes. One's positionality is inclusive of one's ethnicity, class, gender, age, sexuality, and (dis)ability (Hopkins 2007). It also incorporates life experiences, ways of viewing the world, and political leanings and positionings, with these characteristics being relational and never static (McDowell 1992). This means that we knew it would be impossible to fully grasp all the interactions at play during the Hmong Voices Project, nor their impacts on the processes and individuals involved. As Gillian Rose (1997) notes, the researcher's identity is fluid and changes in an iterative process, particularly

in relation to research participants. Hence we needed to think in terms of 'situated knowledges' (ibid: 308), 'hybrid spaces of research' (ibid: 315) and 'webbed connections' (ibid: 317).

Two White Women Researchers 'In the Field'

During this project, these positionalities and interactions were being played out in the borderlands of a socialist state with members of an ethnic minority community. This broader context played an important role in how we undertook the project and in the relationships that developed at all levels. Having the support of Sapa O'Chau was critical, not only because we wished to create a collaborative project, but pragmatically for gaining official permissions to gain access to the field. This field context heightened our awareness of our privileged positionalities as two western educated, white middle class women with the socio-economic privilege to be able to fly in and out of Vietnam when we wanted (albeit with state-approved research visas). Such mobility remains far beyond the financial means of many of our Hmong collaborators, let alone due to the bureaucratic red tape for them to obtain a passport.

Despite the near impossible task of trying to understand the impacts of our positionalities across time and space, we attempted to remain critically reflexive. As we undertook this project we kept in mind: were we providing enough space for authentic stories to be told? How did we think our positionalities and actions were impacting the manner by which the youth and elders conducted themselves and interacted with each other? What should we and could we have been doing differently?

While being mindful not to slip into reification, we observed that being western women researchers facilitated fairly easy rapport with female elder interviewees, though the rapport between the elder interviewee and the youth interviewer seemed to be the most important determinant of how well an oral history progressed, oftentimes also facilitated by youth interviewing elders of the same sex. As Chi pointed out when asked how she felt interviewing her brother's mother-in-law: 'It's easier. But if it were a man I'd be shy to ask questions.' Grandchildren seemed particularly at ease interviewing their grandparents and these sessions generally went smoothly. As Chen explained regarding interviewing his grandfather: 'I know him and he knows me for a long time, so it's easier to talk with him.' Nonetheless, family dynamics could also create obstacles. In one instance, during a participant validation session, the elder started out very enthusiastically, indicating he had 'many more' stories to share. As the session progressed, the youth – his daughter – became frustrated that he kept retelling stories that has been covered in the first interview. Unfortunately, the youth told the elder that he did not need to keep retelling stories, and the elder's responses became less expansive. Overall however, having a youth interviewing someone they had known for a long time proved a very effective entry to having meaningful conversations about the elder's lives. As one youth excitedly exclaimed after a detailed oral history session: 'My grandmother never told me that before!'

Our 'foreignness' placed us in a somewhat ambiguous gender role, allowing us to discuss certain topics with Hmong men that would not necessarily be the norm, such as duties and livelihood tasks seen as 'men's work' (see also Scott et al. 2006). The presence of the youth, often a family member, also appeared

to contribute to increasing the willingness of elders to discuss such topics. This element of trust was mentioned several times by youth in exit-interviews. As youth interviewer Kee commented when asked whether he thought his grandmother was intimidated at all during the interview: ‘I can say she wasn’t scared with us. She was confident because I’m her grandchild’. Similarly, when asked whether she thought it was easy for her mother-in-law to speak with us, Chi replied: ‘Yes, because we know each other already, so she trusts us and she can say anything she would like to say’.

Our age placed us in certain and different categories, with Sarah D. being older than most of the Hmong youth interviewers but close enough age-wise to be able to relate to them fairly well, while being significantly younger than our interviewees. On the other hand, Sarah T. was clearly a generation older than the youth interviewers and a generation younger than the interviewees. Nonetheless, when Sarah T. joined in participant validation trips and worked with the youth interviewers, it did not seem to change the dynamics very much. Familiarity amongst the research team members, sometimes over a number of years, and multiple interactions during the project, hence worked to gain and maintain trust.

We were mindful not to be associated with any local state officials as this would have very likely made both youth interviewers and elderly interviewees suspicious of our motives, resulting in a loss of rapport or trust. Indeed, possible government surveillance was brought up by one youth in her exit-interview. When asked how she felt during the interviews and whether she felt worried at all, Chi replied: ‘The questions were fine, but I was a bit worried in the village when we were speaking to a person, if a government official would come and ask ‘What are you doing here?’ [...] It was very lucky that we didn’t have any big camera with us’. The youth interviewee also noted, as did others, that it was very positive that Shu Tan from Sapa O’Chau had discussed the project with a local Hmong ex-policeman affiliated with Sapa O’Chau and who retained connections in the local communities and also strong informal ties with higher level officials in the District. In the youths’ opinions, these connections – which we had outlined during the initial training session – afforded project members and interviewees protection from harassment from (ethnic majority Kinh) state officials. We should add that we also had all the required official permissions and support to complete the project and would, of course, have stopped at any stage the youth or elders became uncomfortable.

Youth Interviewers’ Reflexive Accounts

[Sarah D.]: When we spoke with your grandfather was there anything you learned that you didn’t know before, about your family’s past?

Chen: Yeah! I learnt stories from what my grandfather shared with us. Like when he said he’d lived in China for many years and that his generation moved here from China. Then in Vietnam, he said they had moved around and lived in different places before settling here. I never knew that or that my family came from China. I was surprised to learn that!

The pre- and exit-interviews with youth interviewers provided valuable insights into their experiences of the research process. As our paper title suggests, the post-

interviews created an opportunity for the youth to reflect on what they had learned over the course of the project and highlighted the inter-generational, and often intra-familial knowledge transfer that had occurred. Regional history, especially regarding the 1979 China-Vietnam border war, was a topic that many youth commented that they had learnt more about. They also mentioned becoming more knowledgeable about different aspects of their family history, such as that their forbearers emigrated from China, or about the local natural history, especially regarding changes in the surrounding landscape and environment. The focus on the past also brought up many comparisons with the present.

Another question asked during the post-interview was how the youth thought their life compared to the elder's. Overwhelmingly, youth indicated that their lives were easier than those of the elders they had interviewed. Whereas many elders reported needing to eat corn or cassava in the past when rice was in short supply, many of the youth indicated that nowadays a stable food supply was far more common. Several reasons for this were given, including greater rice yields. As Tau explained: 'Now we have more food so it's easier [...] I work in the rice fields or the corn fields and we get more food, so we have enough.' Hua added that life was also easier because there were more shops in which to buy food if necessary. Increased economic opportunities were also cited as a reason life had become better. Lan stated: 'I think life is easier now. It's easier to make money and we have enough food so we don't need to go into the forest to forage or carry wood to sell.' Youth also cited greater educational opportunities as a reason why their lives had improved. As Chen noted: 'I think for me my life is better than my grandfather because I've been able to go to school and learn more things.' Chi added that being able to learn to speak English provided more opportunities for work than her mother-in-law had experienced when young.

A more practical concern raised by six of the youth interviewers in their exit-interviews was the difficulties they had interpreting between Hmong and English. The youth specifically noted that they had struggled to interpret words that did not seem to have an equivalent in the other language, and had had difficulties 'keeping up' with the elders when interpreting longer story segments. Yet, based on quality checks of the original oral history recordings, and feedback from Kai who helped cross-check the transcripts, the youth did a commendable job with their interpreting. This was even more remarkable given the fact that this was the first time they had participated in such a project or had interpreted extensive dialogues on varied topics.

Concluding Thoughts: Reflecting and Constructing Upland Histories

The Hmong Voices Project has provided new insights into the history of this upland region that help to challenge the Vietnam state's preconceived narratives and perspectives of this space. State policies and literature continue to be overwhelmingly based on assumptions of primitivism, stagnation, and unproductivity regarding upland minority populations (Lieberman 2010). While there is a growing body of literature attempting to counter such interpretations of the lives and livelihoods of Hmong communities in Lào Cai province (Bonnin 2018, Delisle and Turner 2016, Turner et al. 2015), the Hmong Voices Project revealed a number of new findings regarding historical and contemporary processes and relations. These included details of individual and household mobility patterns and resilience during the Vietnam-China border war, the

historical use of forest products for household food security, and the impacts of rapid economic change in these communities. Of course, we need to be mindful that there were stories that were left out too, perhaps too painful to recall, considered irrelevant due to the rapid changes the uplands are undergoing, or deemed too political (cf. Creef 2000).

As James C. Scott has noted: ‘Because oral traditions survive only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups’ (Scott 2009: 230-231). As shown above, these interpretations are further influenced by how they are understood, and – in our case – how they are then shaped into oral history stories. The oral history stories of the elders involved in this project have certainly been impacted by the broader political context and the need to safeguard individuals and locales; they are socially constructed narratives with inevitable distortions and omissions. Yet, as Ronald Grele has persuasively argued, oral histories are recognised as having a key role in ‘getting a better history, a more critical history, a more conscious history which involves members of the public in [its] creation’ (Grele 1991: xvi).

Our discussions of positionality outlined above revolved around fairly immediate concerns regarding the impacts of gender, age, ethnicity, family positioning, and socio-economic status regarding ourselves, the youth interviewers, and the elders. Yet such considerations often avoid uncomfortable debates regarding the appropriateness of Global North researchers undertaking research in the Global South, and the structurally unequal power relations, different agendas, and possible misinterpretations and representations that can come with such research. There are critical scholars who would thus declare that it is best not to be subject to possible accusations of ‘appropriating and exploiting a powerful story for their own personal and professional ends’ (Kohl and Farthing 2013: 91). We struggled with such concerns (and continue to do so) and yet we saw value in attempting to promote oral history stories that would be accessible to a broad audience. We wanted to support a Hmong individual who had *asked us* for ways to safeguard the compelling stories of elders in their community, and we wanted to show solidarity with those with whom we work, ‘becoming closer while respecting the distance that remains’ (Brabeck 2004: 52). Our commitment was to create a conduit for these stories to be told when otherwise they would not have been. Did we succeed? Probably not very well; the oral history stories continue to gain ‘hits’ on the Sapa O’Chau website, years after they were uploaded, but they are not promoted in a very enticing manner. The hits are fairly global in nature, with the last review revealing the greatest number originating from the US, Australia, and Europe. There are important Hmong diaspora communities in all three regions, but obviously we do not know the ethnicity of browsers. In hindsight, we probably should have also recorded these stories in *Hmong Leng*,² the local Hmong dialect, as well as in English, although at the time smartphones and internet access were not common in local communities.

Yet, at the same time, we found it positive that elders noted that they enjoyed the process and seemed proud of their final stories, while intergenerational ties appeared to have been strengthened. Youth interviewers also said that they would be keen to be involved in a similar project again and that they appreciated the project, as Tau explained:

[Sarah D.]: So overall what would you say about your experience?

Tau (young woman interviewer): I think it's a good thing to do this project and for me to be able to learn; to learn some more from the old people, to talk with you, and to practice my English.

Finally, by situating this project outside academia – placing the completed oral history stories onto a social enterprise website rather than working them into an academic article – it could be argued that we avoided conforming to academic norms, including the trimming and erasures sometimes required by reviewers and journal conventions (see also Leyva Solano and Rappaport 2011). The oral history stories hence remain in a fairly 'raw state' compared to if they had been analysed for a typical academic publication. As Kennemore and Postero (2020: 25) note: 'While in some circumstances collaboration can serve to level the colonial playing field by making Indigenous knowledge and practices visible, in other situations it can reinforce constructed dichotomies between Indigenous and Western knowledge and practices'. We sincerely hope that by designing this research project directly around the wishes of Shu, our collaborator at Sapa O'Chau, while also including a training aspect for Hmong youth and co-creating interview questions with them, completing participant validation with Hmong elders, and making the resulting oral history stories freely accessible, that we have managed to level this field slightly while striving to have ethnic minority voices heard.

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Notes

1. There are a number of oral history projects that have been completed with members of the Hmong diaspora in the US, Australia, and elsewhere in the West (e.g. Borja 2017). We do not review those here, nor do we review oral histories with Vietnam-US war veterans from the US or their allies, as our focus is on the process of undertaking collaborative oral histories with an ethnic minority community living in socialist Asia.
2. Most Hmong in the Vietnamese uplands self-identify as Hmong Leng (also known as Green or Blue Hmong; Hmoob or Moob Leeg in the Romanized Popular Alphabet).

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