Alternative Routes to Development? The Everyday Political Economy of Christianisation among a Marginalised Ethnic Minority in Vietnam’s Highlands

by

Seb Rumsby

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University of Warwick,
Department of Politics and International Studies

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Declaration

I hereby declare that none of the material contained in the thesis has been used or published before. The thesis is my own work, and it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.
Alternative Routes to Development? The Everyday Political Economy of Christianisation among a Marginalised Ethnic Minority in Vietnam’s Highlands

Abstract: Over the past 30 years, upland Vietnam has witnessed the remarkable conversion of over 300,000 Hmong people to Protestant Christianity, despite state-sponsored religious persecution and the absence of foreign missionaries. The central research questions of this thesis are: how does Christianisation interact with processes of ‘development’, state territorialisation and market expansion among a marginalised minority group in Vietnam, and to what extent can these interactions be considered empowering and disempowering? To answer this question, I employ an everyday political economy analytical lens, informed by insights from a diverse body of interdisciplinary literature including critical development studies, sociology of religion, colonial history and postsecular feminism.

Based on rich qualitative data gathered through extensive primary fieldwork in Vietnam’s highlands and cities, empirical chapters show how state religious policies have been brutal and largely unsuccessful, whilst everyday political tactics of resistance, avoidance and active compliance on behalf of Hmong Christians have had unforeseen political ramifications, with young male pastors emerging as a powerful new group of elites who act as political and development brokers. Although conversion has generated significant social conflict within communities, those who embraced and benefited from Christianity have often come from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society, especially women and those without beneficial state connections. Christianity does not challenge the ‘will to improve’, a hegemonic desire in Vietnam’s highlands, but it arguably prepares Hmong communities for integration into the national capitalist market whilst allowing for the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness. While the neoliberal logic is present in state policies, marketisation and religious transformation in upland Vietnam, it is not monolithic but intersects with other cultural rationalities of communalism as well as political projects of territorialisation. These findings can contribute to wider understandings about the nature of everyday agency within the intersections of religious, political and economic transformations.
INTRODUCTION

Sang’s story

Sang is a 50-year-old Hmong pastor living in a remote village near the Chinese border in Lai Châu province of Vietnam’s northwest highlands, whom I became acquainted with over the course of several days’ fieldwork in 2017. Like almost everyone I interviewed from his generation, Sang has miserable memories from childhood which bring him close to tears: only one set of clothes, eating yam and maize because they couldn’t afford rice, no school education but instead having to tend the buffalos and horses from a young age. Sang was perhaps even more destitute than average since he was born out of wedlock and his father did not marry his mother or take any responsibility for him. When Sang was seventeen he got married and subsequently had five children, two sons and three daughters. His older son only completed primary education before being kept home to work (he did not allow his first two daughters to go to school), as Sang had developed a heavy opium addiction which drained the family’s income. After ‘smoking away’ his best land, buffalos and horses, Sang was reduced to exploitative hired labour – working other people’s fields – for a very low income, while his children went hungry and malnourished.

Sang attributes the reversal of his family’s fortunes to their conversion to Protestant Christianity in 1993, when he was twenty-six. He first heard the ‘good news’ by listening to a neighbour’s Chinese radio, from which a Hmong pastor’s sermons were being broadcast. Sang was deeply impressed: “I kept thinking in my heart, oh God is certainly real. Because if there is no God, how is there a [pastor] like that in this world? I looked, my eyes looked – in the world there are many miracles, so now I was certain that there is a God, so I began to believe in God from 1993.” Following the radio pastor’s teaching, Sang immediately burned the traditional altar in his house and, over the next 2 years, struggled to give up opium – both of which he now considers to be ‘demonic’. His family also stopped partaking in traditional shaman offerings and animal sacrifices to appease spirits, which he was happy about because of the resultant economic savings.

Soon after, the believers in his village were being intimidated and harassed by local authorities for participating in ‘illegal’ Christian activities, so they met together in secret. When Sang became a church leader he was followed, chased and arrested several times by the police, which he found terrifying and confusing since he felt he was doing nothing wrong. Despite being illiterate, Sang taught himself how to read – first the Hmong script, then Vietnamese – not only to read the Bible, but also with the aim of reading Vietnamese law in order to understand his religious rights. To this day tensions remain with the local authorities, however they no longer arrest Christians, who make

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1 Sang’s name, along with all named people in this thesis, are pseudonyms; see Appendix 2 for more details about research context, ethics, anonymity and confidentiality.
2 Interview with Sang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
up around three quarters of the village population. Sang believes this is “because they don’t have the ability [to stop us], so they give up!”

With great difficulty, Sang found the motivation to quit opium from a combination of prayer and feeling the shame of his family’s destitution. After getting over the withdrawal symptoms, he worked hard to plough some virgin land and plant his own rice and maize. No longer having to borrow money to fuel his addiction, Sang’s family financial situation slowly improved so that they could afford for his youngest son and daughter to study up to high school level. After borrowing money from the State Development Bank, Sang purchased a motorbike which enabled him to travel to neighbouring villages, meet other Hmong Christian leaders and learn about new, more profitable livelihoods like growing cardamom and flowers as cash crops. Now he is saving up to build a new concrete house, which will cement his position as one of the richer members of his village. Sang believes God guided him through all these economic changes and credits God for blessing him and giving him wisdom.

Nevertheless, Sang and his community still face many challenges. Firstly, Sang has a chronic and deteriorating back condition as a result of years of back-breaking labour combined with the internal damage caused by smoking opium. A Vietnamese doctor’s diagnosis of the operation required would cost a staggering 300 million VND ($15,000), over four times his entire annual earnings. In theory state medical insurance for poor households could pay half of this fee, but there is no guarantee that Sang could secure this, since Hmong Christians are often discriminated against and refused medical support. Instead, Sang travelled to China to find a traditional Hmong remedy, which alleviates some of the symptoms, and he continually prays for God to heal him supernaturally.

Furthermore, Sang worries about the residual poverty and ‘backwardness’ of his village who “have believed in God for over twenty years but have not moved forward one inch.” Sang claims that many say they believe in God but don’t pray or attend church, instead spending all day drinking alcohol and gambling – nor do they engage with government development initiatives, leaving them poor. Recently he has invited pastor Ban from a wealthier neighbouring village to assess and advise them on both spiritual and practical matters, however this apparently triggered some resentment as Sang’s villagers were jealous of the success of their Christian neighbours. Sang sees Ban’s village as a model they should aspire to but which, for now, remains tantalisingly out of reach: “they have God in their hearts so whatever they do, it becomes reality… Because they have God, they listen to God’s word, and follow God’s word, only then are they blessed. So whatever they do is better off.”

Sang is one of hundreds of thousands of Hmong people in Vietnam’s highlands who have converted to Protestant Christianity since the late 1980s; his story is by no means unique and it

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3 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
exemplifies some of the key themes and findings of this thesis: first, radical conversion out of a context of poverty and marginalisation, followed by brutal but ineffectual state-sponsored religious persecution. Then, with a combination of Christian education, networking and increasing penetration of market economy, a degree of material improvements which is attributed by Hmong Christians as a divine blessing. Nevertheless, the problem of inequalities, both entrenched (gender) and emerging (between villages), call into question the degree to which Christianisation can be considered empowering.

This introductory chapter elaborates on Sang’s story by demonstrating the significance of Hmong Christianisation both on Vietnam’s political landscape and as a case study for research on religion and development. In doing so, I argue that this thesis makes a substantial original contribution to understanding the political economy of religious transformation among marginalised groups, especially in contexts of state conflict and at the frontiers of capitalist/market expansion. My core argument is that Hmong Christianisation is seen as both a challenge to state hegemony in Vietnam’s highlands and an alternative pathway to progress and modernity. Therefore, religious interactions with processes of development, state territorialisation and market expansion have both empowering and disempowering effects, as Christianity puts Hmong communities onto a trajectory of resistance to state authority while simultaneously integrating them into the market economy (cf. Salemink 2009). At a grassroots level, conversion and associated social conflict has generated both winners and losers, but those who have embraced and benefited from Christianity, like Sang, often came from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society.

Following this opening vignette, the next section briefly contextualises this phenomenon in current academic debates concerning conversion to world religions, the relationship between religious and economic transformation, and the significance of media in contemporary evangelism. The contributions of this thesis are summarised as providing an empirically rich case study of the complex relations of compliance, support, resistance and governmentality between local religious actors and external state and economic forces, which speaks to religion and development literature as well as regional scholarship. Next, James Scott and Tania Murray Li’s influential works within South East Asian studies are compared and contrasted as a helpful entry point into the tension and interplay between everyday politics and governmentality perspectives which run through the thesis, informing my theoretical position on the nature of everyday agency. The central research questions are then introduced, defined and split into sub-questions, leading to a summary of the key findings and core arguments. A subsequent overview of research design shows how the methods have been tailored to answer the thesis research questions, reflecting on issues of case study selection and positionality. Finally, an outline of the subsequent chapters and thesis structure shows how empirical findings support the overarching thesis arguments about the intersections of religious transformation, development, state territorialisation and marketisation.
Research debates and contributions

Hmong Christianisation fits into two wider global transformations which are of great academic interest and political significance: firstly, the conversion of ‘tribal’ peoples on the fringes of the state from localised beliefs to world religions, which Hefner (1993) considers to be a crucial factor in the global history of what we call ‘civilisation’. This process gained momentum from the 15th century with the dawn of European colonialism, but has in fact accelerated during the latter half of the 20th century with the expansion of state power to the edge of its borders (Scott 2009) which have turned peripheral peoples into ‘minorities’ facing assimilation pressures, as well as globalising socio-economic trends which render “the practice of localized animistic religions [as] markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live” (Keyes 1996: 288). The Hmong are by no means the only marginalised ethnic minority in South East Asia to turn to Christianity, but the timeframe of this case is particularly recent and rapid – approximately a third of the Hmong population in Vietnam having converted in the space of just thirty years and counting (Ngô 2018).

Secondly, the Global South has witnessed an explosion of Pentecostal Christianity in the past fifty years, often in tandem with neoliberal structural reforms in developing countries, leading to much academic inquiry into the potential links between them (see Chapter 1). The prominent role of ‘mediated evangelism’ – including radio, television, the Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, and various print media (Lim 2009, Togarasei 2012, Hackett 1998) – has also been characteristic of this movement. The initial phase of Hmong Christianisation provides a unique (or at least extreme) example of exclusively mediated evangelism via US-produced radio broadcasts; I am not aware of any other religious transformation on this scale, historical or contemporary, during which no missionaries were physically present. In recent years some church elites have made contact with national and international Christian networks, but for the first decade the radio was the only external religious catalyst. Religious proselytisation, church organisation and lifestyle changes were largely the product of Vietnamese Hmong Christians and the vast majority of Hmong have had no physical contact with foreigners to this day. This is significant for my thesis because it provides not only a novel case study but also an opportunity to foreground the behaviour and tactics of marginalised actors as crucial to understanding processes of widespread religious and economic transformations.

Research on other Christian transformations in the Global South generally highlights the decisive input role of foreign missionary activity and associated economic, educational or medical benefits in colonial or postcolonial contexts (c.f. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, Mackenzie 1993, Porter 2004). This is indeed the case for some different ethnic minority groups in Vietnam’s Central Highlands who were missionized in by French colonial Catholics and American Protestant missionaries up until the end of the American war (Salemink 2003). Conversely, upon its much
more recent dissemination and adoption in northern upland Vietnam since the late 1980s, Christianity’s ties with the West were not known by Hmong listeners, still less was there any expectation of direct material benefits from affluent foreign donors. Therefore, explanations of marginalised groups being attracted by Christianity’s prestigious socio-economic status are not sufficient (Tapp 1989a), although it may well have been viewed as a prestigious ‘alternate modernity’ in opposition to state assimilation (Scott 2009). Consequently, the unusual dynamics of Hmong Christianisation offers the opportunity of exploring the relationships between ideas, discourse, media and materiality, as well as the agency of local actors in religious activity in spite of considerable hostility.

Whilst drawing from and engaging with a wide variety of interdisciplinary works, my primary contribution is to model an ‘everyday political economy’ approach to the growing field of religion and development (Marshall 2001, Haynes 2007, Carbonnier 2013, Clarke 2013, Deneulin 2013, Tomalin 2013a). Emerging from the broader development studies in the late 1990s with input from academics as well as religious and development practitioners, much of this literature is characterised as ‘instrumental, narrow and normative’ (Jones and Petersen 2011) due to the focus on how religion or religious NGOs can be ‘tapped into’ by international development actors. Some research has sought to transcend this limitation by paying attention to “the political leverage that religious actors can exert, to the political factors underpinning how and why development actors interact in the ways that they do with different religions and religious leaders/communities” (Fountain et al. 2015: 18) in an attempt to unmask the ‘anti-politics machine’ of development (Ferguson 1990). Others have explored the relationship of religion and neoliberalism in the ‘afterlife of development’, whereby “spiritual reform [is] posited as an antidote to the failure of state-directed development” (Rudnyckyj 2010: 72) but without undermining the conceptual foundations or colonial roots of developmentalism (Marshall 2009, Freeman 2012a).

Despite acknowledging that religion “has long given people the possibility to speak to power, and through religious organizations the wherewithal to engage with existing power structures” (Frahm-arp and Bompani 2010: 6), mainstream analyses of such political engagements are rather superficial. One example of this is the common assumption that religion opposes gender emancipation and is therefore a hindrance to development (Tomalin 2013b: 3), without engaging with the fact that most modern religious movements are disproportionately characterised by women’s participation – including Hmong Christianisation (see Chapter 6). My research contributes to an emerging body of critical literature on religion and development⁴ which does not simply herald religious actors as positive or negative for development, but questions their complex and often contradictory roles in providing motivation for change, facilitating networks of financial

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and informational exchange, challenging or reinforcing power relations, promoting communalism and enforcing discipline, and shaping local conceptualisations of progress and ‘the good life’.

Based on rich multi-methods primary data (see below), this original empirical research on Hmong Christianisation provides an interesting case study because religion’s impact on political and economic relations was not in the form of any NGO or formal development organisation, resonating with Rigg’s (2012) concept of ‘unplanned development’. Nevertheless, the lack of formal ties masks a multitude of informal national and transnational Christian networks embroiled in the everyday politics of upland Vietnam which have grown over time and provide finance, education and ideas in what might be considered ‘peer-to-peer development’ or ‘citizen aid’ (Fechter and Schwittay 2019). The developmental impact of religious movements in late socialist states such as China or Vietnam, with their legacies of socialist developmentalism and antagonism towards religion, are relatively understudied and arguably require a different analysis of everyday politics to the majority of religion and development literature which is based on Africa, Latin America or South Asia (see Chapter 1).

In this endeavour everyday political economy (Elias and Rethel 2016) becomes a useful analytical lens which incorporates the multifaceted pressures and influences that local people face and their diverse responses which have varied and sometimes contradictory effects. In particular, this thesis unpacks the multiple logics behind state ‘development’ agendas – economic growth, governmentality, ethnocentrism, territorialisation – which religious actors may support, resist, exploit or adapt for their own interests. Moreover, the developmental impacts of religious transformation are further shaped by local vectors of inequality such as class, ethnicity and gender, the latter of which is constructively engaged by a postsecular feminist perspective. These insights, as well as a specific focus on the somewhat marginalised issue of religious proselytisation/conversion and development, can contribute to a better understanding of religion as a force for dis/empowerment across the developing world.

In addition, this thesis makes important empirical contributions to regional studies at various levels. Within South East Asian studies, historical and contemporary research on the convergence of religious and ethnic politics in upland Myanmar and Cambodia draws interesting comparisons (see Conclusion chapter), while the involvement of Korean and Singaporean missionaries and religious networks in Vietnam’s highlands adds to our understanding of the political economy of ‘Asian Christianities’ (Phan 2018). Poverty, economic inequality and upland transformations in Vietnam are salient issues but both national and foreign research often omits the voices of marginalised ethnic and religious minorities, due to either discrimination (see Chapter 4) or lack of research access to those communities; this thesis provides an ethnographic account of the convergence of some of the most politically sensitive issues in Vietnam (see below). Finally, my research speaks to the transnational Hmong studies body of literature (especially engaging debates around gender and
conversion) which, while growing, focuses disproportionately on Thailand, China and Western diasporas.5

Theorising the everyday

South East Asian studies, having hosted some very influential early anthropologists (Leach 1954, Geertz 1973), has a heritage of documenting and theorising the agency of diverse non-elite actors. In particular, the ‘everyday’ has emerged as a popular category for understanding how “people’s ordinary everyday activities, even when apparently distinct from other dimensions of life, are invariably tethered to broader social, economic, and political processes” (Adams and Gillogly 2011: 1–2). Eschewing overly rigid impositions of grand theories on the empirical world in favour of a more pragmatic ‘bottom-up’ approach towards generating and interpreting data, the everyday emphasises the political and economic significance of mundane behaviours, customs, disciplines and microdramas of life (Braudel 1981). Of course, within studies on the politics of everyday life in South East Asia are different perspectives and emphases on how grassroots actors respond to, or are shaped by, external influences, and how much room they have to manoeuvre. The contrasting (though not necessarily opposing) works of James Scott and Tania Murray Li stand out as particularly germane to the context of Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam’s highlands.

Together with Benedict Kerkvliet, political scientist James Scott has emerged as a prominent (if controversial) voice on everyday forms of resistance among peasant societies (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986). Scott’s focus on the ‘weapons of the weak’ (1987) and everyday resistance (1989) emphasises the agency of non-elites to struggle against and bargain with state attempts to govern or intrude on their lives in mundane, not overtly political ways, which can nonetheless have important ramifications and force states to reconsider or reverse policy decision (Kerkvliet 2005). Perhaps Scott’s most famous work is his analysis of the other side of the coin in Seeing like a State (1998) which critiques the problems caused when the state’s desire to make populations ‘legible’, for the purposes of governance and extraction, grate with and contradict local worldviews and rhythms of life. More recently, Scott proposes upland South East Asia and Southwest China as a historical ‘zone of refuge’ in which acephalous highland societies (including the Hmong) have endeavoured to keep the tyrannical elements of lowland state-making projects at arm’s length (2009). Of particular relevance is his brief case for the contribution of religion to preserving autonomy, which appears as little more than an afterthought in the grand scheme of Scott’s argument but provides a point of departure for this thesis:

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5 For instance, at the First Hmong Studies Consortium International Conference in Chiang Mai (2017), of the 46 presentations only 4 related to research in Vietnam, even though many papers addressed communities in multiple countries. The most commonly researched Hmong groups were in USA (20), China (12), and Thailand (9) – despite the population of Hmong in Vietnam equalling those in the USA, Thailand and Laos combined.
Christianity offers a powerful way of creating a place for new elites and an institutional grid for social mobilization... The eschatological message of scriptural Christianity mapped closely enough on Hmong millenarian beliefs that little adjustment was required... Christianity offered the opportunity to be modern, cosmopolitan, literate, and still Hmong. (Scott 2009: 320–321)

A different perspective is afforded by anthropologist Tania Murray Li, who seeks to move beyond Scott’s binary analytical scheme of compliance vs resistance to a high-modern authoritarian state, instead highlighting the role of non-governmental parties and asking what are the ‘messy, contradictory, conjunctural effects’ of various attempts to govern or improve (Li 2005). Building on Foucault’s (2008) work on governmentality, Li draws out the less coercive schemes to improve the human condition which requires an assemblage of techniques and technologies to discipline local populations. Her research on developmentalism and the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007) in the capitalist frontiers of South East Asia explores how both state and non-state actors (including missionaries) are involved in the imposition, internalisation and contestation of the desire for progress. However, since “interventions that set the conditions for growth simultaneously set the conditions for some sections of the population to be dispossessed” (2007: 20), Li’s outlook is more pessimistic than Scott on the possibilities for resistance against, or alternate pathways to, capitalist advance.

Although coming from different theoretical standpoints, both Scott and Li’s work are helpful in conceptualising the interactions of Hmong Christians with external influences and pressures. Scott’s insights on everyday resistance have informed how I interpret the agency of Hmong Christians (Chapter 4) and church leaders (Chapter 5) in response to state hostility and attempts to manage religious activity, while his view of upland Christianity as an “alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (2009: 319) proves helpful for understanding the aspirations of religious actors and the possibilities for empowerment (Chapter 6). Meanwhile, Li’s ‘will to improve’ turns out to be a pervasive theme driving both economic change (Chapter 3) and conversion as a way of ‘moving forward’ (Chapter 7), which ties Christianity together with the increasing inequalities of marketisation. A purely ‘Scottian’ perspective of Hmong Christianisation would be incomplete since state and religious governmentalities also play a significant role, yet there is arguably more space for empowerment and alternative scenarios to neoliberal individualistic competition in upland Vietnam than Li’s (2014) findings in Sulawesi.6

Therefore, Elias and Rethel’s (2016) everyday political economy is a useful conceptual lens which productively brings together the ‘actor-centric’ logic of Scott’s everyday politics with the ‘agency-centric’ logic of governmentality and discipline in Li’s work (Chapter 1). In addition, this thesis

6 Guinness (2015) also critiques Li’s narrow account of “the friction that arises as social relations defined by kinship or neighbourly history are painfully transformed... into capitalist relations” without “countenance[ing] alternate development scenarios where people may have the freedom to sell labour, land or crops onto the wider market while continuing to balance these with social relations of a non-competitive nature” (2015: 427).
draws on feminist political economy and postsecular feminism to analyse the patriarchal structures within which Hmong women express their everyday agency, especially focusing on female-led conversion as a form of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ (Kandiyoti 1988). Whilst I am influenced by feminist and governmentality studies, I have concentrated my engagement with them at the point of their intersection with the everyday politics approach, emphasising the importance of ‘tactics’ utilised by non-elites – both consciously and unconsciously – in response to, but not determined by, the ‘strategies’ of institutions and structures of power (De Certeau 1984). This conceptualisation of everyday agency as tactical and negotiative highlights the multiple unequal relationships of power which weak actors are nevertheless able to influence, without disregarding the power of the dominant (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007).

Research questions and key findings

Based on these debates on the nature of everyday agency within contemporary relationships between religious and economic change, this thesis addresses key questions which are not only pertinent for Vietnam’s highlands but contribute to interdisciplinary bodies of literature. I am not primarily concerned with explaining the multifaceted reasons why Hmong people decided to convert to Christianity – this has already been addressed in Tâm Ngô’s (2009, 2016) excellent ethnographic research – but rather about how religious change impacts on and intersects with wider political economy transformations and power relations. Therefore, my central research questions are how does Christianisation interact with processes of ‘development’, state territorialisation and market expansion among the Hmong in Vietnam, and to what extent can these interactions be considered empowering or disempowering?

A few key terms need defining in order to address such questions. A critical analysis of poverty as a ‘relational’ phenomenon (Mosse 2010), whereby economic inequality is produced and reproduced by unequal power relations, means that ‘development’ is inherently both a political and economic issue (see Chapter 1). Therefore, I employ a definition of development as the degree to which economic, political and social conditions and processes empower those most vulnerable to poverty to improve their living conditions and relative authority vis-à-vis other groups in society. This in turn leads to a politicised, multifaceted understanding of grassroots empowerment which includes access to resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer 1999) in contrast to problematic minimalist definitions of empowerment as participation. Christianisation refers not only to conversion but also “the reformulation of social relations, cultural meanings, and personal experience in terms of putatively Christian ideals” (Hefner 1993: 3–4). State territorialisation refers to the expansion of state power to the edge of its borders in order to assert control over the people and resources therein and, as expanded upon in Chapter 2, is crucial in understanding the antagonistic relationship between Hmong Christian communities and the Vietnamese state.
As Chapter 1 elaborates, an everyday political economy approach requires a fine-grained analysis of both the everyday decisions people take in reaction to top-down attempts to govern and the way they are disciplined through mundane routines and behaviours, while simultaneously contextualising them within their wider economic, class and gender transformations. Informed by this approach and other relevant works attempting to answer similar inquiries as well as important themes emerging from fieldwork data, the thesis research questions can be further broken down into several sub-questions, which are the focus of later empirical chapters:

1. **How are livelihoods changing with the expansion of the market economy into Vietnam’s highlands, and what do different groups within the Hmong community stand to gain or lose through this process?** This is necessary for charting the dynamics of marketisation which intertwine with state territorialisation and ‘development’ agendas, thereby laying the groundwork for answering the central research questions. As Chapter 3 details, state policies and market expansion are drawing Hmong livelihoods into the cash economy as well as national and transnational labour markets, presenting both opportunities and risks. The minority who profit from cash crops, tourism or state employment are emerging as a wealthier and more flexible ‘non-subsistence’ class. However, most Hmong households who continue to practise semi-subsistence livelihoods and are increasingly falling further behind the relatively wealthier ethnic Vietnamese majority, despite modest reductions in poverty in absolute terms.

2. **How do Vietnamese state actors attempt to govern, control or co-opt Hmong Christianity, what are the impacts on Hmong Christian standards of living and what tactics do they employ in response?** The contentious church-state relationship in Vietnam is central to understanding the agency and responses of Hmong actors, as well as the political significance of the sum of their combined actions. In Chapters 2 and 4 I argue that Vietnamese state religious policies and practices have negatively impacted upon Christians’ quality of life but were largely unsuccessful in managing Hmong Christianisation, whilst everyday political tactics of resistance, avoidance and active compliance on behalf of Hmong Christians have forced central and local authorities to revise and moderate religious persecution.

3. **How does Hmong Christianisation affect local elite contestations, and to what extent do new Christian elites utilise their political and spiritual authority to empower their communities?** Within the nuanced interactions between local communities and external politico-economic forces, ‘everyday elites’ emerge as key actors who mediate such interactions as nodes within broader webs of power relations, often with feet in different camps. Chapter 5 highlights how young male church pastors displace traditional
hierarchies to emerge as an influential new group of local elites who act as both ‘political brokers’ and ‘development brokers’ for their communities, with external Christian networks acting as alternative sources of funding, information and opportunities to the state. The extent to which the power and wealth of new religious elites are accumulated or redistributed, and therefore the potential for empowerment, varies significantly depending on local factors.

4. **What is the impact of religious change on Hmong gender relations, and how should female-led Christian conversion be interpreted?** This question logically proceeds from the central questions, given the conventional association of religion with gender inequality and the importance of gender to development. While conversion has generated significant social conflict within communities, clans and families, those who have embraced and benefited from Christianity have often come from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society – including people without strong connections to state employment opportunities or poverty reduction welfare schemes, and especially women. My research findings in Chapter 6 demonstrate how Christianity undermines some existing patriarchal structures and inequalities but also inscribes new ones on top, interpreting Hmong female conversion as aspirational agency towards ‘alternative modernities’.

5. **To what extent is Christianisation preparing Hmong communities for integration into a capitalist economy, and what role does neoliberalism play in socio-economic transformations in upland Vietnam?** This is crucial for understanding in what ways religious agency can be considered empowering, within the larger backdrop of economic transformations. While neoliberal logic is present in state policies, marketisation and religious transformation in upland Vietnam, this thesis finds it is not monolithic but intersects with other cultural logics of communalism as well as political projects of territorialisation. As Chapter 7 elaborates, Christianity does not challenge the ‘will to improve’, a hegemonic desire in Vietnam’s highlands, but arguably it does equip Hmong communities for succeeding relative success the capitalist market economy whilst allowing for the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness.

Through these key findings, we can summarise the answer to the central research questions as follows: Hmong Christianisation is seen by locals and state officials as both a challenge to government authority in Vietnam’s highlands as well as an alternative pathway to progress and modernity. Therefore, religious interactions with processes of development, state territorialisation and market expansion have both empowering and disempowering effects as Christianity puts Hmong communities onto a trajectory of resistance to state-ethnic assimilation while simultaneously promoting integration into the market economy. At a grassroots level, conversion has led to conflict between Christian and non-Christian communities and the rise of powerful new
religious elites, but many who have embraced and benefited from religious change came from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society.

This argument contributes to our understanding of the nature of empowerment within the complexities of religious transformation and resulting everyday political contestations, which interact with other socioeconomic processes and state agendas to produce multifarious, and sometimes contradictory, outcomes. The political agency of local religious actors encompasses everyday resistance, compliance or evasion of state authority, the propensity to embrace or challenge economic trends and behaviours, and the ability to connect and exchange with wider religious networks – while simultaneously being influenced and moulded by these external forces. Therefore, empowerment should be treated as a multidimensional measure; for example, local autonomy from state policies and formal governance need not go hand in hand with economic sovereignty within market systems: the two may be unrelated or even have a negative correlation.

Christian conversion by marginal groups in Vietnam may be a form of protest (Salemink 2009) but is more likely evidence of “being tactically selective about modernity” (Michaud 2012: 1853). At the same time, religious aspirations and ‘alternative modernities’ (Gaonkar 1999) may overlap with, contest or be co-opted by other governmentality discourses and strategies, most notably the ‘will to improve’ in this case. State and market forces do not always follow the same logic or exert the same pressures on impoverished people and religious communities, resulting in complex responses and outcomes. This insight speaks to the ongoing debate over the influence of neoliberalism in South East Asian states and societies, emphasising its flexibility in combining with other ideologies and with agendas from non-state actors to produce localised hybrid governmentalities. As Cotoi (2011: 122) notes, “[t]hrough an ethnographical lens, neoliberalism becomes more plural and heterogeneous”.

Moreover, local impulses within religious transformations, which may undermine or reinforce social inequalities, indicate that empowerment is also ‘directional’ – we need to ask “from where? For whom? Towards what goal?” (Jaschok 2015: 50) This is particularly germane in light of a postsecular feminist approach to the gendered dynamics of Hmong Christianisation (Chapter 6), whereby religious women exert remarkable agency in persuading family members to convert and encouraging the ‘domestication’ of Hmong men even while the latter retain a near monopoly on political and religious leadership. In turn, this contributes to wider debates about the potential for empowerment at the intersection of religion and development, emphasising again the need for a detailed inspection of local factors which may lead to elite wealth accumulation in one village and redistribution in another (Chapter 5).
Research design

Attempting to answer the above questions required a robust research design capable of generating data on structures, power relations, discourses and ideas – and assessing the material effects of subjective experiences and interpretations. Most researchers of religion and development understand that the nuances of religious influences on people’s political and economic behaviour requires “deep analysis of the minute particulars of some concrete conjuncture, rather than superficial knowledge of great statistical populations” (Collier 1994: 259). Moreover, statistical data available from national censuses or official surveys in upland Vietnam raises serious questions about their reliability, since both citizens and officials are often reluctant to accurately report delicate issues such as religion or income (cf. Chaudhry 2016). This problem should also be considered with respect to other large-scale quantitative research of religion and development (Chapter 1). Based on multiple visits and previous fieldwork experience, I chose a multi-site and multi-method approach combining semi-structured interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observation and analysis of relevant secondary data. The obvious advantage of using different methods is that the rich data generated can be triangulated, compared and contrasted, which is particularly important in the context of political sensitivity, social conflict, different perspectives and competing agendas present in Vietnam’s highlands (Turner 2013a).

Over the course of my fieldwork I conducted approximately 150 semi-structured interviews with individuals and couples, primarily with Hmong villagers (both Christian and non-Christian), church leaders and local officials but also some ethnic Kinh pastors and civil servants as well as a few foreign missionaries. In addition, I undertook around 15 focus groups with between 3 to 15 people, usually lasting between 40-60 minutes, as well as ethnographic observation of daily activities, religious ceremonies and other rituals of life gained through staying and sleeping overnight in Hmong villages during three months of the fieldwork duration. The majority of fieldwork was conducted in three case study sites across two provinces in Northwest Vietnam, complemented with sporadic interviews in other provinces, focus groups with students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City plus a few interviews with refugees in Bangkok (see Appendix 1). While the in-depth focus on three sites limits my claims to generalisability, they varied significantly in terms of geography, livelihoods, political climate and religious dynamics, giving me plenty of points of comparison (see Chapter 3). Secondary data sources include government-sanctioned and independent news websites, religious pamphlets, Vietnamese language academic newspapers, journal articles, papers and books, as well as letters written from Hmong Christians to the Far East Broadcasting Company (see Chapter 2).

Positionality, or recognising that “all knowledge is produced in specific contexts or circumstances and that these situated knowledges are marked by their origins” (Valentine 2002: 116), was an important factor to consider for my research design. As a tall white Westerner, there was no chance
of me being mistaken for a local and gaining an ‘insider’ perspective among Hmong communities in Vietnam. However, my foreign ethnicity gave me a different positionality to other academics researching Hmong Christianity in Vietnam to date, who are Kinh (Vietnamese ethnic majority). This is an important factor to consider, given the historical tensions of Kinh prejudices and assimilation attempts towards ethnic minorities in Vietnam (McElwee 2004). Gender too is “an important axis of identity that influences and informs fieldwork, both constraining and facilitating field access and rapport with potential informants” (McAllister 2013: 168). Being male aided my ability to engage in dialogue with Hmong men, whilst limiting my opportunities to talk to Hmong women; altogether, I interviewed about 50% more men than women, even after attempts to intentionally balance this out by reaching out to female participants. Moreover, in a context of gender inequality, my own powerful position as a male may have influenced how much women were comfortable disclosing about domestic violence, gender roles and so on (see Chapter 6). Some of my most productive conversations about such issues came when I was with a female research assistant, who could compensate for my ‘maleness’.

As well as more concrete identity markers such as ethnicity, nationality and gender, reflexive researchers should acknowledge their philosophical perspectives, worldviews and political leanings which influence the way they conduct fieldwork and present their results (Turner 2013a: 7). The researcher’s personal religious stance (or lack of it) obviously impacts upon fieldwork dynamics, and my identification as a Christian enabled me to build rapport with the Hmong Christian community much faster than would otherwise have been possible. It is worth pointing out that – unlike many contexts in the developing world – Hmong locals would probably not perceive or assume a visiting Westerner to be a missionary, since historically there have been no Western missionarises present in the Northern Vietnamese highlands since the French colonial era. Although I did not disclose my religious affiliation at the start of interviews, I would often be asked by participants, and word about me quickly spread through the village; this was reinforced by my attendance and observation of church meetings. Nevertheless, I spent more overall time with and interviewed slightly more non-Christians than Christians, aiming to achieve a representative sample of the local populations as far as possible. Moreover, I attended traditional Hmong ceremonies and rituals, as well as joining in alcohol consumption when invited (disapproved of by Hmong Christians), in an attempt to position myself with a foot on both sides of the religious divide.

A serious barrier I faced was linguistic, given my inability to speak Hmong. The majority of older people spoke only Hmong and some younger people, while proficient in Vietnamese, also found it difficult to explain profound religious experiences or cultural transformation in a second language. Officially, I was required to have a research assistant present at all times of my research; their role was not only to help me but also potentially to report on my activities to local authorities (Sowerwine 2013). Other non-nationals researching ethnic minorities in Vietnam have had to employ ethnic Kinh assistants who can speak English, which adds another complication because of
ethnic tensions (Bonnin 2011, Sowerwine 2013). Thankfully, my Vietnamese fluency enabled me to directly employ Hmong research assistants instead, so that they could act as interpreters at the same time. Altogether, I formally employed five different assistants (3 male and 2 female, only 1 of whom was a civil servant) since it was more practical to employ someone from each different locality who could also double up as a ‘cultural consultant’ (Turner 2013b: 221). In addition, there were occasions when I ended up interviewing on my own, in which case one family member who was fluent in Vietnamese would interpret for others. 7 I gave each assistant interpreting training to ensure consistency as far as possible; a more comprehensive account of my methodology, research design, securing access and practical issues during conducting fieldwork is found in Appendix 2.

**Thesis Structure**

With these methodological considerations in mind, I now turn to outlining the structure of the thesis. In doing so, we return to Sang’s opening story which touches on most of the key themes addressed in the thesis. There is a logic of progression informing the thesis structure, whereby later ‘fine-grained’ chapters are grounded in, and emerge from, the results of earlier ‘broad-brushstroke’ chapters. For example, the historical tensions and distrust between Hmong and Vietnamese state (Chapter 2) sets the scene for widespread antagonism to Christian conversion and religious persecution (Chapter 4); this in turn propels new Christian elites into positions of community authority at the expense of hostile local authority representatives (Chapter 5). A closer inspection reveals a gendered dimension as Hmong women pioneer Christianisation (Chapter 6) despite the male dominance of religious leadership. Meanwhile, sweeping livelihood changes and marketisation of Vietnam’s highlands (Chapter 3) have opened up opportunities for enterprising church leaders to accumulate wealth (Chapter 5) and encourage new attitudes towards work and consumption, raising the question of neoliberalism (Chapter 7). These linkages are expanded upon throughout the thesis.

The first chapter engages with literature about religion and development, in particular the alleged new ‘elective affinity’ between the explosion of Pentecostalism and neoliberal reform in the Global South. Common topics identified include the rupture of traditional socio-economic practices and formation of new communities, the logic and motivation for self-discipline and market values, the relationship between church authority and state attempts to govern, and the conflation of ‘development’ with capitalist expansion. As already mentioned above, this thesis employs a more critical definition of development as grassroots empowerment based on a relational view of poverty, which is justified and fleshed out in the second section of this chapter. Thirdly, I propose Everyday Political Economy (Elias and Rethel 2016) as a useful analytical lens which combines

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7 For this reason, there are both first-person and third-person quotes in the thesis; first-person quotes indicate that the interview was conducted without an interpreter, while third-person quotes are attributed to the interviewee rather than the interpreter present.
both the ‘actor-centric’ logic of compliance, evasion and resistance with the ‘agency-centric’ logic of discipline, routines and governmentality of everyday life in upland Vietnam. Such an analysis is grounded in the lived experiences of those directly affecting and being affected by such changes and can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religious agency and empowerment.

Sang’s experience of extreme poverty and marginalisation also forms the backdrop for most of the Hmong of Vietnam’s highlands and borderlands areas, long seen as a ‘problem group’ by the state. Chapter 2 explores this unique historical background, beginning with James Scott’s everyday political lens which paints the broad brushstrokes of historical highland-lowland relations in Southeast Asia, with Christianity seen as “a powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (2009: 319) for some highlands groups. The second section documents Hmong historical themes of marginality, poverty, resistance to state encroachment, the role of religion in political mobilisation, migration Southwards from China to South East Asia, remarkable receptivity to Christianity, and the deprivation of being caught in the theatre of the Cold War. Sang was surprised to hear Hmong-language radio broadcasts, but this was a by-product of Cold War politics as Hmong factions in Laos sided with the Americans, subsequently fled and became refugees, forming Western diaspora communities who continue to contact and influence the Hmong in Asia. A separate history of the Vietnamese nation state reveals the influence of Confucianism in shaping attitudes towards religion and ‘uncivilised’ highlands groups as well as Western imperialism in embedding a mistrust of Christianity. These two histories become entwined in the 20th century state projects of territorialisation and development, to which Hmong communities often suffered negative effects and therefore resisted, with tensions greatly exacerbated with the remarkable explosion of Protestant Christianity.

Sang attributes divine intervention for his improving material circumstances since conversion, but the means through which this was achieved includes increasing market access, new crops and state poverty reduction schemes. Chapter 3 unpacks these dynamics in greater depth and introduces the main case study sites where fieldwork was conducted. Whilst low-profit traditional livelihoods are by no means disappearing but being adapted to new technologies and shifting market demands, the increasing relevance of marketisation is seen in the expansion of cash cropping, tourism work and hired labour. Just as Sang sought medical help in China, so thousands of Hmong in Vietnam cross borders either permanently or temporarily in search of a better life or migrant work. These new opportunities in the cash economy offer the potential for higher profits – but with strings attached, be it fluctuating market prices, unequal market access or risk of exploitation. Local authority employment opportunities are hoarded by well-connected Hmong families, while poverty reduction schemes are also liable to nepotistic selection and exclusion. Many Hmong are eager to embrace precarious cash economies even while inequalities are exacerbated by many forms of marketisation. These inequalities give rise to a new ‘non-subsistence’ class who are best placed to take advantage of changing livelihoods.
The radical conversion and accompanying rejection of traditional practices, as described by Sang, tended to cause deep schisms within Hmong communities (unless the entire village converted), leading to social conflict which has been provoked and aggravated by widespread state-sponsored religious persecution which Sang experienced. Chapter 4 explores the multifaceted and evolving relationships between various Hmong Christian actors and Vietnamese state agents over the past 30 years. Opening with a textual analysis of Vietnamese-language state and academic documents on Hmong Christian conversion, prominent themes of hostile external forces, millenarianism and social conflict narratives are contrasted with the lived experiences of Hmong Christians who have been subject to persecution, discrimination and monitoring. An everyday politics analysis reveals the different tactics Hmong Christians use to comply with, evade or subtly resist heavy-handed state interference, with special attention paid to the many Hmong Christians who have fled religious persecution and migrated both within Vietnam and abroad. Oppressive state policies have been largely unsuccessful in deterring conversion, leading to some calls with governing authorities for a change of approach – or to “give up”, in Sang’s words. This chapter also highlights the inconsistency and contradictions of state religious policy, as various departments and regional authorities with different agendas make life very confusing for local actors. For instance, Sang was able to access a State Development Bank loan whilst being harried by the police, and was not sure whether he would be approved for the state medical insurance via the People’s Committee.

Chapter 5 tracks the rise of new Christian elites like Sang and neighbouring pastor Ban who have travelled and made external contacts, have cultivated access to new economic opportunities and consequently upset the established power relations within Hmong communities in Vietnam. Combining spiritual authority with economic success, these pastors become community representatives as well as informal development agents, who may compete or co-operate with local state actors. Drawing on concepts of political and development brokerage, this chapter shows how national and transnational religious networks can be seen as new ‘patrons’ in addition to the state, providing alternative sources of funding, networking and education opportunities to Hmong Christians – especially when state funding opportunities are denied through religious discrimination. Three extended case studies explore how charismatic Christian elites act as business consultants, challenge local authorities and mimic some of the state’s technologies of governance in their attempts to expand Protestant influence, resulting in wealth accumulation for church leaders and varying degrees of redistribution to their communities.

Another prominent theme of Sang’s story is changing lifestyle norms among Christian households, which also affect gender relations as Hmong men are encouraged to give up alcohol, spend less of – and contribute more towards – the family income, an appealing proposition for many Hmong women. Nevertheless, Hmong patriarchy is still evident in the predominantly male Christian leadership and Sang’s prioritising his sons’ studies over his daughters. Informed by a postsecular
feminist perspective which emphasises the broad spectrum of forms between resistance and submission which religious women’s agency can take, Chapter 6 explores patriarchal clan structures, marriage practices and patrilineal inheritance norms which have a greater influence in reinforcing and perpetuating gender inequality than state policies. This builds the backdrop for Christianisation which has been largely initiated and propelled by women, and can be interpreted as a form of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ by which Hmong women display their agency to secure a more favourable position in society. On the other hand, enduring and new forms of sexism among Christian communities point to the limits of empowerment and indicate the competing forms of traditional, socialist and Christian patriarchies which Hmong women must navigate.

Sang’s renouncement of opium and demonised ‘wasteful’ customs, and expectation that other converts stop drinking alcohol and gambling, raise questions about the overlaps between Christian and communist forms of governmentality – the ‘conduct of conducts’ (Foucault 2008) – and which is more effective. Building on the previous chapters, Chapter 7 delves into the logics of discipline and subjectivity to explore how norms of everyday life are constructed, replicated, transformed and contested. Hmong aspirations for modernity are heavily informed by the developmentalist ‘will to improve’, which state and Christian discourses have jointly inculcated, alongside a desire to be civilised while resisting Kinh assimilation. Local perceptions of the means to development include an awareness of the importance of calculative self-interest, as well as the influence of Pentecostal teaching about material blessings being a by-product of religious devotion. Everyday Christian cultivation of economic attitudes and behaviour include the avoidance of so-called ‘social evils’, rejection of traditional custom expenses, sanctioning of other worldly consumption and endorsement of entrepreneurialism. This chapter suggest that Christianisation supports Hmong integration into the capitalist market economy, whilst qualifying the influence of neoliberalism as one of many logics of governmentality in Vietnam.

In the thesis Conclusion I summarise the main findings and arguments of the thesis: namely, that Hmong Christianisation is seen as both a challenge to state hegemony in Vietnam’s highlands as well as a pathway to progress and modernity. Therefore, religious interactions with processes of development, state territorialisation and market expansion have both empowering and disempowering effects, as Christianity puts Hmong communities onto a trajectory of resistance to state authority while simultaneously integrating them into the market economy. The implications of these findings will then be applied to relevant debates within religion and development literature and regional studies, before putting forward an agenda for future research.
CHAPTER 1 – Bringing together Development and Religion in the Everyday

As set out in the Introduction, the central questions of this thesis are: how does religious transformation interact with processes of development, market expansion and state territorialisation among a marginalised minority group in Vietnam, and to what extent can these interactions be considered empowering or disempowering? The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the research questions by critically defining terms of development and empowerment, to explore how other researchers have addressed these questions in other contexts, especially within the religion and development literature, and to introduce everyday political economy (EPE) as a productive analytical lens through which to understand Hmong Christianisation and answer the thesis questions. This contributes to the overall thesis by setting out the framework and parameters of the research questions, as well as drawing out the key themes and insights from existing literature, in order to provide points of comparison and departure.

My research is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature as it seeks to investigate the complex and multifaceted connections between religious conversion, economic transformation, ethnic politics and gender relations. Therefore, I build on a wide range of literature, borrowing theoretical and conceptual tools from various disciplines including critical development studies, sociology of religion, colonial history and alternative political economies. These diverse schools of thought can be brought together with a focus on the everyday as a key site of political analysis whereby non-elites interact with and contest ‘top-down’ forces through mundane but significant daily choices and practices.

Chapter Outline

The first section of this chapter critically analyses the concept of ‘development’, which is crucial to understanding the research context of Vietnam’s highlands where poverty, inequality and the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007) – both in terms of a developmental state and the population’s common desire for progress – are salient (see Chapters 3 and 7). A brief summary of its changing and contested meanings in theory and practice reveals the limitations of orthodox definitions of development as depoliticised, unsustainable and trapped within a residual view of poverty. Instead, I offer a critical definition of development as grassroots empowerment, based on a relational view of poverty which acknowledges the importance of ‘opportunity hoarding’ vectors of inequality such as gender and ethnicity. This redefinition allows us to move beyond simplistic economic quantifiers of development towards multiple and distinct forms of empowerment.

Given the complicity of religion in the history, conceptualisations and practice of ‘development’, the next section outlines prevailing social science perspectives on the role of religion (especially Christianity) in socio-economic transformations. A review of some seminal works introduces
prominent views of religious actors and practice as potential catalysts for capitalist development (Weber 2002), as playing functionalist or instrumentalist roles (Thompson 1991) and as agents of cultural imperialism (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). It is important to acknowledge that these themes not only have enduring legacies in the academic world but also influence the thinking of Vietnamese state officials concerning religious policies about Hmong Christianisation.

This leads into the third and fourth sections which assess the values and limitations of the interdisciplinary ‘religion and development’ body of literature which has emerged from the contributions of academics, religious and development practitioners. While much of this literature can be characterised as ‘instrumental, narrow and normative’ (Jones and Petersen 2011), particularly in its rejection of proselytisation and conversion, I focus on insightful debates regarding the proposed new ‘elective affinity’ between the explosion of Pentecostalism and neoliberal reform in the Global South. Several themes are identified which are pertinent to religious and economic transformations among the Hmong of upland Vietnam: the rupture of traditional socio-economic practices and formation of new communities, the logic and motivation for self-discipline and market values, the relationship between church authority and state attempts to govern, and the conflation of ‘development’ with capitalist expansion. However, such research rarely provides a nuanced account of the distinct relations between local religious actors and multiple external forces (state, market, wider religious networks) which can lead to contradictory implications for empowerment.

Conceptualising development as empowerment requires an analytical lens that can account for the agency of the marginalised, and in the final section of this chapter I propose Elias and Rethel’s (2016) everyday political economy as a fruitful way of combining the insights and intersections of feminist political economy, Foucauldian perspectives of governmentality and everyday politics. By relating the ‘actor-centric’ logic of compliance, evasion and resistance with the ‘agency-centric’ logic of discipline, routines and governmentality, EPE has the potential to recognise and give voice to marginal actors at the same time as considering “how the conditions of everyday life are themselves produced” (Elias et al. 2016: 256). This is not only relevant for Hmong Christianisation in upland Vietnam but speaks to the broader field of religion and development by emphasising the multifarious relationships everyday actors hold with the state, market forces and external organisations which entail different logics, power relations and responses.

**Locating development and empowerment**

This section problematises mainstream, apolitical conceptualisations of development as unhelpful for understanding the degree to which economic transformations and ‘growth’ actually benefit those vulnerable to poverty, before offering a more critical definition of development as empowerment. This is essential for answering the thesis questions since Hmong communities in
Vietnam live in a context of acute economic inequality vis-à-vis ethnic majority citizens. They are both subject to state-led development initiatives as well as having their own aspirations for changing and improving their lives; as later chapters reveal, these two forces sometimes run in parallel, and other times come into conflict.

‘Development’ is not a neutral term and must be understood in its historical and political contexts. While US President Truman’s 1949 Inaugural Address heralded the start of “development as a political project – that is, as a programme of change that ‘developing countries’ should be encouraged to pursue by the already ‘developed countries’” (Payne and Phillips 2014: 6) – this project has been seen as a continuation of colonial relations (Escobar 1995, Kothari 2005, Duffield and Hewitt 2009). The origins of development discourse have been traced even further back to Biblical and early Christian writings (Gray 2002), connecting modern development to Western-Christian identity: “our daily habits of action are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress which… is rooted in, and is indefensible apart from, Judeo-Christian theology” (White, Jr. 1967: 1205). The overlap between contemporary Christian beliefs on progress and broader developmentalist discourses are explored in Chapter 7.

The spirit of development has been articulated as a moral imperative to ‘civilise’ the barbarians and savages which underpinned colonialism (Beard 2007), a Marxist materialist history inspiring a universal view of progress (Payne and Phillips 2014: 31), or as a linear modernisation process from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’ and measured primarily in terms of national economic growth (Rostow 1960). Interestingly, as Chapter 2 shows, the Vietnamese development project imposed on highlanders like the Hmong contains elements of all of the above, combined with a territorial logic of borderlands security. However, repeated failures to achieve the desired outcomes on poverty reduction across the world have shaken the faith of those attempting to improve the human condition, causing many to question the aims, methods and meaning of development (Schuurman 2001).

One mainstream re-articulation is ‘human development’, influenced by Mahbub Haq (1995) and Amartya Sen (1999) and understood as a process of improving ‘quality of life’ rather than ‘standard of living’, which has profoundly influenced the formation of the multidimensional Millennium Development Goals and, now, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Such a shift of mood might appear attractive for this thesis by opening up space for religion to contribute to ‘non-material’ aspects of human development (Narayan et al. 2000: 38), as will be seen below. However, its associated method of measurement, the human development index (HDI), is problematic in its attempts to quantify inherently qualitative concepts such as gender equality, and is emblematic of the ‘fetishism of numbers’ which plagues mainstream development agendas (Max-Neef 1991).
More fundamentally, human development does not escape the orthodox ‘residual’ view of poverty, which understands the primary problem of the poor as that of developmental absence or lack – access to markets, employment, education, and so on (Bernstein 1992: 24–5). Mainstream development institutions tend to define poverty in arbitrary absolute terms (e.g. $1/day) and insist on ‘technical fixes’ (Unwin 2007: 940). This obscures the fact poverty is also – perhaps primarily – a ‘relational’ phenomenon, generated and reinforced by unequal power relations at local, national and international levels (Kaplinsky 2005: 50–1). Mosse expands on this, applying “Marxian ideas of exploitation and dispossession with Weberian notions of social closure” (2010: 1157) to develop a ‘relational’ view of poverty. Such an approach reveals how impoverishing capitalist relations are embedded in exclusionary processes of social categorisation, such as ethnicity or gender, which are created and maintained for opportunity hoarding (Tilly 2001) and exploitation (de Herdt and Bastiaensen 2008). In failing to address unequal political relations as a cause of chronic poverty, human development has been criticised for allowing the perpetuation of depoliticised, neoliberal “development business-as-usual… under a different umbrella” (Pieterse 1998: 358).

Post-development thinkers like Escobar (1992), who see ‘development’ as a hegemonic tool of neo-imperial, neo-colonialist reproduction, advocate a radical paradigm shift in the way human flourishing is conceived, away from ‘business-as-usual’ capitalism and towards localised, pluralistic grassroots movements, many of which are rooted in religion and spirituality – which highlights “the systemic exclusion of this important area from our secular academies” (Escobar 2012: xxiv). Mies and Shiva (1993) critique the mainstream exclusive focus on incomes and cash-flows which ignores the unsustainability of ‘developed countries’ consumerism and the patriarchal inequalities inherent in ‘catch-up development’, arguing instead for an alternative vision of ‘human scale development’ or ‘subsistence feminism’ centred around basic needs identified as “subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, freedom” (1993: 98). Some have called for the discourse of ‘development’ to be abandoned altogether (Ziai 2013) which, while providing a much-needed provocation to the development industry, are not helpful for my research context (see below).

Both critical and post-development perspectives attempt to bring power relations back into the picture, long side-lined by the ‘anti-politics machine’ of mainstream practice which, in its attempts to depoliticise development activities, obscures the unexpected consequences it fosters (Ferguson 1990). Any attempt to improve material conditions is both a political and economic issue, because poverty is both relative and absolute (Unwin 2007: 930). Moreover, the question of inequality is central to a critical view of development, expanding its remit to wealth as well as poverty, and how the two are connected (Payne and Phillips 2014: 181). Because power is basic to understanding a society (Wilk 1999), empowerment is a decisive aspect of development (Mosse 2007: 32). By empowerment, I mean the process by which marginalised and individuals and groups “become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make
choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination” (Keller and Mbwewe 1991: 76).

Of course, empowerment has also become a ‘buzzword’ (Cornwall 2007) in development jargon to refer to general grassroots participation or ‘capacity-building’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001), which is problematic because it obscures the relational, political aspect of empowerment between unequal social groups (Mohan and Stokke 2000). Interestingly, given the themes developed in this thesis, Henkel and Stirrat (2001) argue that ‘empowerment as participation’ is a cultural construct with historical roots in the Protestant Reformation which emphasised participation as a moral imperative. Another critical perspective regards empowerment as a technology of self-governance in democratic societies to produce citizen subjects, therefore it is arguably a measure of subjection to, rather than autonomy from, state power (Cruikshank 1999). Ferguson (1990) makes a similar argument about ‘development’ as a “machine for reinforcing and expanding the exercise of bureaucratic state power, which incidentally takes ‘poverty’ as its point of entry” (1990: 255). The theme of governmentality is revisited in Chapter 7.

Nevertheless, I contend that politicised understandings of both development and empowerment can be useful for identifying inequality, oppression and ways to improve the human condition which are not inevitably co-opted into state governance agendas (Weldon 2019). For one, the language of ‘development’ (phát triển) is common parlance and central to both Vietnamese state policy goals and the ambitions of the general population, both among the ethnic majority and minority groups like the Hmong (Le 2018: 93; see also Chapter 7). On the other hand, the term ‘empowerment’ is not easily translatable into Vietnamese and is rarely used in everyday conversation or state policy, but is more associated with external influences such as the UN. Therefore, the continued use and critical redefinition of development is justified in order to engage in a constructive dialogue with national policy debates and also to best situate research findings within the language of research participants.

Particularly instructive is Kabeer’s (1999) conceptualisation of empowerment as both process and outcome, which combines Sen’s capability approach (1985) with more critical gender and development studies. While her focus is on women’s empowerment, which is highly relevant for Hmong Christianisation (see Chapter 6), it can be applied more widely to disadvantaged groups in general. She gives three defining dimensions of empowerment: access to resources (material, human and social), agency (ability, meaning, motivation and purpose of action), and achievements (impact of outcome on equality or self-reliance). This maps nicely onto the ‘residual’ and

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8 The most common Vietnamese translation for empowerment is trao quyền, which literally means to be awarded or granted with power; this implies being ‘empowered’ from an external source (i.e. the state) and does not capture the idea of grassroots empowerment as something people ‘do’ or ‘take’ for themselves. This is apparently also the case with the Chinese translation of ‘empowering’ (fuquan) which “suggests that power, understood as constitutional rights, is being granted to women entitled to these rights” (Jaschok 2015: 53).
‘relational’ elements of poverty identified above, whilst being flexible enough to incorporate a
diversity of contributing factors and interpretations of what ‘success’ looks like (Batiwala 1993).
Taking the above considerations into account, we can define developmental impact as the degree to
which economic, political and social conditions and processes empower those most vulnerable to
poverty to improve their living conditions and relative authority vis-à-vis other groups in society.

A number of features make the above definition of developmental impact conducive to a critical
analysis of socio-economic transformations in upland Vietnam. Firstly, the ‘objects’ of
development are groups of people – as classified by ethnicity, gender, religion or class – rather than
individuals, rejecting the externalising individualism of neoliberal rational choice models by
emphasising the importance of social categorisations (Mosse 2010: 1157). Secondly, the tendency
of mainstream institutions to focus on ‘national development’ is rebuffed; it is equally important to
focus on economic and political divides within countries, especially considering that the majority of
global poverty now exists in middle-income countries such as Vietnam (McMichael 2012: 287).
Thirdly, this definition leaves the ‘agents’ of development open to anyone or anything which
impacts the conditions of the most vulnerable; not only ‘formal’ actors such as institutions,
organisations or markets – which development studies tend to overemphasise (Payne and Phillips
2014: 176) – but also communal structures, religious teaching and grassroots movements which
may have a positive or negative developmental impact.

Developmental impact here is considered to be a qualitative measurement which is multifaceted,
open to interpretation and complicated by various factors such as group scale and timeframe. To
take some simplified examples from empirical chapters of this thesis, the expansion of the cash
economy in a previously subsistence-based society might open up the rural population as a whole
to widespread exploitation, but within that group it might enable a previously excluded subgroup
(i.e. women) to enter the workforce, gain a salary and increase their relative bargaining power at a
household level (see Chapters 3 & 6). Alternatively, religious transformation among a marginalised
group which arouses the hostility and persecution of an authoritarian state may initially have
negative economic consequences for these converts, but in the long term this transformation leads
to a change in attitudes towards work and savings, or connects the converts into transnational
religious networks offering financial and educational support (see Chapters 4 & 5).

These illustrations point to multiple and distinct forms of empowerment in view of the “complex
multi-dimensional nature of power” (Mosse 2007: 32), which may at times be contradictory or
dialectic in nature. A comprehensive account must be informed by local specificities emerging
from fieldwork, but from existing literature one would expect gender empowerment at
household/community levels, access to wealth, education and healthcare, food/land sovereignty,
freedom from violence, equity in the exercise of institutionalised power etc. to be prominent
measurements of empowerment (Alkire 2002, Nussbaum 2000, Hill 2003). Of course, there must
also be a gauge for the extent to which those who are (or were) marginalised perceive themselves to be empowered (Kabeer 1999), hence the need for understanding local conceptions of what ‘the good life’ means and looks like based on qualitative, grounded fieldwork (Hefferan 2015). In the case of Vietnam’s highlands, these local perceptions are informed by both ideals of self-sufficiency (Turner and Bonnin 2012) and the perpetual ‘will to improve’, leading to tensions regarding hopes for empowerment (see Chapter 7). Religion also plays a big role in conceptualising ‘the good life’ and how to attain it, the economic implications of which are addressed in the next section.

Perspectives on religion

Having defined and defended a critical perspective on development, this section introduces the disputed relationship between religion and economic transformation – another key element of the thesis research question – within academic literature. I focus primarily on Christianity since there is not space to do justice to the entire spectrum of religion and development literature, but also because religious practice is not monolithic and Christianity has a unique relationship with power, capitalism and ideas of development and progress (Beard 2007). After some cursory remarks about the historical contingency of the meaning of religion, prominent perspectives on religion are explored through three seminal works: firstly, Weber’s influential thesis of religious change facilitating capitalist development in The Protestant Ethic (2002). Secondly, functionalist and instrumentalist perspectives on religion as exemplified in E.P. Thompson’s Making of the English Working Class (1991). Thirdly, the commonly-held link between Christianity and global imperialism as fleshed out in the Comaroffs’ Of Revelation and Revolution (1991). Importantly, all three perspectives are directly relevant to Vietnamese state research and policies concerning contemporary Hmong Christianisation.

‘Religion’ is perhaps an even less neutral term than development. In premodern South East Asia, the religious was interwoven into other fields of socio-economic and cultural life to such a degree that “there is not even a real equivalent of our term religion in the pre-modern languages of the area” (De Casparis and Mabbett 1993: 277). Its modern meaning is a “historical product of discursive processes” (Asad 1993: 29) originating in a western model of distinction between the religious and the secular which emerged following the Protestant Reformation and Enlightenment in Europe. The rise of the secular state and nationalism in Europe, which replaced the Catholic Church as the source of social coherence and legitimacy, marked a turning point in reformulating religion from a public ‘community of believers’ to a privately held ‘body of beliefs’, in order to limit its interference with politics and other matters of the state (Thomas 2005: 21). In the academic world, the isolation of theology departments from social sciences at universities has led to a similar compartmentalisation of religious studies which reinforces an emphasis on belief over practice (Rieger 2016).
Western theories on religion and modernity were later universalised and exported to the rest of the world through colonialism and imperialism (Park and Yoo 2014), based on a Christian-supremacist hierarchical ordering of religions (Masuzawa 2005). Although a fixed, delimited concept of religion has indeed been internalised to various degrees across the world, there are many areas and cultures who do not conceptualise religion in these terms – including the Hmong of Asia (Tapp 1989b). Indeed, in the 1980s when Hmong refugees entered the United States (prior to mass Christian conversions) much confusion arose from administrative attempts to categorise Hmong religious affiliation, many of whom did not believe they had a religion at all (Borja 2014). Instead of seeing ‘religion’ as a compartmentalised aspect of identity, the unified traditional Hmong worldview (which incorporates various beliefs, rituals, social hierarchies, politics etc.) could have been more accurately described as a ‘way of life’, as has often been said of Hinduism (Tomalin 2013a: 74). In modern times these indigenous conceptualisations have now been ‘religionised’ to a certain degree (Picard 2017) since the Hmong in Vietnam have been exposed to both Christianity and state religious categorisation procedures; nevertheless, it is important to recognise that ideas about religion are heterogeneous, historically situated and dynamic.

Any discussion on religious and economic transformations can hardly avoid Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2002 [1904]), which argued for the key contribution of new Protestant ideas and practice in the growth of modern capitalism in Northern Europe. Not only does it continue to profoundly influence current academic debates, including the religion and development literature (see below), but Vietnamese state-sponsored researchers also identify Weber as a key source in their own attempts to grapple with Vietnamese Christianisation in general, and among the Hmong in particular (Nguyễ 2014). After paying lip service to Marx’s ‘opium of the masses’, several papers on Hmong Protestants papers cite a Vietnamese translation of Weber to reproduce notions that “Protestant ethics have an ‘elective affinity’ with the ‘spirit’ of capitalism” (Nguyễ 2016: 14) and that “the role of Protestantism in social, cultural and economic development across the world is quite plain to see” (Nguyễ, K. D. 2015).9 So despite the huge (arguably incomparable) historic, cultural, politico-economic chasm between early-modern Europe and late-twentieth century upland South East Asia, The Protestant Ethic continues to exert a significant influence on both Vietnamese academic and policy debates.

Weber’s argument that religious changes promoted a rationalist motivational force of capitalist behaviour among the general population is well-known. Firstly, the Lutheran doctrinal emphasis on work as a God-ordained vocation or ‘calling’ bestowed an unprecedented dignity on economic activity, which was previously seen as a necessary evil (2002: 28). Secondly, the specifically Calvinist teaching on predestination supposedly produced a ‘salvation anxiety’ which drove people to self-scrutiny, legalistically pouring energy into their vocation and book-keeping, to evidence

9 Author’s translations of Vietnamese-language sources. The particular insights of Vietnamese-language research texts will be explored and critiqued in Chapter 4.
their status as one of the elect (2002: 76–7). These beliefs constitute the ‘Protestant ethic’ which fuelled a rise in productivity and, in tandem with an asceticism which discouraged the consumption of wealth, led to large-scale saving and investment for the first time (2002: 116–7). Conversely, this form of capitalism did not develop among other religions which were still steeped in ‘magic’ or superstition, without the rationalising drive of Calvinism. While medieval Catholics lived ethically ‘from hand to mouth’, performing individual ‘good works’ unsystematically and only when necessary to atone for sins or as advised by the priest,

The God of Calvinism, on the other hand, demanded of his own, and effected in them, not individual “good works,” but “sanctification by works” raised to the level of a system. The ethical practice of ordinary people was divested of its random and unsystematic nature and built up into a consistent method for the whole conduct of one’s life. (2002: 80, original emphasis)

In spite of the significant criticism this thesis has accumulated over the years on empirical, methodological and political grounds (c.f. Parkin 1993, Zimmerman 2006, Farris 2013), Weber’s work remains hugely influential. The mechanism by which Weber explained religious influence is primarily intellectualist: new theological teaching, preached in churches, caused laity to think and feel differently about spiritual matters, fuelling transformation in everyday economic practices. This privileges the role of theology, religious leaders and interpretation over (or at least on par with) more materialistic matters of technology and class struggle (Poggi 2009: 75). An enduring concept is the ‘elective affinity’ which Weber saw between ascetic Protestantism’s attachment to hard work and the spirit of capitalism, intersecting with certain technological and structural changes to reshape social relations.

Another important claim is that the Reformation had substituted the Catholic Church’s “control over everyday life” with a more effective internal form of self-discipline – the “regulation of the whole of conduct” which penetrated “to all departments of private and public life” (Weber 2002: 4). This arguably foreshadows Foucauldian theorisations of governmentality, but one obvious problem is the lack of empirical evidence about the mundane, everyday mechanisms by which this ‘spirit’ of self-discipline took hold. Weber bases his argument almost exclusively on one sermon without showing how typical it was of the general religious teaching of the time. Furthermore, Thompson (1991 [1963]) identifies Weber’s arguments as primarily concerned with the contributions of Puritanism to the rationale and social coherence of the middle class, however he did not address the question of the working class:

How then should such a religion appeal to a forming proletariat in a period of exceptional hardship, whose multitudes did not dispose them to any sense of group calling, whose experiences at work and in their communities favoured collectivist rather than individualist values, and whose frugality, discipline or acquisitive virtues brought profit to their masters rather than success to themselves? (1991: 392)
This is the question which Marxist historian Thompson attempted to answer, pointing to the ‘moral espionage’ committed by new Christian movements among the English working class in weakening its revolutionary spirit and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. As a religion of ‘the heart’ rather than the intellect, “Methodism dropped all doctrinal and social barriers and opened its doors wide to the working class” (1991: 399), offering a community to the displaced and alienated and achieving mass conversions across the nation, in a context of social upheaval and urban migration. Religious teaching emphasised the rewards awaiting the faithful in heaven rather than in the present, the importance of methodical obedience and submission to God’s will. This was also indoctrinated into children in Sunday schools, with the explicit aim being to foster “a spirit of industry, economy, and piety” (1991: 441) – often encouraged and funded by factory owners, who were eager to keep their ‘moral machinery’ in order (1991: 397). On the other hand, Thompson also recognises that Methodism expanded working people’s confidence and organisational capacity by familiarising them with membership associations, self-governance, fundraising and long-distance communications (1991: 47). His historical research on how mundane, weekly church activities disciplined the working class is more methodologically robust that Weber, highlighting “the routines of daily life that shape and are shaped by economic transformation” (Elias and Rethel 2016: 243).

In contrast to Weber’s emphasis on the dual roles of idealism and materialism in the history of capitalism, Thompson’s account places much more emphasis on the latter. Similarly, social scientists grappling with the role of religion in society have ranged from a Durkheimian functionalist reduction of religion as an automatic response mechanism to maintain social stability, to more instrumentalist accounts which see religion as providing ideological and organisational tools for communities to express their class interests in times of socioeconomic transformation and cleavages (Hamayotsu 2008: 181). Marx and Engels saw religion as a socially-produced phenomenon which was primarily a reflection (or inversion) of inhumane conditions of oppression and suffering that distracted workers from “those external forces which control their daily life” (1972: 131 [1878]). This is very much the Communist Party line which Vietnamese officials and academics tow when they quote Marx in their papers on Hmong Christian activity. On the other hand, Engels recognised that clergy were not a homogenous unit but divided according to class composition, which usually legitimated the established order but could also, in certain circumstances, take a critical, protesting or even revolutionary role (Lowy 1998: 81).

Neither Weber nor Thompson pay much attention to the gendered aspects of religious and economic transformations. Aiwha Ong (1987), an influential voice on socio-economic transformations in South East Asia, uses Marxist ideas of false class consciousness to “discover, in the vocabulary of spirit possession, the unconscious beginnings of an idiom of protest against labor discipline and male control in the modern industrial situation” (1987: 207). While Ong’s pioneering account of the creation of gendered neoliberal subjectivities remains compelling, the religious role
of spirit possession in political economy is rather narrow and instrumentalist (Lim 1989). Another important unresolved question is the complex role of religion within gender relations, in light of the hostility of mainstream feminist literature towards patriarchal religious hierarchies which grates with the empirical observation of women’s increased participation in religious life ahead of men (Frances 1997). Postsecular feminism is a way of theorising religious women’s agency which can helpfully interpret the phenomenon of female-led Hmong Christian conversion, as elaborated in Chapter 6.

Another relevant and prevailing theme informing social science perspectives on Christianity is the impact of colonialism and missionisation on non-Western societies – although it is worth noting that the Hmong of Vietnam were barely exposed to direct missionary activity during French imperialism (Chapter 2). From the abundance of research on colonial missionary encounters across the world, Comaroff & Comaroff’s epic two-volume historical anthropology of 19th century missionaries in South Africa stands out as a persuasive demonstration of how colonialism “was simultaneously, equally, and inseparably a process in political economy and culture” (1997: 19). It is particularly instructive due to its immense empirical depth, detailing the mundane ways in which missionaries effected change – though, like Weber’s Calvinists, not always in ways they intended or desired.

While Nonconformist and Methodist missionaries from Britain initially had little success in converting native South Africans, they were more effective in their secondary ‘civilising’ mission as the ideological vanguard and most active cultural agents of British empire (1991: 5–6). Alarmed by the absence of money, markets, irrigation, private property or individualist competition, and believing commerce and market competition to be a means of moral improvement and virtue, “evangelists strove to instil the routines and dispositions of wage work… [and] the pleasures of consumptions” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 33) in an attempt to cultivate the local populations’ appetite for the Gospel. They did this through both church teaching on the benefits of cash-cropping and wage labour as well as the ‘religion of everyday life’: by paying wages in new currencies, inviting merchants to open up shops in the mission field and introducing new agricultural technologies. The impacts on social, gender and economic relations were dramatic as missionary activity “insinuated new forms of individualism, new regimes of value, new kinds of wealth, new means and relations of production, new religious practices. And it set in motion processes of class formation” (1997: 163–4).

This argument – of missionaries as (perhaps unwitting) ‘agents of empire’ who were required by colonial states to “assert and amplify their presence” and change the “state-of being of ‘native’ populations” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 21) – is repeated across the historiography of the colonised world. While there is much debate as to how much power missionaries actually had in the colonial order (Porter 2004), or to what extent local people adapted the Christian message for
their own purposes (Brock 2005), the connection between Christianity and imperialism has become inseparable and informs not only academic thinking but also has ramifications for perspectives on religion in postcolonial settings, such as the hostility of Vietnamese communist anti-Christian sentiment (see Chapter 2).

**Emerging religion and development literature**

The Comaroffs have also contributed to the growing interest in religion within contemporary development studies, which has emerged in tandem with the ‘cultural turn’ within social sciences (Du Gay and Pryke 2002) as well as growing acknowledgement of the ‘return of religion’ in international political affairs (Rinehart 2004). In the past 20 years, religion has been transformed from a ‘development taboo’ (Ver Beek 2000) into a topic which has been covered in hundreds of international development journal articles and book chapters (Swart and Nell 2016). This literature has been contributed to by a wide variety of authors, including different academic backgrounds (theology, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, history etc.) but also practitioners of both development organisations and religious organisations, resulting in a spectrum of target audiences as well as academic rigour.

On the one hand, theology academics and religious leaders are concerned about justifying why and what religions should contribute to development or, sometimes, offering an alternative perspective of what development is (or should be) from a religious perspective (Plant 2009, Tripp 1999, Tyndale 2006, Ware et al. 2013). For example, Christian thinkers have proposed their own concepts including liberation theology (Gutiérrez 1988, Cooper 2007), *diakonia* as social justice (Nordstokke 2011, White 2002) and ‘economic alternatives’ to dominant financial systems (Duchrow and Gueck 1994). Whilst generally arguing for a more ‘holistic’ definition of development than purely economic terms, these theological discussions are rather far removed from the grassroots religious teaching and concepts of development among Hmong Christian communities in Vietnam (see Chapter 7).

Of the more empirically grounded research on religion and development, a minority of authors have attempted quantitative analyses of aggregate national or provincial-level GDP and religious surveys to search for correlations between religious and economic behaviour (Grier 1997, Barro and McCleary 2003, McCleary 2008, Potter et al. 2014). These studies suffer from difficulties measuring religiosity quantitatively as well as selective use of case studies limited by lack of reliable data, and tend to give oversimplified explanations about the socio-economic impacts of religion without taking into account complex historical/political influences (Morris and Adelman 1980, Nikolova and Polansky 2019).
The majority of literature is based on qualitative studies – although some authors are more prone to abstract generalisations rather than the ‘richness, texture and detail’ (Ortner 1995: 173–4) of specific cases. In spite of the variety of case studies and religious traditions researched, much religion and development literature can be characterised for being ‘instrumental, narrow and normative’ (Jones and Petersen 2011), reducing the analysis into a list of ‘positives’ and ‘negatives’ about religion (c.f. Haynes 2007, Marshall 2001). This is especially true of research on how religious NGOs can (and which ones should) be ‘tapped into’ by international development actors, with less interest shown in how local religious movements may be affecting political and economic relations independently of formal ‘development’ organisations.

Building on Asad’s (1993) account of the historical construction of world religions as an irrational ‘other’ in order to contrast with secularism, Fountain (2013) accuses the development industry of imagining and essentialising ‘religion’ as a transcultural and ahistorical ‘other’, rendering “a complex, diffuse and diverse field… intelligible for ease of governance” (2013: 23). This has the additional effect of recasting ‘development’ as secular and rational: “The purported neutrality of mainstream development actors, and their ability to seek the good of distant others, is thereby reinforced as morally superior and inherently justifiable” (2013: 24). In stark contrast, Salemink (2004) emphasises the similarities of religion and development, based on the experience of (non-Hmong) ethnic minorities in Vietnam’s Central Highlands. He provocatively conceptualises development as ‘conversion to capitalism’ which is (in this case) entwined with Christianisation and promises an earthly paradise of consumerism that is unattainable for the majority. I would dispute the extent of the ‘proletarianisation’ in upland Vietnam which Salemink claims, given the relative lack of commoditisation of land and scarcity of land dispossession in my case study sites (see Chapter 3), but Salemink’s relevant work will be engaged with at various points in following chapters.

Another limitation is the widespread hostility towards proselytisation as ‘illegitimate, coercive, and dangerous’ (Fountain 2015) among both the development industry and academic literature (Bradbury and Kirk 2013). For example, Tyndale (2006: 153) equates proselytising with the manipulation of power as part of a negative religious ‘agenda’, while Bradley (2009) refuses to recognise evangelistic groups as valid religious development actors, since they marginalise or exclude those who don’t conform. For Fountain (2015), this hostility arises because “proselytization is a polluting threat to the purity of the secular development enterprise” (2015: 84), endangering its moral authority by mixing it with other activities that should be kept separate, according to the ‘institutional differentiation’ logic of secularism. Nevertheless, in reality all development actors engage in “intentional moral practices of transformative interventions aimed at reworking the social practices of others” (2015: 89), meaning that proselytisation is not an exclusively religious affair.
The rejection of proselytisation in this literature leads to further analytical problems. For example, Buijs’ (2004) claims that while religious change can be both internally or externally induced, it “cannot externally be made or managed… religions can and do change and yet, they cannot be ‘tailored’” (2004: 103). However, this obviously conflicts with counterexamples of external agents (i.e. missionaries) at least partially successful in their attempts to convert people (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), radicalise religious populations for political agendas (Hadiz 2018) or even instrumentalise religious practice in an attempt to improve worker productivity (Rudnyckyj 2010). Like other ‘religion and development’ authors, Buijs seems to imply that religion is a unique, bounded ‘other’ – “Religious systems are a reality on their own” (2004: 106) – but it is more helpful to acknowledge how religion and conversion overlaps with other types of social behaviours, and is also subject to political contestations, power struggles and instrumental governance attempts. One contribution of this thesis, then, is to the limited existing empirical accounts of the relationship between religious conversion and economic transformation.

**Pentecostalism and neoliberalism**

An important subgroup of the religion and development literature to consider is the relationship between the growth of new Christian movements, loosely categorised under the label of ‘Pentecostal’, and the advance of neoliberalism in the developing world. In what is arguably “the largest shift in the religious marketplace over the last 40 years” (Miller 2007: 19), the worldwide number of Pentecostal/charismatic Christians has exploded since the 1970s to reach several hundred millions; although the movement’s origins can be traced to early-20th century USA and UK revivals, nowadays the majority of followers live in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Adogame 2010: 498). Notwithstanding the huge global diversity of belief, Pentecostalism generally shares the same evangelical trademarks of the literalist authority of the Bible and the need to be ‘born again’, but additionally emphasises the importance of a personal, direct and miraculous encounter with God through the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’, fasting and praying for healing and deliverance (Le 2018: 2). While some church networks explicitly label themselves as Pentecostal, the movement also influences other Protestant traditions and denominations who are increasingly adopting similar values and becoming ‘Pentecostalised’ (Spittler 1998).

The economic significance of Pentecostalism has been subject to increasing scrutiny in recent years. One manifestation of this is found in neo-Weberian literature, which has attempted to either confirm or refute the relevance Weber’s theories on the Protestant ethic and other religions to economic development, or to apply it to more contemporary situations (Von Der Mehlden 1980, Palanca 1986, Woodberry 2006). A problematic example is Berger’s (2010) work on ‘the Protestant Ethic today’, which argues that any religion or culture which promotes Weber’s ‘this-worldly asceticism’ – work and life-discipline, delayed gratification, and a ‘relatively’ disenchanted worldview – will produce a ‘comparative cultural advantage’ in terms of social
mobility and ‘modern economic development’. Berger points to Latin American Pentecostalism as a prime case study, however he is criticised for making essentialist generalisations, for fundamentally underestimating the influence of anti-ascetic Prosperity teaching (Kirby 2019), and for his uncritical stance towards – or even tacit support for – neoliberal development policies (Cooper 2017).

Instead, more critical perspectives posit a new ‘updated’ elective affinity between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism, which realigns the Protestant ethic in accordance with contemporary labour demands of post-industrial capitalism (Martin 1995). These studies often emphasise ‘Neopentecostal’ or Prosperity theology – “a concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire” (Kramer 1999: 35) – as a form of “embedding neoliberalism, particularly in the absence of viable state governance” (Barker 2007: 408). On the one hand Comaroff & Comaroff (2000a) depict the rise of ‘Neoprotestant’ movements as a response to the perception of an epochal shift in the constitution of the lived world” (2000a: 307), namely, the radical uncertainty of crises brought about by economic liberalisation. On the other hand, they also allege that born-again faiths in the Global South “often run ahead of such [neoliberal] transformation, bearing aspirations – visions of a this-worldly millennium – that help prepare the ground for more radical, market-oriented reform” (Comaroff 2009: 24). The Pentecostal ‘prosperity gospel’ and similar movements are portrayed as ‘spirits’ of neoliberalism, sharing a common factor:

the allure of accruing wealth from nothing. In this respect, they are born of the same animating spirit as casino capitalism; indeed, perhaps they are casino capitalism for those who lack the fiscal or cultural capital – or who, for one or another reason, are reluctant – to gamble on more conventional markets. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000b: 313)

Unlike their detailed narrative of colonial South Africa, however, the Comaroffs do not provide an everyday account for the mechanisms underpinning their proposition. Martin (1990) also notes that economic advancement and Pentecostalism often go together and may appear to reinforce each other, although any causal direction is hard to evidence. Aspects of Pentecostal teaching can promote self-worth among the poor and disempowered, and engender new skills of entrepreneurship and economic management (Heslam 2014). Equally important is Pentecostalism’s ability to foster a sense of belonging and new, flexible communities to replace those being undone by structural reform, as illustrated in its popularity among dislocated migrants in an era of mass migration and urbanisation (Barker 2007). It is also accused of diverting converts’ attention away from the structural causes of their social deprivation – with criticism often coming from other branches of Christianity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010). In both developed and developing countries, Pentecostal churches and organisations have arguably become ‘surrogates of the state’ (Jennings 2008) by providing ‘mercy ministries’ to fill the gap left by state cuts in social welfare provision
(c.f. Cooper 2015). Freston’s (1998) summary of Pentecostalism in Brazil hints at the possible ways it may ‘prepare the ground’ for neoliberalism:

Pentecostalism transforms a lumpenproletarian into a proletarian or self-employed. It raises people from misery to poverty, but no further. It changes attitudes to consumption rather than work, offering a new plausibility for saving in an adverse context. The Pentecostal ethic reinforces dominant capitalist values among people who have already embraced them but as yet without material reward. (1998: 353)

Freeman’s ethnography in Ethiopia gives a grounded account of how this works in practice, arguing that Pentecostal churches “have a part to play in the conversion to capitalism that the neoliberal agenda requires” (2012a: 160), by effectively bringing about a ‘personal transformation’ which other development agencies cannot easily achieve. In this particular rural setting, Pentecostal conversion of a minority of young people enabled them to reject traditional redistributive feasting rituals (causing significant social conflict at first) as well as providing incentives and opportunities for education, literacy, self-dependence and contact with people outside of the village with “new ideas and ways of living” (2012a: 170). Later, when an NGO development project entered the scene promoting apple growing as a cash crop, these ‘transformed’ Pentecostal young entrepreneurs were the first to take risks, embrace new livelihoods opportunities and reap the financial rewards. Freeman then claims that when other non-Pentecostals started cash cropping, they instrumentally converted to avoid the obligation to redistribute their surplus profits to relatives or neighbours: “conversion was sudden and dramatic and coincided exactly with the apple boom” (2012a: 175). Ten years later the accelerated pace of life, increase in theft, neighbourly distrust and increasing inequality showed how “the fabric of the community was beginning to thin” to be replaced by “a new ethic of individualism” (2012a: 176). These insights are useful for comparing to similar trends in upland Vietnam, as elaborated in Chapter 7.

More insights are found in Ruth Marshall’s (2009) ethnography of the Pentecostal ‘revolution’ in Nigeria, where radical political and economic insecurity of the 1970s and 1980s provided an opening for Pentecostalism to grow both numerically and politically. Marshall uses Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and resistance to understand ‘born-again political rationalities’ in a way which does not simply dismiss it as illogical. Compared in stark contrast with traditional religious practices, which converts demonise and associate with Nigeria’s historical failure to achieve ‘development’, Pentecostalism is seen as a radical break from the past – both morally and politically. At the start of the ‘Born-Again’ revival, when personal holiness was emphasised above material success, converts were in high demand for recruitment as employees due to their reputation for moral standards, which Nigerian employers considered contributed to a good work ethic (2009: 112). Furthermore, church social provision activities “were presented as demonstrating the ability of these communities to develop alternatives to social services that the state was no longer providing” (2009: 115), thereby raising a political critique of government corruption.
Legitimacy, the capacity to reject or confer claims of the right to govern, is a key site for everyday political contestation (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 13), and a serious concern for new Christian elites and local state authorities competing for authority among Hmong communities, as seen in Chapters 4 and 5.

Marshall (2009) posits a duality to Nigerian Pentecostalism with the ‘holiness movement’ on one side of the spectrum and Prosperity theology at the other. As the latter grew in popularity, being Born-Again gradually became perceived as a means of “tapping into spiritual power for one’s personal protection and social mobility” (2009: 177). In particular, the teaching and practice of tithing or additional monetary offerings to the church in exchange for promised future financial rewards became an exploitative way for some preachers and pastors to accumulate and become extravagantly rich. Wealth became increasingly socially unproductive, and decades of church growth and committed religious activity by a large percentage of the population has not brought about the economic security, political mastery and social justice which had been promised and hoped for (2009: 243). Instead, church leadership is tarnished by scandals of prosperity preachers appropriating wealth at the expense of their congregations, fuelling a theological contradiction whereby miracles and prosperity are interpreted as the potential fruit of both godly and demonic behaviour. Here religious institutions facilitate opportunistic wealth accumulation, while Pentecostal culture focuses on local, individual concerns of morality or personal protection while masking and depoliticising the structural inequalities arising from colonialism, capitalism or development (2009: 91).

Although the influence of Pentecostalism is by no means universal among the Christians of Vietnam’s highlands (still less Prosperity teaching), these debates are very relevant to my research on Hmong Christianisation. As seen in later chapters, neo-Weberian claims are made about the impact of Christianity on Hmong economic and lifestyle behaviour, including evidence of the ‘conversion to capitalism’ which Freeman (2012a) describes. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to call Hmong churches ‘surrogates of the state’ (Jennings 2008) since they are operating amidst ongoing conflict with and resistance to Vietnamese state actors (see Chapter 4). Instead, it resonates more with Marshall’s view of Pentecostalism as a “challenge to the postcolonial state, not only indicting its failure to bring about ‘development,’ but proposing an alternate mode for achieving it” (2009: 125), albeit a model which has arguably ‘failed’ in the Nigerian context. Nonetheless, the poor economic growth and presence of political Islam in Nigeria is significantly different to Vietnam’s power dynamics of ethnic marginalisation and a strong ‘socialist’ state whereby neoliberalism is not the only (or necessarily dominant) logic of governmentality or economic rationality (see Chapter 7).

**Everyday political economy**
With a few exceptions like Marshall’s astute research, even critical religion and development literature tends to either focus on either the relation between religious and economic behaviour or between religious and state actors – but rarely are both analysed at the same time as independent, though inevitably interlinked, relationships. Moreover, the political and economic implications of everyday, mundane routines and behaviour remain underdeveloped. For instance, in her proposed framework for analysing the links between religion and development, Rakodi (2013) posits three main subcategories: ‘everyday religion’, ‘religions, societies and politics’ and ‘religious organisation’. However, the questions associated with ‘everyday religion’ are limited to religious beliefs, attitudes and values, without asking anything about everyday practices or habits – thereby omitting important potential sites of political agency or subjectification.

The final section of this chapter contends that everyday political economy (EPE) is a valuable tool for making such an analysis of the political and economic implications of religious agency in contexts of poverty and marginalisation. EPE productively combines insights from everyday politics, feminist political economy and governmentality studies which are of great relevance to understanding, among other things, “the relationship between secular development and the persistent, if not growing, influence of religion in public and market life” (Elias and Rethel 2016: 15). The dual focus of EPE on both everyday political contestations and the logic of governance and discipline can be a way of advancing the debates on the role of religion in (dis)empowering local communities vulnerable to poverty at the same times as contributing to (or challenging) hegemonic discourses and desires for ‘development’.

The above sections show how mainstream development accounts are of limited value for approaching development as empowerment; of more use are heterodox schools of thought which address the agency of the ‘subaltern’. As stated in the Introduction, my understanding of everyday agency is influenced by a ‘Scottian’ everyday politics tradition which has been fruitfully applied to explore the ‘power of the powerless’ in South East Asian, Vietnamese and Hmong Studies (Scott and Kerkvliet 1986, Kerkvliet 1995, Turner 2012a). Critiquing the vast majority of political science’s bias towards ‘elites’ – states, government actors, international bodies, big corporations, trade unions etc. – everyday politics takes seriously the agency of non-elite people in “embracing, complying with, adjusting, and contesting norms and rules regarding authority over, production of, or allocation of resources and doing so in quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organised or direct” (Kerkvliet 2009: 232). Although individual activities which challenge or ignore state authority may appear to be negligible, the cumulative impact of hundreds and thousands of such acts can lead to important far-reaching consequences in policy and economic practice (Scott 1989) – which can often (but by no means always) be considered empowering (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, everyday politics has also great potential for framing local expressions of religion and religious actors as potential sites of contestation and agents of resistance (Scott 2009, Dandekar and Tschacher 2016, Schenk et al. 2019).
Although Scott does not spend much time explicitly addressing gender relations, his work has informed and resembles a diverse array of feminist research into possibilities of resistance to patriarchy (Haynes and Prakash 1991, Jeffrey and Basu 1998, Kittredge 2004, Lilja et al. 2017). Feminist political economy, with its focus on gendered and intimate dimensions of political life and unequal gender relations (Ackerly and True 2000), argues that never-ending accumulation or capitalist ‘growth’ necessitates the “subordination and exploitation of women, nature and colonies” (Mies 1987: 2), linking primitive accumulation with violence against women (True 2012) and showing how women’s productive and reproductive labour has been rendered invisible and incorporated into the economy in subordinate ways (Brenner 2014). A common theme from gender and development literature is the need to connect the household, the informal and the formal sectors in relation to the increasingly global economy (Elson 2000, Waylen 2000). Gibson-Graham (2006) argue that, like patriarchy, hegemonic conceptions of the economy are not “simply an ideological concept susceptible to intellectual debunking but a materialization that participates in the practices and processes that surround it” (2006: xxxiv).

Accordingly, a critical analysis of empowerment must include not only gender power relations (see Chapter 6) but also the interaction between capitalist and alternative economic activities (the family economy, subsistence farming, communal activities etc.) and how the former is ‘materialised’ or contested, which is highly relevant in the context of market expansion in Vietnam’s highlands (see Chapter 3). One significant way in which this ‘materialisation’ has been studied in recent times is through governmentality perspectives which focus on the ‘conduct of conducts’ (Foucault 2008) – or the ways by which subjects are conditioned by powerful actors which “artificially so arrang[e] things so that people, following their own self-interest, will do as they ought” (Scott 1995: 202). Governmentality analysis explores how ‘regimes of truth’ emerge, who is authorised to articulate them and by what practices hegemonic discourses are ingrained (Cotoi 2011). Indeed, a critique of James Scott is that he understands domination as largely coercive (Butz 2011), problematically assuming that the subaltern mind can remain free, at least to some degree, from hegemonic discourses and truth regimes – while at the same time missing the opportunity to explore the imagining of resistant subaltern counter-subjectivities. (Mitchell 1990).

Tania Murray Li illuminates this by combining Foucault, Marx and Gramsci to theorise ‘the will to improve’ as both a form of governmentality – “by educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and belief” (2007: 5) – and at the same time a practical necessity to manage (but not fundamentally challenge) the destructive fallout of capitalism’s advance. However, she contends that under contradictory capitalist forces, these external interventions are only ever partially successful and may inadvertently stimulate political backlash (2007: 26). This study is highly relevant for my thesis since it is also ethnographically grounded in another capitalist frontier of South East Asia, although in Vietnam’s highlands the most striking ‘will to improve’ is that which
drives everyday motivations and is articulated by almost all poor Hmong people I interviewed, rather than Li’s focus on the interventions and imposition of ‘improvements’ by external actors (See Chapter 7).

What everyday politics, feminist political economy and governmentality analyses hold in common is the centrality of mundane, everyday behaviour, decisions and relationships. Consequently, they can be brought together under the rubric of everyday political economy. Hobson and Seabrooke (2007) critiqued orthodox international political economy (in both its constructivist and structuralist forms) for its obsession with hegemony, elites, international trade/financial flows and economic regulatory institutions, with little to say about how the vast majority of the world’s population shape their own lives and beyond. Instead of focusing on who governs, who benefits and how the international system is regulated, an everyday approach asks “who acts and how do their actions constitute and transform the world economy” (2007: 12). For this reason, EPE can be considered among the ‘spiritual heirs’ of classical political economy in their “concern for understanding changes in everyday experience through a perspective emphasising distinctly private histories” (Watson 2013: 22).

Building on the above existing theoretical approaches, EPE joins the call for a greater analysis of the ‘subaltern’ and how their “manifold micropolitical struggles intersect with, and alter, macropolitical structures of governance, and vice versa” (Weber 2010: 110). Without marginalising “the importance of the dominant, nor… reify[ing] the agency of the weak” (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 15), EPE focuses on the interaction between everyday actors, elites and structures to explore the possibilities and impacts of defiance or mimetic challenges. Drawing from Kerkvliet’s (2009) concept of everyday politics, everyday actions can be defined as “acts by those who are subordinate within a broader power relationship but, whether through negotiation, resistance or non-resistance, either incrementally or suddenly, shape, constitute and transform the political and economic environment around and beyond them” (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 15–16).

Situating their focus in South East Asia – the ‘academic home’ of everyday politics – Elias and Rethel (2016) analyse how everyday processes of political contestation, marketisation and economic transformation are embedded within regionally distinct patterns of social relations and cultural-religious dynamics. Their everyday political economy approach has been applied to Muslim markets (Fischer 2016) and Islamic finance (Rethel 2016) in the Malay World, demonstrating its applicability to the study of religion. Since most feminist research is infused with concept of everyday political struggle (Elias and Roberts 2016), Elias and Rethel critique Hobson and Seabrooke’s ‘benign’ focus on global social change, emphasising the need for a gendered, household-level analysis for EPE that highlights the ‘violence of everyday life’ (Scheper-Hughes 1993) in South East Asia. Nonetheless, both sets of authors emphasise the agency of the mundane as well as concepts of legitimacy and identity as important sites of ‘bottom-up’ contestation and
negotiation, which correspond well to the above conceptualisation of developmental impact as empowerment.

In a joint chapter Elias, Rethel, Hobson and Seabrooke (2016) highlight the two intertwining analytical traditions within EPE: ‘everyday politics’, which focuses on the logic of action in non-elite actors’ reactions to political and economic transformations, and ‘everyday life’ (De Certeau 1984), which explores the role of discipline and daily routines from a more ‘agency-centric’ perspective. The latter tradition generally aligns to more Foucauldian approaches whereby the everyday is seen as “a realm governed and ordered by particular ‘logics of discipline’ or… as a site in which the mundane/ordinary comes to be valued on its own terms in order to subvert and challenge the traditional focus of much IPE scholarship” (Elias et al. 2016: 243). The lines between ‘everyday politics’ action and ‘everyday life’ routines are blurred and intersect in various ways, reflecting the productive tension between James Scott’s ‘state avoidance’ and Tania Murray Li’s ‘will to improve’ which informs this thesis (see Introduction chapter). For this reason, EPE’s focus on the ‘agency of the mundane’ – where the two analytical traditions meet – makes it a valuable tool for exploring empowerment within religious and economic transformations in upland Vietnam.

Researchers of religion and development may benefit from the insights of EPE in order to broaden the scope of enquiry into the political and economic dynamics of religious activity in contexts of poverty and inequality. This would help to re-politicise the ‘anti-politics machine’ by foregrounding the political leverage that religious and development leaders have (Fountain et al. 2015) as well as exploring “the growing invocation of religion in everyday processes of work, finance and consumption; and the dynamic interplay between local economic cultures, practices and understandings and global circuits of capital” (Elias and Rethel 2016: 15). In particular, there is a need to consider and even disassociate the multiple forces including state, market forces and transnational actors that have distinct agendas and impacts – sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting – on local religious communities (see Figure 1).

This is not to imply that ‘local religious actors’ is a homogenous group; they can be differentiated by gender, class, religious status, and so on with competing interests and priorities. In this regard Chapter 5 makes a contribution to an EPE approach by conceptualising ‘everyday elites’ – pastors and church leaders in this case – as political and ‘development brokers’ (Lewis and Mosse 2006) who act as nodes within broader webs of power relations, often with feet in different camps. Ruth Marshall’s (2009) nuanced approach fits well with this approach by simultaneously addressing Pentecostalism’s political challenge to the postcolonial state, the economic impacts of different forms of religious self-cultivation and the tensions between competing movements, churches and religious elites.
This EPE model of religion and development can help identify and understand the multiple dynamics which affect prospects for local empowerment. As seen is this thesis, religious actors can endure considerable conflict with state policies (Chapter 4) and yet be very eager to embrace economic activities which the state would otherwise want to promote (Chapter 7). On the other hand, this may still be considered as a threat to state legitimacy, if religious actors claim to be bringing development where the state is not (Chapter 5). Meanwhile, marketisation and market logics have powerful effects which may coincide with, or be challenged by, local religious aspirations for development or communalism (Chapter 7). This is complexified by the variety of perspectives and agendas within both state bodies and religious groups, changing economic and religious policies over time, the involvement of transnational religious and economic actors and the different strategies and stances available to them. Furthermore, local religious actors are not only recipients or resisters of external influences, but also have the agency to influence external forces to varying degrees.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered a wide range of interdisciplinary literature in order to address questions of how religious transformations interact with processes of ‘development’ and economic transformation – and to what extent they can be considered to be empowering. Based on a critical conceptualisation of empowerment, it becomes clear that a great deal of interventions made under the name of ‘development’ do not positively impact the most marginalised. Feminist political economy has highlighted the complex and often negative effects economic transformations have on gender relations, Foucauldian approaches explore development as a form of governmentality while everyday political analyses highlight the agency of non-elite actors in subtly modifying or resisting interventions for their own interests.
These approaches are brought together under everyday political economy, where “the ‘everyday’ is seen not only as a site of political struggle and resistance but also as a site within which the ongoing marketization and economic transformation of the region play out in variegated ways” (Elias and Rethel 2016: 6). EPE has the potential to not only recognise and give voice to marginal actors, but also consider “how the conditions of everyday life are themselves produced” (Elias et al. 2016: 256), including through religion. This is why the most compelling accounts of religious and economic change stay close to the ground with the ‘richness, texture and detail’ (Ortner 1995) of mundane practices, behaviour and power dynamics behind such transformations.

There is now an abundance of literature on ‘religion and development’, with some of the most insightful works on the supposed elective affinity between ‘Pentecostalism and neoliberalism’. Yet even critical literature tends to either focus on the relation between religious and economic behaviour or between religious and state actors – but rarely are both analysed at the same time as independent, though inevitably interlinked, relationships. An EPE lens highlights the multiple relationships and tactics of engagement between local people and external influences; state and market forces which do not always follow the same logic or exert the same pressures on impoverished people, resulting in complex responses and outcomes. This is perhaps more clearly evident in contexts of ongoing state territorialisation attempts and local contestations of state legitimacy at the same time as rapid marketisation and development projects, as is the case in upland Vietnam. Here EPE’s combination of ‘actor-centric’ everyday politics and ‘agency-centric’ governmentality approaches make it particularly well equipped for grappling with such cases.

The everyday roles of religion in empowering those most vulnerable to poverty are multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. An interesting theme in seminal literature is the potency of inadvertent effects of religious activity: Weber’s Calvinist teachers, Thompson’s Methodist organisational structures and Comaroffs’ colonial missionaries were all allegedly responsible for shaping economic behaviour in ways which were unintended and/or undesirable. This resonates with unexpected nature of ‘remote’ radio Christian conversion among the Hmong and the surprising political consequences of mass migration (Chapter 4) and changing gender relations (Chapter 6), reminding us that intentionality is not a prerequisite for agency. To appreciate the unique dynamics of Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam, the next chapter delves into the cultural and political histories and narratives which shape the present context.
CHAPTER 2 – Historical Background and Social Context

The Hmong are also a group who have lost their country; in the past there was also a Hmong kingdom, now they are scattered across the world, which is another hardship and pains their hearts, so when they hear about God’s kingdom, they have a new hope.¹⁰

Histories not only claim to explain how “particular combinations of actors, structures and events coalesced or not (for whatever reason or reasons) at a particular moment to give rise to the outcome that did occur rather than another” (Woolcock et al. 2011: 78), but are also the foundations upon which social actors – be it nation states (Anderson 1991) or ethnic communities (Smith 1986) – are constructed. As this thesis moves from theory towards introducing the specifics of Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam, a multi-layered and nuanced historiographical account is necessary to fully understand the following empirical chapters. As a politically marginalised highlands group, Hmong history has been largely ignored, simplified or distorted by outsider perspectives (Scott 2009); in addition, emic accounts of Hmong history are in the form of oral traditions and until very recently have not been written down (Lee 2015). Furthermore, only since the twentieth century do Hmong histories with Vietnamese state history, the latter of which has its own separate influences and complexities.

Engelbert (2016) notes that the processes of discrimination, dispossession and assimilation within Vietnamese majority-minority interaction “did not start with Western colonialism, post-colonial regimes or communist ideology, but have centuries’ old political and cultural roots” (2016: 17). Unless we thoroughly explore these details, contemporary religious developments in the Vietnamese highlands make little sense – or, as will be seen, are at risk of being misinterpreted. Therefore, this chapter locates the phenomenon of Hmong Christianisation in its historical, geographical, religious and politico-economic contexts, highlighting the complex relationship between religion and state formation. In doing so it contributes to the broader thesis research themes by revealing how recent religious transformation, market expansion and development processes emerge from older political struggles and logics of governance. Moreover, questions concerning empowerment must be grounded in a background of Hmong experiences of and responses to marginalisation, exploitation, territorial encroachment, conflict and assimilation attempts over time.

Chapter Outline

After this introduction, a brief discussion on ethnicity is necessary to define what and who the term ‘Hmong’ refers to, noting how ethnic categories have been constructed and instrumentalised in South East Asia. This leads on to James Scott’s everyday political lens on historical highlands-

¹⁰ Focus group 4 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
lowlands relations which, while not without its critics, offers some useful generalisations about the role of religion in state evasion or subversion. The main body of this chapter consists of several interweaving narratives devoted to understanding the cultural histories of the two main sets of actors involved in this thesis, namely, transnational Hmong communities and the Vietnamese state. Firstly, historical trends emerging from Hmong history in Southern China and South East Asia include millenarianism and mass conversions at the nexus of religious subversion and construction of ethnic identities.

Next, I explore the historical development of the Vietnamese nation state, with the Chinese influence of Confucianism engendering a political expectation of religious subservience to the state. Deep-seated state hostility towards Christianity is rooted in the French colonial experience, while attitudes and policies regarding upland ethnic minority groups have evolved over time from ignorance and exclusion to more recent nationalist mobilisation and assimilation attempts. This leads on to a discussion of modern Hmong-state relations through the concepts of territorialisation, borderland security and state development projects. These concepts reveal not only the power imbalances whereby Vietnamese state forces attempt to exert control of Hmong territory but also the room for manoeuvre carved out by Hmong communities despite (or perhaps because of) their marginal geographical and social position (Bonnin and Turner 2014).

I then introduce the recent Protestant explosion in Vietnam as one surprising (but not unprecedented) expression of Hmong agency, noting how existing literature generally focuses on rather narrow issues of religious persecution but sheds little light on the relationship to wider political economy transformations and gender relations. The conclusion identifies the strengths and limitations of existing literature on Hmong Christianisation, and the specific contributions of this thesis in theorising social conflict from an everyday politics perspective as well as studying the relationship between religious and economic transformations. Finally, the implications of ‘strange parallels’ between modern and historic Hmong Christian movements are explored.

**Ethnicity and not being governed**

At the outset, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of ethnicity, and specifically what is understood by ‘being Hmong’. Ethnicity is often viewed as primordial, an ascriptive category existing unchanged for centuries (Varshney 2003). Primordialism was popularised by 19th century racial theorists who drew on evolutionary scientists to advance a ‘social Darwinism’, asserting that biological differences could explain differences in behaviour (Keyes 2002). According to one proponent, people are primarily ethnic or national, not ‘rational’, beings (Connor 1994). This essentialist assumption is echoed by Huntington, who controversially contended that the dominating sources of conflict “will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic” (1993: 22), but rather ‘cultural’. Similarly, Max Weber is accused of ‘neoracism’ (Zimmerman
2006) which replaces biological race with a system of fixed cultural differences to explain political or economic inequality: “culture can also function like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin” (Bilabar 1999: 22). Whilst primordialism has been critiqued and refuted, it has influenced much colonial and nationalist historiography and continues to be instrumentalised for political purposes in ongoing ethnic discourse, as seen below.

Instead, I take a constructivist position of ethnicity as socially constructed and shaped over time by political agents, both internally and externally, through various processes including conquest, colonisation or immigration (Wimmer 2008). Unlike primordial accounts, constructivists argue that social categories such as ethnicity are not natural or inevitable, but rather flexible and open to manipulation by political entrepreneurs (Brass 2003), “with the pragmatics of calculated choice and opportunism in dynamic contexts of political and economic competition between interest groups” (Tambiah 1989: 336). The role of language, historical narratives and cultural symbolism is significant in instigating and sustaining ethnic identity (Kaufman 2001), which can in turn become internalised and produce a sense of common interests based on shared historical memories, valued cultural traits, religious beliefs and values, and shared territory/homeland (Smith 1993).

A critical historical analysis supports this constructivist position, since ethnicity in early-modern South East Asia appears to be fluid, loosely defined, overlapping and subject to fluctuation depending on the political benefits of identifying with different ethnicities at any given time (Lieberman 1978). A classic constructivist case is presented in Leach’s *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), where ethnic Kachin chiefs who accrue enough wealth and power were able to ‘become’ ethnic Shan when they attempt to redefine formerly reciprocal relations into patron-client relationships. On the other hand, there is little doubt that ethnicity has ‘sharpened’ and hardened during colonialism and post-WWII South East Asian politics, with specific groups being rendered as ‘lesser’. Alatas’ seminal *Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977) demonstrates how indigenous inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago were evaluated and categorised according to their exploitability in the colonial-capitalist production system, which became racialised through the perpetuation of derogatory myths and stereotypes.

In Vietnam, postcolonial state officials combined French racial distinctions with Soviet ideology to attempts to ‘scientifically’ categorise and census ethnic groups on a social evolutionary model, with the *Kinh* (Vietnamese majority) at the top of the hierarchy (Keyes 2002) – we return to this later in specific reference to Hmong-state relations. The consolidation of national ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991) follows a comparable constructivist logic, with ethnicised notions of ‘citizenship’ being central to state governance (Bhambra 2015). In response, elites within marginalised groups on the periphery of South East Asian states have also appealed to primordial sentiments for legitimacy and mobilisation purposes in ethno-nationalist conflicts (Brown 1988).
At present, there are perhaps 5 million people classified as Hmong living in China (>2 million), Vietnam (1.4 million), Laos (600,000), Thailand (250,000) and USA (260,000) as well as smaller numbers in Myanmar, France, Australia and French Guiana (see Figure 2). Endogenous markers of transnational Hmong identity include speaking (largely) mutually intelligible languages and sharing the same clan surnames, although this is by no means unanimous. This can clash with exogenously imposed ethnic categories, especially in China where Hmong-language speakers are considered to be a subcategory of the ‘Miao’ national minority, which includes a total of 12 million people, many of whom have very different linguistic and cultural features to the Hmong (Tapp 2004). In addition, Hmong and Miao are often further catalogued into subgroups like ‘White Hmong’, ‘Green Hmong’, ‘Black Miao’, ‘Flowery Miao’ and so on. These distinctions are made by various academics and governments based on dialect or traditional dress colour, without much consistency from one country to the next (Tapp 2002a).

Since ‘Hmong’ is an endonym and most of the group’s history has been written by outsiders, they were traditionally labelled ‘Miao’ (in China) or ‘Meo’ (in South East Asia). These exonyms carried derogatory, ‘barbarian’ connotations, although in the 1950s the Chinese Communist Party radically revised the spelling of ethnic group names to remove the negative associations in the old ideograms (Wilkinson 2000: 712). To complicate matters, early Chinese historical sources referred to any non-Han peoples to the south as ‘Miao’ regardless of what language they spoke (Diamond 1996: 92); the term only came to refer to a more specific people group in the past century or two (Jenks 1994: 31). These ambiguities mean that the further we look back into history, the less clear it is in what sense so-called Miao peoples were related to the Hmong. Of course, from a constructivist perspective, these details do not matter so much as the meaning present-day actors attach to narratives of history, which reinforce or shape ideas of ethnic identity.

While the Hmong have been subject to numerous anthropological and historical studies as referenced below, they are generally highly localised and eschew a wider political-economic analysis. One notable exception is James Scott’s controversial The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia (2009), which both raised the profile of ‘Zomia’ (or the South East Asian Massif) and also generated fierce debate about the historical merit of his claims. Also taking a constructivist perspective of ethnicity, his thesis is that “hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have… been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys” (2009: ix). Building on an everyday politics perspective developed in previous work (see Introduction), Scott argues that over time highland groups like the Hmong have shaped their cultural practice, social structure, farming habits and even linguistic sensibilities to maintain their autonomy and resist assimilation attempts from lowland states.
Two main contributions of religion in ‘keeping the state at bay’ are identified: firstly, the widespread highlands appeal of millenarianism, fusing political and religious activity in a quest for imminent, this-worldly, collective redemption from oppression (Talmon 1966). With messianic charisma acting as a temporary glue to mobilise otherwise dispersed groups, millenarianism is seen as a dramatic last resort for upland peoples to ward off state power if less confrontational strategies have failed (Scott 2009: 309). Secondly, Christianity is seen as “a powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity” (Scott 2009: 319) for highland peoples who wanted to access literacy and cosmopolitan networks without assimilating to the religion of lowland states, namely, Buddhism or Confucianism. This builds on Tapp’s (1989c) research on the Hmong in Thailand, for
whom “adoption of Christianity increase[s] the conceptual distance between members of ethnic minorities and the states to which they belong” (1989c: 65). Scott claims that the popularity of Christianity among several significant ethnic minorities across mainland Southeast Asia – including the Chin, Karen, Kachin and Hmong – was due in part to the millenarian elements of Christianity, as well as its utility in “creating a place for new elites and an institutional grid for social mobilization” (2009: 320).

Scott has been critiqued for his cherry-picking of examples and dichotomisation of state vs ‘nonstate’ (Petit 2015), without paying attention to the historical variance in different state actors or the myriad of state-making projects from within highland peoples (Sadan 2010, Michaud 2018). Nevertheless, out of all the diverse histories of Zomia’s highlanders (van Schendel 2002), Scott’s thesis is arguably most relevant to the tumultuous migration history of the Hmong (Lieberman 2010: 339). Scott claims that this is a historical study which does not apply to post-WWII politics due to the enhanced ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ available to the state (2009: xii). However, in fact Scott illustrates his own arguments with examples from the later 20th century (Brass 2012), and the following sections of this chapter show more continuity into the modern era than a radical departure from historical highland-lowland relations. Moreover, other scholars of Hmong studies continue to borrow Scott’s concepts to explain contemporary everyday politics (O’Briain 2018, Turner et al. 2015, Michaud 2017), so Scott has arguably overemphasised both the historical importance of hill peoples’ desire for freedom from the state – and the abruptness of its ending.

**Hmong/Miao history**

A brief overview of Hmong/Miao history highlights the political significance of millenarianism and Christianity. Before the 19th century, most Miao (including Hmong speakers) lived in the highlands of China’s southwest provinces (Culas and Michaud 2004: 70). Without a centralised political organisation, the Miao were often found at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy, sometimes as tenants or slaves to chieftains from other ethnic groups (Weinstein 2014: 31–2). Dramatic 17th-19th century Han population growth and migration southwards coincided with imperial thrusts for more direct rule and attempts to assimilate and ‘civilise’ the Miao with Confucian customs (Sutton 2003: 48) which, while unsuccessful in pacifying them, did infiltrate into Hmong culture (Tapp 2002b).

It also provoked a series of rebellions in Guizhou and Hunan, starting in the late 18th century and flaring up intermittently until the 1870s, which devastated the region and caused many to flee south in the aftermath. Jenks (1994) cites five main motivations for the so-called ‘Miao rebellion’ of 1854-73: “ethnic hostility; alienation of lands… excessive taxation; maladministration by officials… and sectarian religion” (1994: 55). These heterodox movements, led by both Miao and Han prophets, offered an additional justification for revolt, provided organisational structure and
pools of human resource that helped mobilise rebels effectively (1994: 62). Prominent themes of a Miao king, promises of imminent reversal of ethnic power relations and supernatural abundance for followers (Weinstein 2014) are also echoed in more recent Hmong millenarianism in South East Asia (Rumsby 2020).

At the turn of the 20th Century, Baptist missionaries led by Samuel Pollard gained access to Southern China where, after preaching to Han Chinese with little success, they encountered a group known as A Hmao (one of the present-day Miao sub-groups, linguistically related to Hmong). As bonded tenants or slaves of Han and Yi landlords, the A Hmao occupied the least fertile lands and experienced widespread poverty (Lewis 2004). In this context of economic deprivation, socio-political subservience and rumoured further revolts, Pollard (1919) was surprised to witness mass conversions as many A Hmao actively sought out the missionaries – up to 10,000 were baptised before the mission was expelled from China, and today up to 80% of A Hmao in China identify as Christian. The mission’s popularity may have stemmed from Pollard’s invention of an A Hmao script in order to translate the Bible, which was interpreted as the restoration of mythical lost script (Enwall 1994), as well as messianic elements of Christian teaching – especially that of a returning king (Tapp 2015: 294). More practically, Lewis (2004) points out that the missionaries’ medical provision, mediation in dispute and advocacy with landlords would have positively “contrasted with the harsh treatment usually meted out to them by their neighbours” (2004: 221).

From a more critical perspective, Cheung (1996, 2004) compares the receptiveness of A Hmao highlanders to Christianity, in spite of severe persecution by governing authorities, to the unpopularity of the same Baptist mission among the culturally and linguistically related Hei Miao, who lived in a different part of Guizhou. Cheung attributes this to differing levels of capitalist penetration and experiences of Western interaction. For the upland A Hmao, who were socio-politically homogenous, ruled by chieftains from other ethnicities and “deprived of control of their own lives” (1996: 231), Christianity became an attractive option to those who realised “the transcendent political power of Western missionaries over the Miao’s traditional adversary, the Chinese state” (1996: 217). Conversely, social stratification within Hei Miao society had occurred for over a century with Hei Miao local chieftains meaning who “eventually became landlords and exploited their own people” (1996: 237). Furthermore, inequality among the Hei Miao was intensified by their greater integration into the commodity economy due to better transport conditions, bringing exploitation and a ‘bitter experience’ of Western commodity domination, which “may have hampered the Hei Miao’s conceptualization of the Western missionary as the savior among them” (1996: 240).

Cheung moves on to record the profound impact of Christianity on A Hmao society, especially in moulding ethnic identity and relations vis-à-vis other groups. Firstly, missionary promotion of literacy, schools and education became an important symbol of prestige and improved A Hmao
political status in regional ethnic interactions (1996: 242). Secondly, church administrative structures and decision-making skills introduced into the formerly egalitarian, dispersed A Hmao society gave pastors considerable new powers, and “small scattered, loosely related villages became connected through the church network. Diverse Miao groups came into frequent contact” (1996: 243). A Hmao Christians were equipped with the social cohesion and confidence to assert their power and improve their political and economic position, defying oppressive Yi landlords and refusing corvée labour or military conscription (1996: 244). Of course, the political leverage afforded by Western missionaries was due to their complicity with British imperialist power which left a wider legacy of misery, slavery and dispossession through the Opium Wars, unequal treaties and associated narco-economy (Bays 2012). Nevertheless, this case study provides interesting points of comparison to the wider political and social impacts of contemporary Hmong Christianisation (see below).

Into South East Asia

Many of those who fled Han encroachment and social upheaval following rebellions (but not including A Hmao Christians) migrated south to the highlands of South East Asia in the mid-to-late 19th century. This region eventually became designated as Tonkin and Laos of French Indochina, although the colonial presence remained limited in these borderlands. Upon arrival, Hmong immigrants found the best land already inhabited by various other groups including the Tày, Thái, Nùng and Khmu, so most newcomers settled further uphill or on steeper, less fertile land (Lentz 2011: 84). On the other hand, in Hà Giang (see Figure 3) the Hmong were more numerous and carved out more desirable territory by force, with strongmen declaring themselves kings and wielding their own armies. Some self-declared Hmong ‘kings’ tapped into millenarian appeal, while later the Vương kings of Đồng Văn colluded with French colonial forces in the early twentieth century, before tactically switching sides and joining forces with the Viet Minh (Lee 2015: 254), with their descendants being rewarded with government positions to this day (see Chapter 4).

Nevertheless, this position of power was unusual, and the majority of Hmong found themselves in marginalised areas, often exploited or oppressed by strongmen from other ethnic minorities (especially Thái) who had also collaborated with the French regime. This triggered more Hmong millenarian uprisings in 1910-12 and 1918-21 which, while unsuccessful and costly in lives, did result in the Hmong being given more autonomy to administer themselves instead of being taxed by the Thái, as French authorities attempted to pre-empt further rebellion (Gunn 1986: 120). In later decades, the Viet Minh independence coalition offered a credible option for many, though by no means all, disaffected Hmong communities to rally to. During the decisive battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, in which ethnic minorities are acknowledged to have made a vital contribution to the Viet Minh victory, the aspiring Hmong military leader Vang Pao – whose name would later
become the epitome of Hmong anti-communism (see Chapter 4) – led 850 soldiers through the mountains of Sam Neua province, Laos, in a vain attempt to support the French garrison but arrived too late (McCoy 1972: 50).

In the early 1950s Xieng Khuoang province, Laos, set the scene for more mass Christian conversions, smaller in scale than the A Hmao of China but no less remarkable. Again, Hmong actors showed significant agency in the conversion process as a shaman made contact with a neighbouring ethnic Khmu Christian and invited him to share the message, with entire villages converting at the same time (Barney 1957: 61). By the time Western missionaries arrived several weeks later, nearly 1000 Hmong had already professed faith in Christianity, and in a few years the number of converts rose to 3000, increasing further after the missionaries evacuated following the communist takeover (1957: 69). Missionary-cum-anthropologist Barney (1957) attributed the success of Christianity to the early conversion of prestigious shamans and village elders, as well as the limited direct influence of Westerners which prompted ‘cultural innovation’ among Hmong Christians instead of missionary-led cultural imperialism (1957: 89). As with the A Hmao, Christianity had a unifying effect on Hmong ethnic identity, which the Laotian government regarded as a threat and therefore banned Hmong-language Christian literature (1957: 75). A decade later, Barney noted that more Hmong Christians were changing their economic patterns and engaging more with lowlanders, no longer subject to ‘animist taboos’ which had previously
deterred them from certain occupations (1967: 289–90). Since then, however, Christianity has only grown marginally with perhaps 15,000 Hmong Protestants in Laos today.

As Laos descended into Cold War conflict between communist, nationalist, Vietnamese and US forces in the 1960s, Hmong communities found themselves on both sides of the fighting. In fact, many joined the Pathet Lao communist party and made important contributions, but more infamous was general Vang Pao and his Hmong army who were secretly funded and armed by the CIA to fight communism (McCoy et al. 1989). During this time of civil war, desperate uncertainty and social upheaval, millenarian activity flourished with rumours of either the Meo king’s return (Heimbach 1976: 35–36, Halpern 1964: 138) or “that Jesus Christ would soon appear, riding a jeep and dressed in the clothes of an American” and handing out weapons to dispose of local officials (Garrett 1974). After communist victory in Laos, hundreds of thousands of Hmong fled to Thailand with many (including Vang Pao) being granted asylum in USA, where they encountered Christian organisations and churches who were commissioned to support refugees make the dramatic (and often traumatic) transition into American society (Borja 2014). One of these refugees, a Hmong pastor from Laos named John Lee, would later play a crucial role in the Vietnamese Hmong Protestant explosion, as will be elaborated below.

This admittedly selective narrative of Hmong history emphasises themes of marginality, conflict, millenarianism and Western intervention which form the context for Hmong Christianisation – most of it occurring outside of Vietnam, which highlights the importance of a transnational analysis of religious and politico-economic transformations. It is important to note that only a fraction of the Hmong population in any given location or time period have engaged in millenarian activity, and it is often criticised or denounced by the wider Hmong community (Culas 2004a: 12). Nevertheless, there appears to be a millenarian undertone within Hmong culture which forms part of their social and historical background (Rumsby 2020), with certain events and crises acting as a trigger to bring it to the forefront. The ‘strange parallels’ of Cheung’s account of A Hmao historical conversion with contemporary developments are revisited in the conclusion, but for now we turn to the other major actor in this thesis: the Vietnamese state.

**Vietnam: state, religion and highlands**

It has often been noted that Vietnam’s current geopolitical status as ASEAN member and part of ‘South East Asia’ – itself a historical construct (Kratoska et al. 2005) – masks its complex historic and cultural ties with the East Asian world (Woodside 1971, Womack 2006, Jamieson 1995).

Vietnam has been seen as a historical ‘frontier’ between China and South East Asia, limiting the former’s influence on the latter (Reid 1988: 9–10); according to Taylor, “[i]f the epistemology of our age requires a boundary between East Asia and Southeast Asia, then… it certainly falls amidst the speakers of Vietnamese” (Taylor 1998: 973). In this section, I briefly summarise the historical
development of the Vietnamese state, focusing on the cultural influences and political experiences which shape its present-day attitude towards religion and highlanders.

Perhaps the most obvious East Asian legacy in Vietnam is Confucianism, a state-centric philosophy based on the belief of a unified and orderly universe, where social relationships are regarded substantially as an extension of a patriarchal family with the virtuous emperor as the head (Barr 2016). In contrast to modern Vietnamese nationalist myths of ‘righteous struggle’ against northern invaders, Chinese ‘occupation’ of northern Vietnam from 111 BC to 939 AD largely peaceful with only a few periods of unrest; Han soldiers and migrants settled and intermarried with locals, bringing Confucian values with them, but this was largely confined to elite society (Taylor 2013). The majority of the population was unaffected by court changes, and there is some evidence that mainstream society used to be more matrilineal and matrilocal (Frenier and Mancini 1996), in stark contrast to today’s Confucian resurgence within Vietnamese gender politics (see Chapter 6). The more extensive cultural assimilation which entrenched Confucianism in Vietnam was initiated from the 15th century onwards, long after the Han rulers were expelled, as the Sino-Vietnamese elite attempted to mimic and “replicate the [Chinese] neo-Confucian world order, which they admired and of which they believed themselves a part” (Andaya 2006: 24). Nevertheless, this Confucianisation was only partially successful and eventually became syncretised with traditional folklore, Mahayana Buddhism and Taoism, of which different elements rose to prominence at different time periods (Jamieson 1995).

The lowlanders of Vietnam’s Red River delta called themselves the ethnic Kinh – derived from the word for ‘capital city’ (kinh đô) – reflecting their aspirations for civilisation and urbanity, in opposition to the backwards, remote highlands (Abalahin 2015: 366). As such, they made no sustained attempts to ‘discover’, or spread Confucianism to, upland groups (Andaya 1993a: 444). Indeed, there was a traditional antipathy towards the highlands since they were believed to be the home of evil spirits and poisoned water that caused malaria (Hall 1993: 266). As Vietnamese speakers gradually migrated south and integrated or fought with other lowland groups such as the Cham and Khmer, they shunned intermarriage with the ‘primitive’ Central Highlanders while nevertheless trading with them for valuable products like timber. While some highland chieftains were officially appointed to maintain order, and would intermittently present tribute to the Vietnamese imperial court (Woodside 1971: 244), the latter lacked the ability or desire to census or tax upland populations. Thus, up until the late 19th century there was very little knowledge about, or interest in, the northern highlands or their inhabitants (Michaud 2000: 336).

In stark contrast, the encounter with Western religious (and later colonial) powers was of immense concern to Vietnam’s Confucian rulers. The early 17th century marked the arrival of the first Catholic missionaries, Jesuit priests led by Alexander de Rhodes; by 1640 there were apparently over 100,000 Catholics in Vietnam, mainly in the South (Andaya 1993b: 534). Their initial success
is attributed to the importance missionaries placed on learning the local language and training native clergy from an early stage. Unlike other religions which had been introduced and adapted into the Vietnamese religious landscape however, Catholicism placed obedience to God above loyalty to the throne, contradicting the Confucian teaching of emperor as ‘Son of Heaven’, both secular and spiritual ruler (Engelbert 2016: 19). Vietnamese leaders inevitably grew hostile to the challenge of Catholicism: religious restrictions and persecution waxed and waned through subsequent rulers and dynasties. As a result, many Catholics left their villages to create new socio-religious communities for cohesion and security, with priests acting as village elders (Ramsay 2007).

In addition to fears about the undermining of Confucian practices, Catholicism was suspected by many to be a pretext for colonial takeover, as it had been in the Philippines – and with good reason. Upon his return to France, Alexander de Rhodes’ accounts aroused interest among prospective business pioneers, with some clerics arguing that “without strong commercial relations evangelization would be unsuccessful” (Andaya 1993b: 535). From the 1830s onwards, the internally insecure emperor Minh Mạng oversaw the most anti-Catholic regime in Vietnam’s history: many missionaries, local priests and followers were executed on the grounds of following and promoting ‘false doctrine’ (Ramsay 2007: 377). Souring Franco-Vietnamese relations culminated with the French invasion of 1858 – ostensibly to protect Catholics – after which Vietnamese nationalists portrayed the latter as the vanguards of imperialism. For this reason Salemink (2009) notes that while Catholicism grew amidst early persecution, conversion among the Vietnamese population actually faltered during French colonial rule of Indochina, despite the Catholic community’s relative safety and privilege by then. In the subsequent Indochina wars and partition of Vietnam, anti-imperialism was implicitly tied up with a rejection of Catholicism, with US-backed President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam being a staunch Catholic. Today there are about 6.5 million (primarily ethnic Kinh) Catholics in Vietnam, representing 7% of the population.

The French colonial administration took an active interest in upland Indochina, being much more concerned than precolonial rulers about ethnically categorising their subjects (Pelley 1998: 377) and clearly delineating borders (cf. Winichakul 1994). Military conquest and control was achieved using divide-and-rule tactics, attempting to persuade highlanders to see “France’s conquest of Vietnam as their liberation from Vietnamese domination” (McLeod 1999: 360). Certain highland strongmen such as Đèo Văn Trị (ethnic Thái) collaborated with French rule and were given authority to collect taxes, trade opium and administer justice locally (Goscha 2016: 421). However, this led to other highlanders including the Hmong being exploited by these strongmen, fuelling resentment towards French authority. In this context, Catholic priests like Father Savina established upland missions, building a few churches in northern Vietnam which remain standing to this day. Over two decades, Savina (1924) achieved fluency in Hmong and became an indispensable ‘expert’
by interpreting, advising colonial policy as well as producing the first written account of Hmong history:

The Miao [Hmong] await a liberator, a king, a phao thay, as the Jews await a Messiah… As soon as a phao thay is announced somewhere, in China, in Tonkin, in Laos, they quickly take up arms and put themselves under his orders. What we call a revolt, they call ao phao thay, king-making. (Savina 1924, cited in Lee 2015: 19)

Interestingly, Vietnamese author Trần Hữu Sơn claims that Father Savina worked with colonial officers to create an evangelism strategy “aiming to appease and lull the Hmong people’s fighting spirit against the French” (Trần 1996: 178–9) in Lao Cai province, where civil unrest was widespread. However, only a small number of Hmong converted to Catholicism in a few locations; the vast majority of Hmong in Vietnam never met any missionaries and knew little-to-nothing about this Western religion. In recent years, Hmong Catholicism has undergone something of a revival (Ngô 2016: 27), although the numbers are now dwarfed by Protestant conversions. A more enduring legacy of Catholicism is the association of ‘the foreign cult of Jesus’ as a threat to Vietnamese sovereignty, liable to manipulation by powerful external forces (Taylor 2007: 43).

Of the several competing early nationalist groups, only the Indochinese Communist Party (later known as the Việt Minh national independence coalition), founded by legendary figure Hồ Chí Minh, overcame Vietnam’s traditional ethnic prejudices and harnessed highlander support through ‘nationalities policies’ (chính sách dân tộc) to mobilise anti-French activity (Mcleod 1999: 363). While the French-backed Thái strongmen opposed the Việt Minh, many disgruntled Hmong joined the cause with the promise of greater prosperity and political autonomy. After the victory of Điện Biên Phủ, the newly recognised Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) did indeed declare two autonomous zones in the areas where most Hmong lived (see Figure 3 above), however almost immediately the authorities ran into problems attempting to govern the highlands. Chronic famines combined with hypocritical policies towards widespread opium production, which was condemned as a ‘social evil’ but also taxed heavily, leading to further Hmong protests and millenarian activity in the late 1950s (Lentz 2017). This in turn prompted the ‘eliminate the bandits’ (tiễu phi) programme from 1950-78 which targeted alleged ‘counter-revolutionary’ activity in the Northern highlands, with Hmong people making up the majority of the thousands arrested (Ngô 2016: 28).

Earlier promises to respect the cultural and political autonomy of highland groups such as the Hmong soon faded with the consolidation of the new nation-state (Pelley 1998: 389). The so-called autonomous zones were quietly disbanded in 1975, reflecting the Kinh chauvinism inherent in most ethnic minority policies. Misguided and culturally destructive campaigns aimed at eradicating the ‘backwards customs’ (hủ tục lạc hậu) of non-Kinh people meant that becoming ‘socialist’ looked very similar to becoming ‘Kinh’ (McElwee 2004: 196). Despite communist rhetoric on the right for
each ethnic group to use its language in political, economic and cultural activities, minority languages have been marginalised, ignored and only sporadically taught at primary school level (Enwall 1995). The transformation of highlanders from pre-colonialism ‘barbarians’ to ‘younger brothers’ (anh em) in the postcolonial communist state reflects the reconstructed, but still hierarchical, notions of ethnicity (Pelley 1998). As McLeod notes, “any notion that highlander cultures are intrinsically valuable or that lowland Vietnamese might have something to learn from them cannot be found in the official literature” (1999: 370).

The implications of this section on my thesis are clearly important. Vietnamese rulers’ suspicion of Western religion, combined with a pejorative attitude towards highlanders, frames the especially aggressive responses towards Hmong Christian conversion (Chapter 4). Despite its officially atheistic stance, researchers have observed that the Vietnamese Communist Party has inherited “a Confucian worldview, a human-centric philosophy that is indifferent or hostile to ecstatic, magical or ostentatious expression and to alternative philosophies such as Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity” (Taylor 2007: 9). Moreover, the re-emergence of a neo-Confucian discourse in Vietnamese gender politics (see Chapter 6) underscores the enduring relevance of a cultural historical analysis.

**Borderlands and territorialisation**

As Figure 2 above shows, the majority of Hmong population live in upland areas near the borders of various Asian nation states. Historically, Scott conceptualises these highlands as ‘nonstate’ spaces, but it is more helpful to conceptualise them as ‘borderlands’ in the sense of territories claimed by multiple polities without clearly demarcated boundaries (Giersch 2006: 4). This geographical feature is not only key to understanding historical Hmong marginalisation and uprisings (Rumsby 2020) but also continues to profoundly affect political, economic and religious dynamics among Hmong communities in Vietnam to this day. To give just a few examples which will be expanded later in the thesis, the Vietnam-China border is a porous and oft-travelled crossing (both legally and illegally) for Hmong economic migrants (see Chapter 3) as well as aspiring missionaries and pastors looking for opportunities to proselytise or receive training (see Chapter 5), while large-scale migration of Hmong Christian asylum seekers to other Vietnamese border regions, Laos and Thailand have significant political ramifications (see Chapter 4). Therefore, borderlands and territorialisation are important lenses through which to understand the modern history of Vietnam’s northern highlands, while simultaneously challenging the ‘methodological nationalism’ at the core of social science disciplines (Wimmer and Schiller 2002) and attempting to ‘rescue history from the nation’ (Duara 1995).

Territoriality is the “attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area” (Sack
1983: 55). Based on this definition, Vandergeest and Peluso (1995) document how South East Asian states have used this technique of governance to include, exclude and control populations over the 20th century using borders, maps, land titles, protected forest and natural resource management, as well as everyday resistance to these techniques. In precolonial South East Asia, “state-building relied on a leader’s ability to maintain control over a population rather than over a geographic territory” (Duncan 2004: 6). Territorialisation commenced with colonialism as different powers competed to ‘discover’ and claim territory before land, resources and taxable populations were grabbed by rival states (Winichakul 1994). Later, the territorial administration became useful for postcolonial states to survey, census, sedenterise and assert control over people’s everyday activities (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995: 390). However, as with Scott’s Seeing Like a State (1998), state ambitions often ignore and contradict people’s lived experiences and histories of relationship to the land, leading to conflict, resistance and the need for state coercion.

The latest development in the history of Asian borderlands was a post-Cold War shift from the 1990s onwards, as border became more permeable, albeit selectively and unevenly: while their “role of protecting national sovereignty remained, they were no longer responsible for separating the ideological realms of socialism and the ‘free’ capitalist world… borders now also needed to facilitate exchange in the name of growth” (Saxer et al. 2018: 2). This has led to large-scale ‘distance-demolishing’ projects such as roads, special economic zones, mobile phone networks and technologies of surveillance in borders which, while creating “nodes of legibility and state presence… also increase the remoteness and illegibility of border areas outside their immediate scope” (2018: 4). Therefore, weak governance and illicit border activity are not a thing of the past but continue to be a source of anxiety and tension for central and local state authorities.

The logic of territorialisation in northern Vietnam is all the more salient in the context of complex and unstable Sino-Vietnamese relations. Traditionally Vietnam had been a tributary state to Imperial China, and the DRV was clearly influenced by Chinese communist policies, although Hồ Chí Minh’s land reform was not as ‘heaven-storming’ as Mao’s (Duiker 1977: 415). During the American war, the DRV received large sums of money, supplies and weapons from China, but in the 1970s Sino-Vietnamese relations broke down due to South China Sea island disputes and the exodus of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese from southern Vietnam, after state attempts to crack down on private trade (Owen 1993: 492). In 1979 China invaded Vietnam to ‘teach a lesson’ after Vietnamese troops toppled the China-backed Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; the conflict lasted just 2 weeks before China retreated but both sides suffered heavy casualties. In 1990 the collapse of the USSR, Vietnam’s most important ally, forced the latter to exit Cambodia and restore relations with China, after which bilateral trade has increased annually until present. However, since 2011 raised maritime tensions have stoked both anti-Chinese sentiment among the Vietnamese public, and discontent with their government’s impotence in the face of an increasingly assertive Chinese navy (Hayton 2014).
Throughout these upheavals, transnational groups living on both sides of the Sino-Vietnamese border, especially the highly mobile Hmong, have sometimes been viewed with suspicion as a potential fifth column. Many Hmong migrated to Vietnam during the extreme hardships of China’s cultural revolution in the 1950s and 60s, whereas since the 1990s more Hmong have been moving the opposite direction in response to improved living conditions in China (Enwall 1995: 2). Various measures have been taken in the attempt to sedentise the Hmong of Vietnam, not least by banning swidden or shifting cultivation – an important element of traditional Hmong agriculture, which is demonised as ‘backward’ and environmentally destructive (see Chapter 3). A supporting policy in the 1980s was named ‘move down the mountains’ (Hạ Sơn), forcefully relocating Hmong families from ‘undesirable locations’ – too near the border or too high altitude – to concentrated villages in lower areas (Ngô 2016: 32). After the 1979 invasion, many Hmong from borderland provinces were relocated further ‘inland’ towards the capital (Kou Yang 2008: 14); in fact, my interviewees declared that local authorities targeted only Hmong families with Chinese-sounding surnames for relocation, due to fears of their transnational connections!11

Unsurprisingly, these forceful territorialisation projects had negative impacts for many ethnic minority communities. Those who were settled in lowland areas with little fertile land or forest suffered from malnutrition and new diseases (Clarke 2001: 425), while simultaneously government-encouraged Kinh migration into the northern highlands has increased competition on resources for those who remained (Lundberg 2004). Further disruption ensued from the economic liberalisation policies following the 1986 ‘renovation’ (đổi mới) and the gradual ending of socialist economic structures and removal of subsidies, resulting into severe food shortages in upland Hmong society. Sowerwine (2004) sees a continuation of territorialisation logic – of making land and populations ‘legible’ – through the decollectivisation of cooperatives, the classification, allocation and titling of forest and agricultural land to individual households, and the liberalisation of domestic and foreign markets, creating new patterns of highlands investment. However, most Hmong experienced severe poverty into the late 1980s and early 1990s after subsidies were removed and continued to practise swidden farming in protected forests long after it was banned. Hmong migration south to the Central Highlands, a phenomenon starting in 1954 in response to the division of North and South Vietnam (Goscha 2016), peaked in the economic deprivation of the 1990s (Nguyen 2009, see also Chapter 4).

The development project

Territorialisation strategies across South East Asia – the enclosure of commons, construction of transport infrastructure to increase access, tightening of border controls, market expansion and promotion of nationalism through education and media – are often branded ‘development’, and

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11 Interview with Diu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
therefore seen as desirable (Li 2010). Beresford (2008) notes that the subsidies which poorer highland provinces receive from Vietnam’s central budget are “not purely redistributive and… may be more related to issues such as defence and integration of ethnic minorities” (2008: 237). Ten years ago the World Bank praised Vietnam for “leading the way in tackling poverty”, due to a “combination of spectacular growth with a limited increase in inequality” (Renwick 2011: 74). Nevertheless, concerns of increasing ethnic inequality have been raised since over half of those living below the poverty line are ethnic minorities, who only make up 14% of the population (Baulch et al. 2010). Back in 1998 Jamieson, Le and Rambo warned of a ‘development crisis’ in Vietnam’s highlands due to a combination of poverty, population growth, environmental degradation, social marginalisation and economic dependency. Critiquing large state-development plans as “based on false assumptions, stereotypes, and wishful thinking” (1998: 5) and bemoaning the lack of ethnic minority representation in decision-making positions, they called for a fundamental rethinking of development strategy, not unlike some post-development critiques seen in the previous chapter.

However, these calls have largely fallen on deaf ears in Vietnam: ‘national development’ remains the dominant paradigm as measured by a “high and increasing economic growth rate” (Le 2018: 94), influenced by a combination of socialist drives for industrialised modernity, (Post-) Washington consensus neoliberalism and East Asian models of state-led development (Vu 2010). On the ground in Vietnam’s highlands, development policies have been translated into a host of programmes including the promotion of fixed cultivation, introduction of new farming technologies and new crop varieties, improvement of irrigation systems, tax incentives to enter cash cropping, land privatisation, provision of credit and marketing support, promotion of migration to sparsely populated regions, state seizure and allocation of so-called ‘barren land’, prohibitions of deforesting, industrial exploitation of minerals and hydroelectricity, state-sponsored transport and provision of commercial goods, construction of roads, market buildings, health care centres, schools, provision of teaching materials and equipment, and so on (Chu 1995).

Many of these programmes have indeed contributed to increased food production and commercial activity, however the developmental impact on those most vulnerable to poverty has been mixed. Ethnographic research into the everyday politics of development reveals the connection between state-led development, borderland security and assimilation of ethnic minorities, while offering a clearer perspective of local responses. The benefits of several cash cropping development programmes have been largely reaped by immigrating ethnic Kinh lowlanders who had greater access to information and finance, while indigenous ethnic minorities were conversely subject to ‘development-induced displacement’ (Doutriaux et al. 2008) – especially in the Central Highlands. Land privatisation and state restrictions on use of forest land clashed with traditional practices and local understandings of communal land, and have therefore often been ignored or resisted by ethnic minority communities (Sowerwine 2004, McElwee 2011). Meanwhile, state-led projects rarely
consult local ethnic minorities and build physical markets in inconvenient or unwanted locations, leading to barren markets and wasted funds (Bonnin and Turner 2014: 330). Turner (2012b) even claims that low school attendance rate of Hmong children was an example of “subtle, under-the-radar forms of everyday resistance to full-speed market integration and the Vietnamese state’s ‘development’ ideals” (2012b: 416).

Another relevant case of the interplay between development and governance is found in Chaudhry’s (2016) ethnographic study of poverty reduction welfare support in a village near the China border, again in Lào Cai province. From a Foucauldian perspective, Chaudhry analyses state welfare support (primarily financed by the World Bank) as an increasingly important ‘technology of rule’, by encouraging local people to engage with the state and render themselves visible (or ‘legible’) for welfare eligibility. Apart from poverty reduction, another goal of welfare support is to ensure “that alternative centres of power and mobilisation around ethnicity – or religion in the case of the Hmông – do not develop” (2016: 230). However, this is hindered by nepotism whereby local officials do not always engage the chronically poor but allocate resources to relatives or more politically connected villagers. On a macro-level, Beresford (2008) corroborates that highland poverty reduction is hampered by corruption and lack of accountability in local authorities. This combination of top-down state interventions with government corruption, along with outsiders reaping the benefits of ‘development’ projects, contributed to an often tacit but salient disillusionment with the Vietnamese state which emerged from interviews across my fieldwork sites.

To summarise so far, narratives of Hmong history are characterised by poverty, marginalisation, intermittent conflict with lowlanders and expansionist state forces, forced migration and a prominent role of religion in social change and mobilisation. The historical development of the Vietnamese state has been heavily influenced by Chinese (especially Confucian) culture which contributed to a tradition of imperial control over the religious sphere, as well as ethnic chauvinism and condescension towards ‘uncivilised’ highlands people. Meanwhile, Catholic expansion and French colonialism reinforced Vietnamese hostility and suspicion towards Western religion. The 20th century has witnessed a pattern of increasing (though uneven) territorialisation of Vietnam’s highlands – starting with the colonial regime, continuing with its inheritors the Vietnamese Communist Party, and accelerating with market penetration since the 1986 renovation. Nevertheless, varied Hmong responses to state-led development projects confirm what Jonathan Rigg (2016a) writes about everyday negotiations of development policies in rural Vietnam and Thailand more broadly:

on the one hand, we see in the everyday actions of ordinary people an undoubted, irrepressible enthusiasm for modernization. But in the details of how they go about achieving this, we discern not a resistance to modernization but rather a resistance to the modernization project. (2016a: 27)
The Hmong Protestant explosion

This historical background sets the scene for the remarkable growth of Protestant Christianity among Hmong communities of upland Vietnam over the past thirty years, which can be understood in the convergence of complex and evolving cultural, political, economic and geographical dynamics. In the face of repeated attempts to categorise, assimilate, sedenterise, govern and ‘develop’ them, the Hmong of Vietnam are not passive subjects and have used their agency to engage or disengage with state forces and wider processes of politico-economic transformations in diverse, sometimes in unexpected (though not unprecedented) ways. The most extensive studies about Hmong Protestantism in Vietnam to date were undertaken by Dr Tâm Ngô, a Vietnamese anthropologist who was based at the Max Planck Institute, Göttingen. This section draws heavily from her excellent ethnographic research (Ngô 2009, 2015, 2016, 2010), which will continue to inform (and occasionally be challenged by) the following empirical chapters.

The first Protestant missionaries reached lowland Vietnam in 1911 through the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA), an evangelical and ecumenical organisation sending American, Canadian and European missionaries. Initially, CMA activity was restricted by wary French colonial officers and made slow progress during wartime, with under 100,000 believers by 1975, mainly in South Vietnam (Nguyễn 2005). The apolitical stance of the CMA-established Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) came under increasing pressure during nationalist and Cold War conflict, and in 1954 when Vietnam was divided into two states the majority of both Protestants and Catholics from the North migrated to the South, fearing further religious repression under Communist rule (Nguyễn 2008: 47). In the South, CMA missionaries sowed the seeds for significant Protestant conversion among some ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands (Salemink 2009), but never made contact with the Hmong in the North.

Instead, the catalyst came from the Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC), an evangelical radio network founded in the USA which airs programmes in many different languages, with the explicit aim of spreading the Christian message to the ‘least reached people’. FEBC had been broadcasting in Hmong-language since the 1960s, with Pastor John Lee as the main presenter in both Laos and later as a refugee in California, when recordings were then aired from a radio station in Manilla (Ngô 2016: 62). However, it was not until the late 1980s when Vietnamese Hmong listeners started tuning in, probably because only by the mid-1980s did cheap radios become available in the northern highlands through black market trade from China (2016: 49). As the only programme on air in Hmong language, listeners would hear about Vàng Chứ, a traditional Hmong name for God imbued with cultural and mythical significance, who loved the Hmong, had sent his son Jesus Christ “to save the Hmong from their sins and would some day return to earth to bring about a righteous kingdom” (Lewis 2002: 88).
The incredible popularity of FEBC radio broadcasts among the Hmong of Vietnam has been attributed to several different factors, and Christian research participants also gave a variety of spiritual and practical reasons for their own conversion. Ultimately, this thesis is primarily concerned with the subsequent impacts of Christianisation rather than the antecedent causes and motivations, but they are of course interrelated questions. As we have already seen, during the late 1980s the northern highlands witnessed increasing poverty: many informants remembered going hungry for several months in a year at the time.¹² In these desperate times, Ngô (2016) highlights Pastor John Lee’s ‘cultural innovation’ in tapping into Hmong cultural discourse to indigenise Christianity, such as using a traditional ballad style for learning biblical stories, or incorporating “details of Hmong legends and folkloric stories… used as references to explain the Bible” (2016: 45). Indeed, multiple authors have noted the apparently striking similarities between certain traditional beliefs and Protestant teaching: “[t]he eschatological message of scriptural Christianity mapped closely enough on Hmong millenarian beliefs that little adjustment was required” (Scott 2009: 320, also cf. Tapp 1989c: 99).

Meanwhile, government intrusions and disruption of Hmong communities, ethnic discrimination and unfulfilled promises for political autonomy had left a legacy of distrust and sometimes resentment towards the state. Salemink wavers between viewing Protestant conversion in Vietnam’s highlands as an attempt to create ‘autonomous space’ (2003), “a protest against the state and its dominant culture” (2009: 53) and “an exercise of human agency which is motivated as much by desire for modernity as by pressure from state and market” (2015a: 402). Internalisation of Kinh prejudices about traditional Hmong worldview as ‘superstitious’ (mê tín dị đoan), and the official undermining of many customs as ‘wasteful’ or ‘backwards’, arguably left a cultural void waiting to be filled (Ngô 2016: 115). My own fieldwork corroborates with others’ findings that the most common explanation given by Hmong Christians for conversion was “to escape poverty, a condition that was partly due to their costly traditional religious practices” (Ngô 2016: 104, c.f. Moua 1995). Analysing Protestantism across South East Asia, Keyes (1996) interprets conversion among tribal groups as a response to complex and multiple crises, not just at social and economic levels but also at a deeper, existential level, where “the practice of localized animistic religions is markedly disjunctive with the [globalised] world in which they now live’ (1996: 288).

In any case, FEBC programmes generated considerable excitement in Hmong communities, as listeners travelled from village to village telling friends and relatives to tune in to the radio station. As early as 1988, communist cadres were complaining that tens – maybe hundreds – of thousands of Hmong were now following the FEBC and becoming Christians (Ngô 2009). More alarmingly, millenarian rumours began to spread about the imminent return of Vàng Chứ, persuading many Hmong to travel long distances for gatherings, stop farming and sometimes sell possessions to pay

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¹² E.g. Interviews with Cai / Nhia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
for certain items or make contributions required for salvation (Ngô 2016: 84). Eventually, by the instruction of the FEBC broadcasts, isolated Hmong converts made contact with the ECVN in Hanoi and received more orthodox Christian teaching and literature, while others crossed borders to find Hmong Christian networks in China, Laos and Thailand, sometimes joined by Hmong missionaries from the USA (Ngô 2010). Official statistics on religious demographics are regarded as unreliable (Pew 2015), but contemporary estimates of Protestants – or followers of ‘the New Way’, as it is called in Hmong – range anywhere between 150,000 to 500,000 out of the 1.4 million Hmong in Vietnam (Ngô 2018).

Predictably, millenarian and transnational developments sent alarm bells ringing throughout Vietnam’s local and central authorities, and the resulting crackdown ranged from heavy-handed to brutal (Reimer 2011). After spending decades undermining traditional Hmong beliefs, new policies were implemented to ‘encourage’ Hmong Christians to renounce their faith and return to their old ways (Ngô 2016: 130); local highland cadres then took these protocols into their own hands, with numerous testimonies of serious religious persecution from Christian interviewees (see Chapter 4). Not only has conversion prompted government conflict, but it has also torn apart Hmong communities along religious lines, as Christians and non-Christians became estranged and alienated (Ngô 2015). While these tensions have certainly eased over time, a significant level of religious discrimination remains and it is still very difficult for new Hmong churches to be officially registered (Endres 2013: 342). Chung Van Hoang (2017) explores the state rationale for such religious restrictions and ‘interventions’, revealing “the state’s fear that it may lose the loyalty of the ethnic minorities” (2017: 5) to pastors and missionaries who hold more influence that local officials. Chapters 4 and 5 further expound on changing church-state relations and the rise of pastors as new elites.

Religious harassment has not had the desired effect of halting Christianisation; ironically, it appears that Protestant activity is most dynamic or “flared up” (Nguyễn, Q. H. 2015: 158) in places where social conflict is most intense, whereas less Hmong have converted where provincial authorities took a more relaxed approach.13 International Christian voices have blamed state persecutions for ongoing Hmong millenarian activity, such as the most recent large gathering at Mường Nhé in 2011 (Rumsby 2018). Another unintended effect is that tens of thousands of Hmong Christians have migrated south to the Central Highlands to avoid harassment, in a process compared to the “Exodus of the Israelites” (Nguyen 2009: 201). There they come into contact with other marginalised ethnic minorities, many of whom are also Christian; sometimes the migration sparks conflict over land and resources, other times new pan-ethnic Christian networks are forged (Ngô 2016: 118). Thousands more fled Vietnam to Laos or further afield; hundreds of Hmong Christians currently face destitution and an uncertain future in Bangkok, as they await asylum claims to be processed (see Chapter 4).

13 Interview with Anh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
Conclusion: thesis contributions and strange parallels

This chapter has covered the wide range of variegated historical, religious, political and geographical backgrounds necessary to understand Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam. Existing analyses on this contemporary phenomenon contain some prominent themes but also omissions which this thesis addresses. Chapter 4 gives a more detailed review of Vietnamese-language research produced within government research bodies and national universities which, as will be seen, is primarily descriptive of contemporary trends, or prescriptive regarding policy recommendations, but offers less analytical or theoretical depth. English-language research on this subject is much sparser: a few authors frame Hmong Christian activity through the lens of human rights and religious persecution (Lewis 2002, 2013, Denney 2006, Reimer 2011), with little to say about the infrapolitics, elite power struggles, profound socio-economic transformations or gender politics accompanying religious change. Salemink (2015a) hints at a ‘Weberian’ disciplining involved in upland Vietnamese Christian conversion, emphasising “not just religious devotion but frugality, literacy, numeracy” (2015a: 401), but does not develop this point.

Tâm Ngô’s (2016) ethnography of the intersection between religion and ethnicity is much more sophisticated, making a number of important contributions to our understanding of Hmong conversion. Firstly, she gives a detailed historical account of Vietnamese ethnic discrimination which has had such a destructive impact on Hmong social structure and alienated Hmong communities from national government agendas, arguably paving the way for Christian conversion. Secondly, she identifies the key role of the (also marginalised) US-based Hmong Christian diaspora in sending ‘remittances’ of faith and modernity, as well as the impact it has on the missionaries themselves. Thirdly, she brings a Foucauldian analysis to the new morality adopted by Christians, especially with regard to sexuality, arguing that strict Protestant teachings against premarital sex and polygyny constitute a new ‘technology of the self’ – although she does not reconcile this with an earlier claim about conversion being seen as empowering for Hmong women (2016: 109), something I grapple with in Chapter 6.

Nevertheless, there are some limitations to Ngô’s work which this thesis seeks to address whilst making its own unique contributions. Surprisingly, she references very little Vietnamese-language academic literature on Hmong Christianisation, thereby missing important insights on ‘official’ government perspectives and attitudes (see Chapter 4). Whilst ‘social conflict’ is a prominent theme in Ngô’s work – both church vs state and Christians vs non-Christians – she appears to play down the brutality of the Vietnamese authorities’ response by giving little space for the harrowing personal testimonies of human rights abuses which were very common during my interviews. Moreover, Ngō does not seek to conceptualise conflict within a wider framework; my Chapters 4 and 5 move beyond this through an everyday politics perspective, which enables us to take a
broader perspective and identify the varied and shifting strategies of both Hmong Christians and state actors. While Ngô discusses the pragmatic responses to economic crisis at the start of mass conversions, she pays less attention to the subsequent wide-reaching economic transformations and market expansion which is accompanying Hmong Christianisation (see Chapter 3), nor does she bring this phenomenon into discussion with debates about religion and development, or Pentecostalism and neoliberalism (see Chapter 1). Another contribution of this thesis is to consider the everyday political economy of the complex relationship between religious and economic transformations (see Chapter 7).

It is interesting to consider the ‘strange parallels’, to coin Victor Lieberman (2003), between mass A Hmao Christian conversion in Southern China at the turn of the 20th century and contemporary developments in Vietnam. The subjects of both phenomena were linguistically and culturally related – although indirectly, and there is no oral history of former Protestant conversion among the ancestors of today’s Hmong in Vietnam. Both groups lived in politically dispersed rural communities and have been the subject of ethnic discrimination, marginalisation, exploitation and military aggression from more powerful neighbours. Shared millennial legends of a former Hmong/Miao kingdom, a lost script for their language and the promise of a returning king influenced the collective consciousness of both groups. And the enthusiasm for Protestant Christianity at a time of crisis has been similarly remarkable, in spite of – or perhaps fuelled by – local opposition. Cheung’s observation that “the more severe the persecutions, the more energetically the Miao [in Guizhou] embraced Christianity” (1996: 325) could be applied equally to the Hmong in Vietnam.

The A Hmao also showed considerable agency in actively seeking out Baptist missionaries, as did the Hmong trying to make contact with wider Christian networks, and millenarian expectations of Christ’s imminent return also followed mass conversion among both groups (cf. Pollard 1919: 166). If these strange parallels can be extrapolated, it would be interesting to examine whether the politico-economic impacts of Christianisation among the A Hmao of Southern China will also apply to the Hmong of Vietnam in a comparable way. Will the promotion of literacy, schools and education also improve Hmong political and economic status in regional ethnic interactions? Will church administrative structures centralise Hmong political power and give pastors new positions of authority with which to stand up to oppressive external forces? And will Christianisation lead to a stronger (or different) sense of ethnic identity and greater representation or recognition at the level of state administration? These questions will be addressed in later chapters of this thesis.

Lastly, this chapter’s introduction of territorialisation has direct bearing upon later chapters. Bonnin and Turner (2014) argue that state enclosure of northern Vietnam “has involved market integration, replacing common property with private land use rights, pressing shifting cultivators to become
settled farmers, and the introduction of hybrid seed technology and cash cropping” (2014: 321). These policies can be considered to have a territorial logic if the purpose is to “ensure that economic activity [is] legible, taxable, assessable, and confiscatable or, failing that, to replace it with forms of production that [are]” (Scott 2009: 5). The next chapter explores how Hmong households and communities respond to these rapid economic changes through everyday livelihood choices, as well as introducing the three primary case study sites of my fieldwork.
CHAPTER 3 – Old and new precarities: Hmong livelihoods and Case Study Sites

The ‘everyday’ is not only a site of political struggle but of ongoing marketisation and economic transformations (Elias and Rethel 2016), which are not simply imposed on local communities but are embedded within different patterns of everyday social relations (Brenner et al. 2010). Conceptualising development as empowerment requires a detailed examination of livelihoods, since various ways of earning a living have different dynamics regarding sustainability, self-reliance, profitability and inequality (Thawnghmung 2019). Building on the historical background of the previous chapter, this empirical chapter provides a more in-depth analysis of the various contemporary livelihood options available to Hmong farmers, highlighting the changing economic dynamics and political structures accompanying Hmong Christianisation, as well as introducing the main case study sites where fieldwork was conducted. Precarity emerges as a recurrent theme of newer livelihood options in upland Vietnam, while traditional practices offer little prospect of improving living conditions.

In Chapter 1, poverty was understood as both residual – something to be measured in absolute terms – and relational, generated and reinforced by unequal power relations (Mosse 2010). Observing the political economy of various livelihoods sheds light on the options available to Hmong actors, the opportunities and constraints they face, and who are the winners and losers of economic transformation. This contextualises the processes of development, market expansion and state territorialisation within the central research questions, which later chapters build upon to explore the intersections of religious transformation with such processes. Key findings include: the growing importance of the cash economy which influences consumption habits and household division of labour (Chapter 6) while placing a premium on entrepreneurial business skills (Chapter 5); continued and increasing prevalence of economic migration, which overlaps with religious migration (Chapter 4); a shift of state policy away from welfare benefits and towards loans, with accompanying discourses of personal responsibility and ‘lazy poor’ (Chapter 7).

Chapter Outline

This chapter begins by introducing the everyday political economy of livelihoods and coping strategies in South East Asia, with Thawnghmung (2019) and Turner, Michaud and Bonnin (2015) as useful points of reference. Next, an overview of the three Case Study Sites, where I conducted the bulk of my fieldwork, shows the diversity of political and economic dynamics among Hmong communities even across a relatively small geographical area. The rest of the chapter outlines the most important rural livelihood options currently practised by Hmong communities in my fieldwork sites, with images included to familiarise the reader with the mundane practices, routines and choices which shape people’s lives. Situating the more traditional livelihoods including rice, maize, livestock and petty trade within local political economies shows that despite low profits,
they are by no means disappearing but being adapted to new technologies and shifting market demands.

The increasing relevance of marketisation is seen in more recent livelihoods options which offer the potential for much higher revenues, but with strings attached. Growing cardamom, flowers or other cash crops relies on unpredictable weather and market prices, tourism is only viable for those in the right place with the right skills, while hired labour wages come with a heavy physical toll and the threat of exploitation. ‘State livelihoods’, in the form of local authority employment and poverty reduction schemes, constitute the other major source of income for Hmong communities. This can be very important for upward mobility but is not equally available to all, since rare government job opportunities are hoarded by well-connected Hmong families and welfare benefits are also liable to nepotistic selection and exclusion. Government loans and sale of land are amongst the most precarious economic activities which are encouraged by marketisation and state policies, raising the question of neoliberalisation in upland Vietnam. The conclusion notes how many Hmong are eager to embrace cash economies even while inequalities are exacerbated by many, but not all, forms of marketisation. These inequalities give rise to a new ‘non-subsistence’ class formation who are best placed to take advantage of changing livelihoods.

**Everyday political economy of livelihoods**

As expounded in Chapter 1, an everyday political economy approach combines the ‘actor-centric’ dynamics of everyday politics with an ‘agency-centric’ analysis of “the broader cultural reconfigurations and logics of discipline that lead to the production of everyday life” (Elias et al. 2016: 252). Nevins and Peluso (2008) argue that South East Asia is the site of ongoing primitive accumulation and commoditisation, characterised by “market forces mediating an increasing amount of social life” (2008: 15) – although Vietnam’s socialist legacy complicates these trends (Trân 2008; see also Chapter 7). This chapter’s analysis of the mundane reveals the agency and tactics of Hmong communities in response to wider trends of market expansion, monetarisation, reduction of state welfare, as well as the broader reshaping of social relations and emergence of new rural class formations.

In her recently published *Everyday Economic Survival Myanmar*, Thawnghmung (2019) exemplifies an ‘actor-centric’ approach to livelihoods, researching how ordinary people try to get by in difficult conditions under a semi-authoritarian Burmese regime. Her framework brings together economic coping strategies with their political implications and their efficacy at individual and communal levels. Inspired by Kerkvliet (2009), her typology of everyday livelihoods runs across two axes: firstly, the everyday political positions vis-à-vis state structures of loyalty (supporting, accepting or not challenging the status quo), passive resistance (c.f. Scott 1989), voice (exerting pressure for political change), and exit (emigration). The second axis attempts to measure
whether such livelihoods are self-enhancing or self-defeating, whether they promote resilience or reliance, and the extent to which private gains come at the expense of public. Thawnghmung’s range of informal coping strategies range from home-based businesses, pooling resources, black market activity, tax evasion, reliance on religion, astrology, and so on. Instead of focusing on the rare cases of resistance, she argues that the majority of strategies pose little challenge to the political status quo:

“Everyday activities that involve patron-client relationships, compliance with the authorities, and exchanges within established networks tend to reinforce class and status differences and help perpetuate a political system in which inequality, dependency, and cronyism are endemic.”

(Thawnghmung 2019: 7)

This statement could just as easily describe Vietnam as Myanmar, although there is a normative assumption of democratisation as the ideal in Thawnghmung’s work which is not necessarily a helpful way of discussing everyday politics in Vietnam, where the Communist Party shows no sign of making any formal democratic concessions. Nevertheless, I utilise her expansive classification of ‘economic coping strategies’ beyond the formal sector to include state benefits, loans and selling lands as prominent forms of ‘livelihoods’. Closer to home, Turner, Michaud and Bonnin combine years of ethnographic experience to produce an everyday politics analysis of Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands (2015). Also taking an actor-oriented approach of creative adaptation and covert resistance, they highlight the importance of ‘frontier dynamics’ which simultaneously marginalise the Hmong from lowland economic prospects as well as connecting them to transnational opportunities; my fieldwork largely corroborates, but occasionally challenges or throws up new developments which they do not mention.

There are currently around 1.4 million people classified as Hmong in Vietnam, making them the 5th most populous ethnic group, according to the 2019 national census, with around 85% living in the seven North and Northwest mountainous provinces. An astonishing 70% of the Hmong population in Vietnam are under the age of 26, with a higher birth rate than the national average. They also have the highest poverty headcounts and lowest education levels of any ethnic group in Vietnam (Nieke and Luong 2013), with a strong correlation between the areas of highest Hmong population densities and highest poverty indicators (see Figure 4). Living in rural highland areas, the Hmong have traditionally practised a variety of livelihood strategies including shifting cultivation, growing wet and dry rice, maize and vegetables, rearing livestock, manufacturing textiles and distilling alcohol. According to Turner, Michaud and Bonnin (2015), the customary aim of this diversified approach is semi-subsistence, so more recent cash-cropping of opium (until it was banned), cardamom and hired labour has supplemented, but rarely replaced, existing livelihoods.

Figure 4: Topographic map of Vietnam (left), Hmong population and Case Study Sites (centre) and poverty levels (right) by province, based on 2009 census data (source: http://www5.worldbank.org/mapvietnam/, accessed 18/05/2020)
Case Study Sites

Since the prevalence of different livelihoods varied significantly from one area to the next, it makes sense to first describe the significant geographical, historical, political and socio-economic characteristics of the three official fieldwork sites in which I generated the bulk of my data. As explained in Appendix 2, there are good reasons to anonymise my data sources as far as possible for the wellbeing of those who participated in my research, therefore Sites and Villages are not named. The sites were over three hours’ drive apart in different districts (see Figure 4), with distinct political and economic contexts. At each Case Study Site, I would spend most of my time interviewing in one to three Focus Villages (see Figure 5 below), as well as meeting people from other villages during the course of the fieldwork.

Case Study Site 1 is a cluster of rural villages located at a high altitude about 30 minutes’ drive from a thriving tourist town in Lào Cai province. It has the coolest climate of the three Sites; temperatures range from 5-24°C, with humidity levels above 80% all year round and heavy rain from March through to November. Cement roads have been built from the main road to all villages in Site 1, however they are often too narrow for car access, and many are in dire need of repair. Houses are built on steep terrain, with 80-150 households in each village. Wealthy households tend to be next to the cement road and own rice terraces nearby, while less fortunate houses are situated up to a hundred metres away from a cement road up steep slopes which become muddy after rain and only accessible on foot. Although Villages A, B and C have distinct subcultures (with Village C also containing some ethnic Dao households) they share the common feature of being near enough to a major tourist hub to be indirectly affected, but too far to easily walk there and back (in a day) and directly access the tourist market without a motorbike. All three villages also have Christian minorities of between 15-40% of the population.

Despite French control of the district town in the colonial era, elderly inhabitants of Site 1 had no interaction with any French people, since Hmong communities at the time kept to themselves and tried to avoid nationalist conflict. Fresher in their memories was the 1979 Chinese invasion of Vietnam, during which many interviewees fled their homes and ran to the woods with whatever provisions they could muster, hiding there for several days until the coast was clear.15 Prior to the mid-1980s Đổi Mới economic reforms, many Hmong villagers from Site 1 worked on a socialist cooperative plantation which provided employers with rice and essential commodities. The ending of this cooperative brought not only widespread famine, as mentioned in Chapter 2, but also a chaotic power vacuum during which some households managed to seize large amounts of land, while other former plantation workers got nothing. It appears that one or two of the richest Hmong households at present have benefitted in this way. Nowadays, land is at a premium with more ethnic Kinh entrepreneurs setting up shop or big companies buying up land for tourism.

15 Interview with Cai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
development; one resident of the district town described Site 1 as a ‘honey pot’ which has attracted many ‘bees’ (i.e. lowlands business investors) who want to suck it dry (see more on tourism livelihoods below).\footnote{16 Interview with Binh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.}

Case Study Site 2 consists of the single remote Village D in Lai Châu province, an hour’s drive away from the nearest major urban centre. Also situated at a high elevation with steep terrain, it is more sheltered and slightly warmer than Site 1. Village D contains just over 100 households and, whilst there were other Hmong villages within a 30-minute drive, I did not have permission to conduct fieldwork there. It is just 10km away from the Sino-Vietnamese border and some villagers have taken this route into China by foot, despite there being no official border crossing. Until recently there was no cement road to the village, but in 2012 the villagers collectively mobilised and built nearly 5km of cement road down to the nearest main road, allowing car access and transforming the village economy (see Chapter 5). In 2015 it was given official status as a tourist site, allowing villagers to host domestic and international guests in homestays.

Before the eradication campaigns of the early 1990s, opium was grown here as in many Hmong villages throughout the Northern highlands. Even after production was banned Village D was notorious for opium, with a high proportion of interviewees declaring their former (or father’s) addiction.\footnote{17 Interviews with Chau / Hang / Pheng / Sang / Tu, Sa & Sinh; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} An online tourism article, written in 2017 from the patronising perspective of an ethnic Kinh government official, states the following:

Previously, [Village D] was a village always covered in [opium] smoke as all the men of the village shut their eyes and dreamt about fairies in paradise, wrapped in a quilt with a smoking pipe and oil lamp. Until the rice ran out, and the alcohol was finished. It was due to the mobilisation of the village elder and authorities that the village struggled together to abandon opium and clean up their village. The villagers’ income is primarily from cardamom and selling orchids. Now the people have added community tourism and services, as well as creating and selling ethnic products and handicrafts.\footnote{18 Author’s translation; website address is restricted for purposes of confidentiality.}

On the ground, however, this narrative of state-led development is flatly contradicted by the interviews of villagers who largely attribute rises in living standards to the role of pastor Ban and church activities in mobilising the (now Christian-majority) community. This contestation is examined further in Chapter 5 and is all the more important given that Village D is now the wealthiest Hmong village in Lai Châu, if not all of Vietnam’s northern highlands.\footnote{19 Interviews with Hang / Binh; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 23.}

Case Study Site 3 is in another district back in Lào Cai province, at a lower altitude and therefore with a warmer climate than Sites 1 and 2. The hills are not as steep and road quality is better;
cardamom cannot be grown here, so instead migratory labour in China is the most popular way of making a reasonable income (see below). While the nearby district town has a famous weekly market that draws in plenty of tourists, few of them leave the town to visit Villages E or F. As with Site 1, many Hmong villagers were working in social cooperatives prior to the economic reforms. Interviewees put forward divergent narratives as to how the land was allocated after cooperatives were disbanded: either equally between each household, or according to how many children each household had, or by drawing lots to see which household got the prime locations.20

Both Villages E and F of Site 3 are almost entirely ethnic Hmong with a few Kinh shopkeepers, but that is where the similarities end. Apart from being famous for its maize-distilled alcohol, Village E is unique in the unusually high number of inhabitants who have secured jobs in local, regional and even national-level state bodies. Of the 30 Hmong cadres I interviewed across all six Focus Villages, over 40% were from Village E alone (see Figure 10, end of chapter). Historically, households from Village E were among the first Hmong to join the Vietnamese Communist Party and sent soldiers south to participate in the wars for independence;21 their loyalty was rewarded with Party and government positions – one of the highest-ever ranking and most prestigious Hmong officials (now retired) is from Village E. These Party connections have earned Village E plenty of government-funded university scholarships for students, state funding through poverty reduction schemes and cadre salaries. On the flip side, local cadres are proud to declare that there are no Christian households, as families are forced into line by powerful and prestigious relatives; anyone who wanted to convert had to migrate out of Village E in order to avoid the threat of discrimination or persecution.22

In stark contrast Village F, just 30 minutes’ drive away on the other side of the district town, is around 80% Christian with only a few local cadres, and is significantly poorer that Village E. It still comes under the intense district-wide anti-Christian discrimination, making it a more hostile religious (and fieldwork) environment than in Case Study Sites 1 or 2. However, Village F lacks the historical legacy, government networks and nationalist spirit of Village E, therefore authorities were unable to prevent most Hmong from Village F from converting.

The variety of socio-politico-economic contexts across the three Case Study Sites allow for useful comparison and contrasts in the coming chapters with two Christian-majority villages, three Christian-minority villages and one completely non-Christian village (see Figure 5). Because official statistics on religious demographics among the Hmong are wildly inaccurate, it is difficult to know to what extent these Focus Villages represent the distribution of Hmong Christians across Vietnam’s highlands – I suspect that on a national level there is a greater proportion of Hmong villages with most or no Christians, and fewer Christian-minority villages.

20 Interviews with Co / Kia & Bao / Lan; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
21 Interview with Lu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
22 Interviews with Dua / Ho / Ngoc; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
In addition to sharing an unusual proximity to the tourism industry, Hmong communities have also lived in all three Case Study Sites for a long time (at least a hundred years) as opposed to many other Hmong villages which have been established from more recent migration or forced resettlement. This brings into question how representative my fieldwork is, since newly established Hmong communities have tended to be poorer, experienced more social unrest and more likely to convert to Christianity en masse (Ngô 2015: 282). Unfortunately, for these same reasons it proved impossible to secure research access to such locations, limiting the generalisability of specific research findings. Nevertheless, the triangulation between the in-depth, ethnographic analysis of Case Study Sites and broader interviews and focus groups with an extra 75 Hmong interviewees from across 11 provinces (see Appendix 1 Figure 24) enables me to at least posit trends which are likely to be relevant at the national level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Site</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
<td>Lào Cai</td>
<td>Lai Châu</td>
<td>Lào Cai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altitude</td>
<td>1300m</td>
<td>1400m</td>
<td>1000m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel time to nearest town</td>
<td>30 mins drive</td>
<td>60 mins drive</td>
<td>15 mins drive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance to Chinese border</td>
<td>30km</td>
<td>10km</td>
<td>60km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Majority Hmong, some Dao in Village C, a few Kinh settlers</td>
<td>Hmong only</td>
<td>Almost all Hmong, a few Kinh settlers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary livelihoods</td>
<td>Rice, maize, livestock, orchids, cardamom, peach trees, hired labour, artichoke, cabbage, homestays, souvenirs</td>
<td>Rice, maize, livestock, orchids, cardamom, peach trees, hired labour, market, homestays</td>
<td>Rice, maize, alcohol, livestock, cassava, cinnamon, buffalo trade, plums, migratory labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism impact</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Growing</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates of fieldwork</td>
<td>Sept 2016, Jan 2017</td>
<td>Sept 2016, Jan 2017</td>
<td>Feb 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of interviews</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus villages</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Christian villagers</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 5: Summary of Case Study Sites and Focus Villages*

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23 These percentages are ballpark figures estimated by the villagers themselves, since official statistics on ethnic minority religious demographics are unreliable.
Rice and technological advance

Historically, the Hmong have practised shifting cultivation to grow rice and maize, their primary subsistence crops. Also known as swidden or (more pejoratively) ‘slash and burn’, Scott labels this technique as ‘escape-agriculture’ (2009: 190), pointing out its suitability for highly mobile societies who may wish to avoid state legibility or migrate from away from conflict, as did the Hmong who left Southern China into South East Asia over several generations (see previous chapter). For these reasons among others, shifting cultivation has been stigmatised as backward or environmentally destructive – although the evidence for this is contested (Corlin 2004) – with official Vietnamese rhetoric viewing it as a ‘primitive’ stage of production, influenced by a socio-evolutionary Marxist-Stalinist ideology (Fox et al. 2009: 307). According to the 1991 Forest Law, smallholders are allowed to manage upland or forest land, but this right can be revoked if smallholders use the plot for swidden. In spite of decades of sedenterisation policies and campaigns, shifting cultivation is still practised by some Hmong communities in very remote regions such as Mường Nhé, Điện Biên province, but not in any of my Case Study Sites. State territorialisation policies have not succeeded in preventing Hmong mobility, as seen by transnational economic and religious migration (see below and Chapter 4). Nevertheless, for the majority of Hmong in Vietnam, the most important means by which peasants escaped poverty or marginalization in the past has disappeared: peasants can no longer migrate to open up new land for agriculture because the agricultural frontier has been closed by prior waves of rural-rural migration combined with the intensification of forest protection against new peasant occupations across most of the region. (Rigg and Vandergeest 2015: 34)

24 Interview with Binh; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Although shifting cultivation is very much associated with the Hmong throughout Asia, wet rice cultivation has also long been practised by Hmong communities, for hundreds of years at least in China (Culas and Michaud 1997: 217). Wet rice cultivation is more productive than swidden or dry rice cultivation, however it requires more water and flatter terrain, which is rare in Vietnam’s Northern highlands. In some areas, therefore, Hmong farmers have fashioned elaborate rice terraces to maximise wet rice cultivation on their steep plots of land (see Figure 6). Whilst much more difficult and time-consuming to manage – and less productive – than flat rice paddies, these terraces are considered beautiful and have become a crucial part of the iconic scenery of some tourist areas, including in Case Study Site 1.

One significant development in upland rice cultivation has been the introduction of a new strain of rice, usually referred to by research participants as ‘Chinese rice’. Previously, Hmong farmers used a local variety of rice which had a distinctive flavour but yielded small harvests. Since the 1990s, state development initiatives have encouraged farmers to use a more productive rice strain, initially by giving away rice seeds (but not anymore). Turner and Bonnin (2012) made much of the reluctance of Hmong farmers to give up the old variety of better-tasting ‘Hmong rice’. They point out how the new strain requires new seeds and fertiliser to be bought every year, unlike the self-replicating old variety, implying that the new strain may be unsuitable for Hmong farmers on a low income: “farmers were often discouraged by this need for increased upfront financial and physical capital investment due to the risks involved” (Turner and Bonnin 2012: 291). This cash requirement to buy new rice seeds coincides with the market expansion and monetarisation of upland Vietnam in the name of ‘development’, which Hmong farmers could ‘quietly challenge’ by continuing to grow old varieties of rice (Turner et al. 2015: 57).

However, just a few years on, my fieldwork results contrast markedly from this argument: I couldn’t find any household in my Case Study Sites which was still growing traditional ‘Hmong rice’. Furthermore, interviewees unanimously agreed that the higher-yield ‘Chinese rice’ was a positive intervention – often considered the most important factor to livelihoods improvement – not a ‘last recourse’ as claimed by Turner et al (2015: 53). Whereas previously households with small plots of land couldn’t grow enough traditional rice to feed their families and had to buy extra rice from the market, the introduction of ‘Chinese rice’ doubled, trebled or even quadrupled yields, boosting most households into self-sufficiency in terms of rice production.25 Pao from Case Study Site 1 describes the spiral of debt and poverty which used to beset poorer households who had little land and were not self-sufficient in food production, having to borrow rice from richer households:

> But then when it was planting time, you couldn’t work at home [to plant your own rice] because you had to work for them to pay them back. So, for instance for 2 bags of rice you had to pay 6-7 [days of] labour. If you worked for 2 or 3 families, you would almost miss the planting time so when you

25 Interview with Ly; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
planted your own, the productivity was not much, so you couldn’t harvest much, so you became even poorer… 10 years ago, the people were poor, because they had little land, so each year they reaped just 10 bags of rice, and they (the rich) got 80-90 bags of rice, so they had enough to eat, but not us.26

Inequality was perpetuated by the traditional technology hierarchy whereby rich households with a buffalo could plough and plant crops early, while poor households had to then borrow the tiring buffalo who would work slower and less efficiently, causing the poor to plant crops late and thus reap a smaller harvest: “if you did hired labour, you spent all your energy on them. So each day you got poorer, and if they’re rich then each day they get richer”.27 However, nowadays the availability of affordable mechanised ploughs reduces the workload and need for villagers like Pao to depend on, and borrow from, richer households. Therefore, on a local level, new rural technologies can be argued to have reduced inequality by enabling households with small plots of land to become self-sufficient, avoid borrowing rice and becoming indebted to richer households. Of course, those with large plots of land could produce even more rice with the new hybrid seeds but selling surplus on the market generates little profit, so they tend to use extra land for other livelihoods described below.

While Turner and Bonnin (2014) focus on the apparent reluctance of Hmong farmers to adopt a monetarised form of rice production, my fieldwork shows the potentially empowering results of this change – which research participants in my Case Study Sites have not resisted, but rather embraced. This is perhaps a controversial claim within development studies literature which emphasised the inequalities of the so-called ‘Green revolution’ and new intensive farming technologies (Junankar 1975, Dhanagare 1987). However, in this case it is worth stressing the potential of new rice hybrids to enable household self-sufficiency in upland areas – apparently also evident in Southern China (Ding et al. 2011). On the other hand, while soil exhaustion or erosion following the adoption of hybrid rice and more intensive fertiliser use was not mentioned by Hmong interviewees, the long-term environmental sustainability of this crop in Vietnam’s highlands is subject to some debate (Tran and Nguyen 2009, Dang and Duong, Ngo Thanh Trung Hoang 2008).

**Diminishing traditional livelihoods**

Whilst rice will continue to be grown by the majority of Hmong households in the near future, other traditional livelihoods are becoming less popular in the face of both marketisation and religious change. Maize, or corn, is another staple crop grown by Hmong farmers in all three of my Case Study Sites. Maize production requires less water (but just as much physical labour) than rice paddies do, so it is usually grown on less fertile ‘mountain land’ further uphill from the villages.

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26 Interview with Pao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
27 Interview with Pao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
After harvesting and threshing (see Figure 7), maize can be pounded into powder and used to make paste or dough to eat, but this is a last resort during famines when there is no rice to eat. In normal times, the primary use of maize is as animal feed for the household’s livestock. Surplus maize can be sold on the market, but the maize prices are even lower than rice, so earnings are very meagre.

In Village E alcoholic spirit, distilled from the maize husks, was a livelihood for most households. Whilst every non-Christian household needs a supply or alcohol for welcoming guests and to use during festivals or rituals, many people also take it to local town markets to sell for up to 20,000VND ($1) per litre – this has steadily dropped to a paltry 10,000VND ($0.50) in recent years. Home-distilled Hmong alcohol from Village E is considered a speciality and is bought up by Kinh wholesalers to sell for up to 130,000VND ($6.50) per litre, however the Hmong suppliers still only receive 10-12,000VND ($0.50-0.60) for their labour (Turner et al. 2015: 101). When I asked why they continued to sell alcohol at prices they acknowledged to be extremely low, interviewees replied that they already had the maize husks as a waste product, so they might as well use them to distil alcohol.28

The Hmong are also renowned for home-distilled rice wine. However, in a 2015 tourist news report the author noted with surprise that Village D (Case Study Site 2), which used to be called a ‘rice wine heaven of Northwest Vietnam’, had undergone a radical transformation with villagers unanimously determining to stop alcohol production. The report attributed this to the “resolute mobilisation and struggle of Ban, the most prestigious person in the village… turning their village into a ‘clean’ Hmong village, using community tourism development to escape poverty and rise into riches”.29

28 Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
29 Author’s translation; website address is restricted for purposes of confidentiality
is in fact the church pastor, a powerful new Christian elite (see Chapter 5). Although rice wine was probably a rather marginal contribution to livelihoods, this is nevertheless a preliminary glimpse of the material impact of Christian conversion on Hmong livelihoods and, consequently, local political economies.

Virtually every Hmong household I entered kept livestock of some sort, usually a few chickens and a pig. Most interviewees did not consider livestock as a way of earning an income, since they bred them in order to eat or sacrifice throughout the year – a pig is needed for new year festivities – and only sold them in emergency situations. More wealthy households have several chickens and pigs (and thus eat more meat), while a few entrepreneurs have stables to breed dozens of them commercially. Other animals like ducks and goats were rarer. Villagers from Case Study Site 2 used to keep horses to help with transport before the main road and motorbikes were introduced, while a disbanded socialist cooperative farm in Site 1 had unsuccessfully tried to breed cows in the high altitudes.30 The profitable salmon farms in Site 1 were owned exclusively by migrant ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority) businessmen.

Water buffalo hold an important place in both Hmong livelihoods and culture. As mentioned above, buffalo have traditionally been used to plough crop fields and are still more effective than machines for negotiating difficult terrain. Animist households continue to sacrifice buffalos at funerals and other important ceremonies (despite this ‘wasteful’ practice being banned by the authorities), and they are widely regarded as evidence of wealth and prestige with a high resale value (Turner et al. 2015: 63). Case Study Site 3 was located nearby to a major buffalo market, so several villagers there earned a living by trading buffalo (see Figure 8). For those who had the assets, this trade could be quite lucrative: for instance, Dua’s father could buy a buffalo for 35 million VND ($1750), rear it for 6 months and then sell it on for 40-42 million ($2000-2100).31 However, in recent years buffaloes were fetching lower prices: apparently demand has dropped after Sino-Vietnamese relations have soured since 2014 (Le 2017), which deterred Chinese traders from crossing the border.32

Several interviewees complained that, unlike rice production, rearing livestock was now more difficult, for a few reasons. Firstly, diseases and infections are more common than before, requiring the purchase of various vaccinations which by no means guaranteed the survival of the animals.33 Secondly, farmers must now keep constant watch of their livestock and can no longer allow them to roam freely as before, since land has become scarcer due to population growth and land being purchased by outside companies.34 Moreover, while market expansion has made livestock trade more convenient for the average Hmong household, it has also somewhat undermined the cultural

30 Interview with Cai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
31 Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
32 Interview with Do; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
33 Interview with Thao & Quoc; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
34 Interview with Keo; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
importance of owning a buffalo, since they can now be easily bought with cash if necessary. And as mentioned above, new farming technology has rendered the buffalo’s ploughing strength non-essential, though still desirable.

Semi-subistence Hmong communities have never existed in complete isolation but rather have engaged in petty market trade for centuries (Turner et al. 2015). A minority of female interviewees formally rented stalls to sell textiles or fruit and vegetables at daily or weekly markets in nearby district towns. Many more would come less regularly and sell livestock or seasonal vegetables and peach trees outside of the official market space. Hmong traders in Case Study Site 1 reminisced how market trading was easier in the past, when tourists were coming up to Vietnam’s highlands for the first time and bought more (see below); nowadays, the competition is greater, with ethnic Kinh vendors also selling fake ‘ethnic’ clothing and souvenirs (Rumsby 2017). One household in Village E ran a tiny convenience store selling petty commodities from a shed outside the house; in other villages, Kinh newcomers have seized this opportunity to sell petty commodities to the Hmong.

Unusually, Village D has established its own weekly market from scratch in 2013 (see Chapter 5); unlike district markets, the majority of vendors in this village market were Hmong locals, with a few outsiders also renting stalls. Hmong vendors I interviewed there said that market trade income was rather modest, and that selling wares at larger urban markets downhill was the only way to make a living exclusively from this business. Nevertheless, the village market remains a popular

35 Interview with Sua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
36 Interview with Bau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
place to trade at for social as much as economic reasons, with a couple of villagers also running
breakfast stalls on market day. Furthermore, the market serves a secondary function to boost
tourism, as it has become a tourist attraction in its own right with various games and music playing
alongside the stalls. In return, market vendors indirectly benefit from growing tourism by gaining
more customers, and even villagers who have neither market stalls nor homestays may be able to
sell the odd chicken or pig to visitors.37

Cash crops and precarity

As traditional livelihoods become less desirable, government policies have introduced new cash
crops (Chu 1995) and also encouraged intensifying production of traditionally cultivated plants.
Cardamom has been collected for centuries, but since the 1990s Hmong in upland Vietnam and
China have started to plant it as a cash commodity in response to sharp rises in demand (Turner et
al. 2015: 110). Because cardamom thrives in cool, humid conditions with plenty of shade, many
Hmong farmers in Case Study Sites 1 and 2 plant them uphill in their ‘mountain fields’ under tree
cover. Sometimes cardamom is illegally grown on land designated as ‘national forest’, which has
generated conflict with local authorities who accuse the Hmong of deforestation (Sowerwine
2004). Villages B, E and F are too far from high altitude land to grow cardamom. During the
harvest time at the end of Summer, gatherers must work every day and stay up in the mountain
fields for several days (see Figure 9).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Prepare for Hmong New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Recover from New Year; prepare corn and rice fields</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>Prepare fields for corn and plant fields at end of month; prepare rice fields and sow nurseries of rice seedlings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Prepare rice fields; start transplanting rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Transplant rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Complete rice transplanting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>Check cardamom fields; harvest hemp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>Check cardamom fields; harvest corn; pick indigo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Harvest and dry cardamom; start to harvest rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Harvest rice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Complete rice harvest; collect firewood; prepare clothes for New Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Collect firewood; prepare clothes for New Year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Typical seasonal labour calendar for Hmong households with rice as their core crop, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam. (Source: Turner et al. 2015: 41)

Cardamom has provided a modest yet significant income for Hmong communities, especially for
wealthier households with more land to use and therefore higher yields. At 400,000VND ($20) per
kilogram of dried cardamom, annual yields could range from $800 up to $10,000 – although
Hmong profits paled in comparison to those of Kinh middlemen and merchants further down the

37 Interview with Vang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
commodity chain (Turner et al. 2015). In addition to the legal risks of informal land use and cases of cardamom being stolen from each other’s fields, in 2015 a freak winter brought heavy snow which settled all over Vietnam’s northern highlands, killing the cardamom and wiping out the harvest for that year. Moreover, it would take another 2 to 3 years for newly planted cardamom to regrow and reach the same yields of previous years. Many Hmong decided to replant due to the continual high demand, but some have been intimidated by the apparently increasingly common weather risk and look to other cash crops.38

A new option which has not been historically grown among the Hmong is seasonal flowers. Much has been written about issues of economic insecurity, health and safety, gender inequality and union representation within the more established cut flower industries in Kenya, Ecuador and Columbia (Hale and Opondo 2005, Patel-Campillo 2010, Riisgaard and Gibbon 2014, Mena-Vasconez et al. 2016), but the political economy of Vietnam’s rapidly growing flower supply chains remains largely unexplored. While international export of flowers is dominated by ethnic Kinh businesses in Dalat (Central Highlands), seasonal flowers have emerged as a popular cash crop option for Hmong households selling to the domestic market, especially boat orchids (hoa đìa lan or hoa phong lan). Because these orchids bloom at the end of winter, it has become a fashionable commodity for Vietnamese (lunar) New Year, so ethnic Kinh wholesalers and individuals will come to the village to haggle for them with Hmong villagers.

Orchids are also negatively affected by extremely cold weather and heavy rain; they don’t die, but flowers will be smaller. They require far less land than cardamom, but more maintenance. Like cardamom, orchids take at least two years to grow before producing saleable flowers, so both cash crops are a long-term investment. Several Hmong interviewees in Case Study Sites 1 and 2 plant orchids in large pots near their houses, preferably at a raised height (see Figure 10). Buffalo manure can be used as fertiliser, but orchids requires significant initial investment (relative to the average Hmong household income) for the seeds, even for small-scale production. In addition, regular pruning is necessary in order to keep the plants in good health, so households owning land near the village have a distinct advantage. Cai from Village A had no land near his home so tried planting orchids in his field further away, but he was unable to prune his plants often enough; as a result, they were attacked by pests and at the New Year period he was only able to sell 2 out of 50 plants.39

Orchid prices vary massively depending on flower quality, market demand and bargaining ability: interviewees reported selling a bunch of flowers from as little as 15,000VND ($0.75) up to a high of 300,000VND ($15) a few years back. Of course, growers would rather sell the entire plant, which can range between 200,000-10 million VND ($10-500). Some wealthier households could make 100 million VND ($5000) over a successful new year, although most made much smaller

38 Interview with Cau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
39 Interview with Cai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
incomes due to having smaller flowers or being unable to sell all their plants. In addition, reported market prices have notably declined in the past year or two, probably due to a surge of supply since Kinh businessmen have also invested in growing huge numbers of orchids, as well as an influx of ‘genetically modified’ orchids being imported from China. Therefore this is a potentially profitable but risky market, in which the Hmong might soon lose their niche.

Another seasonal flower grown in Case Study Sites 1 and 2 is the peach tree, an essential decoration for Kinh households celebrating Lunar New Year. In the weeks approaching new year, Hmong farmers from Site 1 would cut off large branches with peach blossom and take them up to the main roads and town market to sell, usually transporting them by motorbike (see Figure 11). During my fieldwork, the market supply appeared to be oversaturated with many people being unable to sell many branches; nevertheless, those with good peach branches could make 4-10 million VND ($200-500) over the new year. As with other cash crops, Hmong producers only see a fraction of the commodity chain profits; they could a large single peach branch for 500-850,000 VND ($25-45), but by the time it reaches Hanoi it may be bought for up to 15 million VND ($750). On the other hand, in Site 2 peach trees were primarily grown as a tourist attraction, to enhance the village scenery – so they didn’t transport peach branches to sell anywhere, but some tourists still came to the village to buy them.

In addition to cardamom and seasonal flowers, other cash crops included artichoke, cabbage, bananas (at lower altitudes) and cassava – but the market prices for these commodities were not

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40 Interview with Sy; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
41 Interview with Binh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
42 Interview with Cho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
high enough to entice many Hmong farmers. In Village E, plums were once grown in large numbers but the supply became so great that the price crashed to just 200VND ($0.01) per kg, at which point many Hmong sellers understandably just chopped down their plum trees in frustration.\textsuperscript{43} The price has recovered somewhat to 15-20,000 VND ($0.75-1.00) currently, although the few who still sell plums worry about the possibility of another crash if more people re-enter the market. Two entrepreneurial young Hmong men from Village E were experimenting with macadamia nuts and guavas respectively; they were both educated and from families with strong government connections, with enough assets to pay the initial investments and the confidence to take a risk. Only a few households grew cinnamon, which is more profitable but requires a large area of land and takes 15 years for the trees to grow and make a return on investment. Lastly, for Hmong communities who have migrated south to the Central Highlands (see Chapter 4), coffee is a major cash crop which cannot be grown in the warmer climates of the Northern highlands where my Case Study Sites were located.

\textit{Figure 11: Hmong men waiting to sell peach branches at the nearest main road, Case Study Site 1}

What all cash cropping livelihoods share in common is their precarious nature, which is inherent to the risky nature of cash crop specialisation and intensification – putting all your eggs in one basket, in contrast to traditional diverse livelihoods – and is also being experienced in other parts of upland South East Asia (Kusakabe and Myae 2018). Whereas many crops have traditionally been grown by Hmong as a small part of a diverse semi-subsistence household economy, the rise of the cardamom and flower industries in particular are symptomatic of the ever increasing marketisation and commodification of rural livelihoods. Proposing a generalised model of ethnic minority

\footnote{43 Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.}
poverty reduction and socio-economic development in Vietnam, Wells-Dang (2012a) argues that cash-cropping has in fact been an important first step for many successful households to intensify agricultural commodity production – but this must be followed by subsequent diversification and consolidation through investing in education for the next generation (2012a: 2). One possible route to diversification for some Hmong communities is tourism.

**Tourism opportunities**

Tourism is a recently emerging livelihood option for those located on the tourist trail with the capital and knowledge to take advantage of it. International backpackers have been visiting Vietnam’s northern highlands for over two decades, and more recently numbers of domestic tourists have exploded due to the growth of Vietnam’s middle class with disposable income for travel. All three of my Case Study Sites were more or less affected by tourism which is unrepresentative of the general Hmong population of Vietnam, most of whom live a long way from tourist destinations and cannot access these opportunities. This fieldwork bias is largely because local authorities in tourist areas are more used to non-national visitors, thus making it possible for me to secure research access (see Appendix 2). Nevertheless, even within Case Study Site 1, which has become a centre for tourism, the majority of households do not directly benefit from tourism and rely primarily on other livelihoods.

Avenues for Hmong to carve out a living from tourism include tour guides, homestays, sale of souvenirs and food services – among which, like many livelihoods (see Chapter 6), a clear gendered division of labour is obvious. Duong’s (2006) ethnography on female Hmong tour guides shows the gender-empowering possibilities as young women and girls engage with modernity, travel more widely, teach themselves foreign languages from conversing with tourists, build social capital and earn money independently, thereby raising their status within their households and villages. Being a tour guide is seen as desirable since it involves no heavy physical labour; even trekking for hours is light work compared to back-breaking toil out in the fields.

Hmong tour guides can either work independently or get customers through a hotel or travel agency. In the latter case, they may get paid around 200-300,000VND ($10-15) per day, and hope for tips from the tourists after a long day of trekking and some complimentary rice wine. Guides who work independently must find their own customers, either by accosting them on the streets of tourist towns or increasingly through online advertising. Two of the most successful tour guides I interviewed, both Christians, had their own Facebook pages and promoted their tourism services primarily in Hmong language, targeting the Hmong diaspora in wealthy countries like the USA, Australia and France. They offered full tour packages, meeting tourists at the city airport and organising journeys not just to Hmong-inhabited highlands but the other major tourist sites of

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44 Interviews with Phu/Thao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Vietnam such as Halong Bay. More costs and better connections were required to pull this off, but obviously the profits were much higher.

Another option for those with significant resources is to build – or convert their own house into – a homestay (see Figure 12). In Case Study Site 1, the flood of domestic tourists is turning the district town into a crowded, noisy and dirty urban sprawl with more and more Kinh-owned hotels popping up to satisfy the demand. This ‘development’ has deterred many international tourists, who are willing to travel to more remote villages and get a more ‘authentic’ experience, offering a niche for Hmong and Dao homestays to take advantage of – if they can make contact with the customers. At the going rate of 70,000VND ($3.50) per night, it would take most likely take several years for an average homestay to repay the 100-200 million VND ($5-10,000) cost of building a ‘modern’ house with flushing toilet and hot water facilities. On the other hand, many Hmong homestay owners did not make decisions purely based on return of investment, because it was also a common aspiration (and marker of prestige) to build and live in a new home. When guests came, the family would simply move next door to the old house for a few nights, or however long the tourists stayed for.

Homestay owners I interviewed in Villages A and C only saw guests sporadically, since the foreign tourists usually went to neighbouring Dao homestays recommended by the ethnic Dao guide. This gives the (mostly female) tour guides considerable power as brokers, so homestays or restaurants who want to attract guests need good relationships with the guides – or to pay them a small commission. In contrast, a rather centralised method of allocating guests has been attempted in Village D, where tourism is growing rapidly: 6 out of 103 households had homestays and a further 12 were in the process of building them. Most tourists thus far had lodged with the two most well-connected individuals, village elder Chu and pastor Ban (see Chapter 5), who had already built their reputations as amenable hosts. However, Ban claimed that at a recent village meeting it had been decided that, from now on, guests should be shared evenly among the 6 completed homestays for the sake of fairness.45 How successful this initiative is remains to be seen, but at any rate this level of economic cooperation was unique to Village D.

Those with more limited resources or connections could engage with tourism in smaller interactions which earned less money. The district town of Case Study Site 1 was inundated with Hmong street hawkers trying to sell souvenirs such as textiles, bags and knives. With the help of a local charity, one household had converted their house into an ethnic handicrafts shop, where tourists trekking through the village were invited to stop for refreshments, and to view and try their hand at a traditional Hmong weaving machine. The products on sale were made by neighbours; the shop owners would take a 20-40% commission on whatever was sold and pay the rest to the

45 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
neighbour.\textsuperscript{46} Other tourism services include food and refreshments provision, but in Case Study Site 1 the competition is stiff due to ethnic Kinh investors who set up shop in the highlands and can afford to sell food at low prices.\textsuperscript{47} It is much easier for those who live directly beside a main road to set up a restaurant in their homes, giving them flexibility to cook and sell food when tourists turn up, while engaging in other livelihoods if there is no demand.

As Robinson argues, “new productive activities and social relations may bring gains to some groups caught up in changing structures and disadvantages to others” (2008: 140). The impact of tourism development in upland Vietnam is somewhat similar to Ferguson’s (2011) findings in Central America, whereby “changes have to a certain extent destabilised traditional gendered power relations, leading to increasing empowerment for certain groups of women within the home and wider society” (2011: 348, see also Chapter 6). However, as she also observes, such gains occur at the same time as increasing differentiation along other vectors of inequality including geography, ethnicity and social connections. The majority of Hmong who fall outside those vectors are left behind with more gruelling livelihood options.

\textsuperscript{46} Interview with Du & Pha; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\textsuperscript{47} Interview with Cang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Hired labour options

While only around 15% of Hmong interviewees were involved in the tourism sector, about half of the households in my Case Study Sites contained one or more hired labourer. As mentioned above, indentured labour in exchange for rice between Hmong households is not a new phenomenon, but the expansion of road networks and increasing availability of motorbike transport has connected Hmong villagers to external demands for wage-paid labour. It is quite surprising that Turner et al (2015) do not mention this livelihood option at all in their research, given its prominent and growing relevance across all three of my Sites. For most people, ‘hired labour’ (làm thuê) involves manual labour on building or road construction sites, hoeing, weeding or harvesting on larger farms or plantations. A less strenuous option for those with foreign language skills is to work for a hotel, restaurant or tourist shop in the nearby district town, or to work as a security guard, taxi or coach driver, but these opportunities were rare.

The majority of hired labourers could not find stable, regular work but instead responded to job opportunities as and when they became available. Some weeks could offer 3-4 days of hired labour, while in other months there was scarcely a day’s work available. Wages ranged between 100,000 VND ($5) and $250,000 VND ($12.50) per day, and many complained that you’d lose 20,000 VND ($1) of that straight away to pay for lunch if it wasn’t provided – not to mention the cost of motorbike fuel for long-distance jobs.48 A few fortunate people had managed to secure a monthly wage of between 3-6 million VND ($150-300) if the employer could offer regular work; these were discriminatory lower rates than ethnic Kinh townsfolk would be paid, but it offered some job security. For the rest, hired labour could not be relied on for regular income and was at best a supplement to other livelihood options outside the busier planting and harvesting seasons.

There was some ambivalence about to what extent hired labour was a pathway out of poverty and towards prosperity. Doing hired labour was generally viewed very negatively because it was extremely strenuous work, with the possibility of being exploited or underpaid: “No-one likes to do hired labour, but if you’re in hardship then you must go!”49 As soon as they could afford to, most wealthier Hmong villagers would stop doing hired labour and invest in another livelihood option. On the other hand, one of the reasons interviewees gave to explain why some households were poor was that they were ‘work-shy’ (không chịu đi làm), as elucidated by Cai’s brother Quang:

I know in [Village A] there are a few households still in hardship, still poor – they have enough rice to eat, but have no money for expenses for their families. It’s because they don’t work outside to earn money; they just plant and reap rice… So they continue to rely on the state, for instance the poor households – some of them totally rely on the state… They can’t be bothered to work, or don’t know where to work… Some poor households have been supported [by the state] for a decade and have not escaped poverty because they keep saying, “I don’t know how to earn money”. But in fact,

48 Focus group 1 with Hmong farmers; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
49 Interview with Nu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
if the state stopped supporting then certainly they’ll go [find work]… If you go into society and socialise once or twice, even if you didn’t know how to find work, you will be able to do something.\(^{50}\)

This quote exemplifies the growing need to be able to ‘socialise’ (va chăm xã hội) in order to secure work – a recurrent theme in interviews (see Chapter 7) – and a critique of overreliance on state benefits which will be explored in more depth later. On another occasion, Christian leader Phu (see Chapter 5) also lamented how many poor Hmong in Hà Giang province have opportunities to work on dam construction sites, but they ‘don’t want to change’ because the workload would be too hard; for Phu, willingness to enter the labour market was a sign of desire for modernity and progress, in spite of the possibility of drudgery and exploitation.\(^{51}\) For now, it appears that hired labour is predominantly performed by low-to-middle income households but less so among the extremely poor – or relatively wealthy.

One distinct subcategory of hired labour among Hmong communities is travelling to China for migratory labour. Unlike generic hired labour described above, migratory labour involves moving away from home for long periods of time – from a few months to a year or more, with many migrants only returning for Lunar New Year. While travelling to Hanoi or other Vietnamese cities for work was also an option, this usually led to permanent urban residence and I only interviewed a couple of households with family members in this situation. Migratory labour to China was becoming increasingly common in Case Study Site 3 (affecting 10 out of 73 households in Village F), uncommon in Site 2 and very rare in Site 1. This variance was not related to border proximity, since Site 3 is actually the farthest away from the Chinese border; instead, it seemed to be driven by networks of familiarity as everyone in Site 3 knew, and could get advice from, others who had migrated and returned.

Migratory labour in China is a daunting prospect, especially for those who speak limited Chinese. Firstly, crossing the border legally can be expensive so most Hmong opt to cross illegally, risking getting caught and fined. Finding a job may then entail several days’ travel inland, during which some migrants get robbed. Work itself is considered to be even more exhausting and dangerous than hired labour in Vietnam including construction, brick making, logging, mining and farming: one young man who worked on a plantation recalls having to carry bunches of bananas weighing up to 50-60kg, as heavy as himself.\(^{52}\) Hmong labourers were sometimes exploited and then not paid after several months’ work, without any civil rights or legal support as undocumented migrants.\(^{53}\) Another danger, particularly for Hmong women, is that they would be tricked or forced into bonded labour or to marry a Chinese man, and never return. Several interviewees had friends or relatives who had gone missing this way, and one lady interviewed from Village E had previously

\(^{50}\) Interview with Quang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.  
\(^{51}\) Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.  
\(^{52}\) Interview with Nhia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.  
\(^{53}\) Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
been trafficked as a teenager and escaped from a forced marriage in China.\textsuperscript{54} That is not to say that all female migration is coercive, and there were other stories of Hmong women actively finding better conditions (or better husbands) in China – we return to this topic in Chapter 6. Nevertheless, those who are less fortunate are vulnerable to sexual violence or being imprisoned (Stöckl et al. 2017).

Despite numerous challenges, the potential economic gains are drawing more and more Hmong from Vietnam into migratory labour in the recent years. Wages are considerably higher than average rates in Vietnam at 190,000-340,000VND ($9.50-17.00) per day, depending on currency exchange rates. Furthermore, there are more opportunities for regular work in China, allowing Hmong migrants to earn wages on most days of the month. Those lucky enough to be paid fairly and not get robbed, arrested or injured in China were reportedly able to save 100-200 million VND ($5-10,000) or even more during a single year, enabling them to build prestigious modern houses when they returned to Vietnam. These symbols of status in turn encourage more young Hmong men who want to build their own houses – or who have ended up heavily indebted – to see China as a get-rich-quick option.\textsuperscript{55}

Nevertheless, most who can afford it avoid migratory labour to China, while those who return safely with a profit choose to ‘retire’ from the back-breaking work after a few years. In addition to the above risks, Hmong families with any connection to the local authorities do not send anyone to work in China since they do not want to be associated with illegal cross-border activities. As well as government cadres, Christian leaders like pastor Sai of village F are also concerned that the negative social impacts of mass emigration on the home community outweigh the economic benefits:

Those who do hired labour in China… don’t have the documents or passport, so the risk is high. They can easily be deceived and cheated by them; some might be sold, some might be exploited into forced labour, people can be robbed on the road. This is also the reasons why children cannot study, because – say for instance, if I have a small child, and my wife and I go [to China], then we must rely on my grandparents to look after the children, because my wife and I cannot care for or teach them according to our affections. The grandparents cannot raise the children as well as the parents; they can provide materially, but as for emotions, only the parents can bring close affections to the children. The grandparents can too, but not as well as the parents.\textsuperscript{56}

Given the normality of grandparents raising children whilst parents work in Vietnamese society, pastor Sai displays an unusual commitment to nuclear family values, possibly as a result of being exposed to church leadership training which is often adopted from American Christian resources with a strong emphasis on Western family values; this theme is revisited in Chapter 7. At any rate,

\textsuperscript{54} Interview with Giang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\textsuperscript{55} Focus group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
pastor Sai takes this issue seriously and sees it as his responsibility to find ways for his villagers to earn a living at home, to deter them from migrating.

**State livelihoods and welfare reduction**

Perhaps the most sought-after livelihood is securing official employment through one of the state bodies at village, commune or district level. As will be seen, the nepotism of state livelihoods and welfare benefits helps explain why certain well-connected Hmong families, clans and communities – like Village E – vehemently opposed Christianity, while those on the margins with nothing to lose were more likely to convert (see Chapter 5). Figure 14 (end of chapter) shows the multitude of organisational structures including the People’s Committee, People’s Council and mass mobilisation organisations (Women’s Union, Farmer’s Association etc), police and army; these all have explicitly political roles for “promoting and ensuring faithfulness to the Party line in word and action across a variety of sectors” (London 2014a: 11). In addition, there are salaried village elders, teachers, medical workers, state development loans debt collectors, and so on. However, there are only one or two cadre positions for each body or department at commune level, and with up to a dozen villages in each commune, opportunities are very limited. At the district level, competition is multiplied with the better educated Kinh townsfolk holding a disproportionate majority of seats (Nieke and Luong 2013), leaving only a small proportion of ethnic Hmong cadres, usually in low-ranking positions.57

Over 70% of Hmong cadres I interviewed were men, with salaries ranging from just 400-800,000VND ($20-40) for part-time positions up to 2-8 million VND ($100-400) for full-time jobs (see Figure 11, end of chapter). While formal salaries are not significantly higher than could be earned through other cash crops or hired labour, a cadre position was nevertheless much more desirable since it was a reliable, low-toil income. Crucially, those in permanent positions were set for a lifelong salary, including a reasonable state pension after retirement, since cadres usually changed roles every five years but were rarely fired. As a result, these highly prized positions had a low staff turnover and were carefully guarded by a few powerful family networks who had already managed to secure government posts; any new cadres tended to be (male) relatives of existing cadres as they kept it in the family as much as possible. Even with the right prestige, connections and education qualifications, a substantial bribe of at least 100 million VND ($5000) would be required to secure a permanent Party or People’s Committee job, or 50 million VND ($2500) to become a teacher.58

While most Hmong villagers could not hope to become cadres – Christians least of all – the majority of households benefitted from state benefits on some level. A villager elder informed me that out of the 90-odd households of Village A, about 40 were classified as ‘poor’ (nghèo), 25 were

57 Interview with Pho & Se; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
58 Interview with Sin; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
‘quite poor’ (cần nghèo), and 25 ‘average’ (trung bình). At its most generous, a household categorised as poor with mentally unwell parents and a disabled child in Village A received 1 million VND ($50) in welfare each month. However, most poor households only get 500,000VND ($25) once a year at Lunar New Year plus a bag of rice, MSG, salt and fish sauce with ‘quite poor’ households getting 100-300,000VND ($5-15). More importantly, they are not charged school or hospital fees and can access non-cash benefits during poverty reduction initiatives including rice and maize seeds, fertiliser livestock, orchid plants, construction materials for building a toilet or rebuilding a house after an accident or natural disaster, and so on. Chaudhry (2016) notes that in Vietnam’s northern highlands “the state’s presence is perhaps felt most keenly through the provision of poverty reduction and welfare support to the people of the commune” (2016: 203), with the state’s goal of gaining loyalty among ethnic minorities seemingly as important as poverty reduction.

However, these initiatives were irregular, not always well publicised, and suffered from a lack of transparency as to exactly how these resources were allocated, sometimes leading to conflict. For example, Lan from Village E considers hers to be a poor household, but she was unable to receive one of the water tanks being distributed because her household’s name was not on the local authority’s list, for some reason unbeknown to her. Similarly, when I asked Thang from Village D why he hadn’t received any state support despite being classified as poor, he laughed and answered: “We don’t know, it’s up to the cadres. We’re [just] the people, we cannot ask anything!” Moreover, there is a widespread scepticism about the fairness of the poverty classification system, with many people disagreeing with their official status as ‘quite poor’ or ‘average’ when they still feel very poor. Some pointed out the nepotism involved whereby relatives of local cadres would continue to receive benefits perpetually, regardless of their financial situation: “the reason is it’s up to the village elder – whoever he likes, then it’s distributed to those people... So, I’m not the village elder’s friend!” This confirms Chaudhry’s findings:

The chronically poor are politically unconnected and thus locked in a condition of stasis. They are assured of the basics of food and shelter, but do not have access to state largesse and opportunities which could potentially transform their lives. Instead, these resources go to better off, politically well-connected and politically literate others, which in turn ensures that the political equilibrium of the commune is maintained, along with the social status quo. (2016: 232)

A significant trend noticed by Hmong communities is the gradual withdrawal of poverty reduction schemes and welfare support over time. While the people were told that the reason was because

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59 Interview with Cho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
60 Interviews with Ca / Sai / Thao & Quoc / Focus group 5 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.
61 Interview with Chia & San, see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
62 Interview with Lan; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
63 Interview with Thang & Le; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
64 Interview with Leng; see Appendix 1 Figure 2
they had now ‘escaped’ poverty, those in the know claimed that there was a government agenda to scale back welfare and replace them with loans from the state-funded ‘Social Policy Bank’ (ngân hàng chính sách xã hội). Quang, brother of a district-level cadre, claimed that by 2020 all households in Case Study Site 1 will be expected to have escaped poverty, and “at that time the state will not support [them] any more”,65 echoing other studies which suggest that local authorities are given implicit targets and caps on the number or proportion of households that can be classified as ‘poor’ (Nguyen 2015). Commune vice-president Dung, from village E, stated:

As for the families, different subjects need different policies. For the disabled, we may support them with insurance policies and subsidies. With poor people who have the ability to work, we will just support them with seeds. And allow to them borrow, but stop giving out handouts, which will make them have to work. In [Case Study Site 3], the Vietnamese state is beginning to do this. Except for those who cannot work, but those who can work – we support with [low] interest rates on loans, so they have to work to be able to pay back the loan, stimulating their ability to work for themselves...

Before we focused on supporting their food and shelter, but now we focus on policies for loaning and credit, for them to develop. Step by step, with time that’s the change.66

Nguyen and Chen (2017) point out how both Chinese and Vietnamese regimes have increasingly emphasised ‘socialisation’ in the past few decades, which implies that “people should rely on their own resources for their well-being while actively contributing to social causes… except for the neediest and most incapacitated, deemed to be failing subjects” (2017: 235). After the massive state retrenchment following doi mới economic reforms (London 2014b), Vietnam’s welfare system has since expanded and transformed in order to appease social conflicts and challenges to state legitimacy which have arisen out of the dispossession and devaluation of rural areas during post-reform development (Nguyen and Chen 2017). Dung’s quote appears to signal a shifting emphasis of government policy towards fostering a neoliberal governmentality, which is unpacked in more depth in Chapter 7.

Precarious livelihoods: loans and selling land

Social Policy Bank loans, only available to poorer households, have lower interest rates than commercial banks (6% instead of 8-9%) and borrowers do not require collateral to take out a loan (Sikor 2012: 1093). In theory, loans are only approved if the applicant can justify how the loan will enable their household to ‘develop’ their economic situation; for instance, buying a buffalo to breed and trade. However, interviewees said that in practice almost anyone eligible can borrow up to 50 million VND ($2500) and then spend it on whatever they want, with no need to show any evidence of subsequent economic development. The extent to which Hmong communities have embraced these loans is varied but rather alarming: Cai, who works part-time as a debt collector for the Social

65 Interview with Quang, see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
66 Interview with Dung, see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Policy Bank, estimated that 90% of Village A were indebted to the Bank, while Phong claimed that nearly 100% of his Village B were in debt. In contrast, apparently only 40% of Village D had outstanding loans, with influential local pastor Ban claiming he never borrowed from the Social Policy Bank.

Presumably, many will eventually repay their debts (although I interviewed very few people in this situation). Nevertheless, this ranks among the most precarious ‘livelihood’ options available to Hmong farmers, due to the risk of getting into perennial debt. Even those who borrowed money in order to invest ‘productively’ were unable to guarantee a return on their investment if, for instance, the buffalo they bought died unexpectedly. Often, however, Hmong borrowers actually used the money on something which would not be classified as directly stimulating economic production, like a new motorbike or to pay for a wedding. For a 50 million VND loan, the interest alone starts at 325,000VND ($17.50) each month, which can be difficult to repay consistently due to the seasonal nature of many Hmong livelihoods. And while the Social Policy Bank is less cut-throat than commercial banks, it was still the source of anxiety for some debtors:

Here, if you borrow money for a house and then run away without paying, then they’ll arrest your brothers; they’ll get your brothers to take your house and then get him to pay back... The commune authorities would come up every day to get you to pay. Even if you flee, you’ll still have your children here, so they will be forced to pay.

A final option for Hmong households is to sell land. While technically land is still publicly owned by the technically-socialist Vietnamese state, in practice land has become a privatised commodity since 1993, when households were given land tenure certificates with the right to exchange, lease, transfer, mortgage and inherit the land (McElwee 2011: 82). Land sale was only common in Case Study Site 1, but not unheard of elsewhere; the language used was of the state ‘compensating’ Hmong holders of land which needed to be ‘reclaimed’ to build a road through, or which was due to be flooded from a dam construction. In fact, land was always chosen, seized and compensated for at a rate determined by local authorities, before sometimes being sold on to companies for an undisclosed price. The room for Hmong households to negotiate in these transactions was limited; once the local authorities had agreed the plan and informed about compensation, refusal was not a realistic option. Land sale did, however, present exploitative opportunities for well-placed local officials:

There are those who are savvy, those who participate in a function at the local commune, they know this land is about to be scheduled to do something there, those people in the authorities are told in

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67 Interviews with Cai / Chu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
68 Interviews with Phong / Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
69 Interview with Sieng; see Appendix 1 Figure 2
70 Interview with Chia & San; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
71 Interview with Lau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
advance, so they can take unfair advantage of these things. Maybe then can buy land cheap from the people... they can exploit or they can urge them like: “You should sell the land [to me], if not it will be confiscated”. They can intimidate others into selling land on the cheap. When they want to buy it for 100 million, they’ll sell for billions. In this place, the normal people don’t know about it... 2 years ago some people sold some land for a tens of millions, but just 2 years later, the buyer sold it for billions.  

Households who get a good deal out of selling land can in turn invest the money into other livelihood options such as building a homestay. On the other hand, those who sell land on the cheap and don’t manage to invest it wisely are in a very vulnerable situation, shut off from most avenues of earning a living (see Figure 12, end of chapter, for a summary of the primary livelihood options discussed in this chapter). Land was unsurprisingly one of the main indicators by which Hmong interviewees measured their neighbours’ economic status, and villagers without land or assets were reduced to selling their labour, either locally or in China.

Conclusion: Reshaping social relations, new class formations?

Through focusing on Hmong livelihoods, this chapter has revealed aspects of the wider politico-economic transformations affecting everyday life in Vietnam’s highlands, which in turn enables a discussion on their intersections with Christianisation in the following chapters, and to what extent these transformations are related to neoliberalism (see Chapter 7). State development and territorialisation attempts have slowly (and unevenly) provided infrastructure such as roads and schools in Hmong-inhabited areas, drawing communities more and more into the cash economy and national and transnational labour markets. The growth of national GDP and rise of an ethnic Kinh middle class have created new demands for tourism and seasonal flowers which Hmong producers are becoming integrated in. Policy changes in state welfare and loans programmes are resulting in higher borrowing and indebtedness, while land reforms have led to dispossession in some areas – though not to the extent which Salemink (2004) describes as ‘proletarianisation’ in Vietnam’s Central Highlands.

While most (but not all) forms of marketisation arguably lead to increasing inequality, the overwhelming majority of interviewees considered their quality of lives to have improved significantly compared to 10 years ago. As Chaudhry (2016) notes, the fact that “nobody starves anymore” (2016: 230) is a big deal. Furthermore, many young Hmong people evidenced a desire not to continue with traditional forms of subsistence livelihood, which yielded little profit, but rather to “link together in a chain [where] the two parties will do business with each other”, in the words of 29-year-old Nhia from Village D. This metaphor of becoming connected to the market economy as a ‘chain’ (mặt xích) alludes to the long-term business ties which Nhia hopes to be

72 Interview with Phong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
73 Focus Group 1 with Hmong farmers; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
74 Interview with Nhia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
sustainable and profitable, but also to the binding nature of transition into the market economy from which this is no way back, and may eventually destroy traditional forms of livelihood.

Nevertheless, at present most Hmong households in my Case Study Sites continue to adopt a diversified livelihoods approach with rice, maize and livestock for consumption while looking to a variety of other options for securing increasingly important cash. My fieldwork results support Turner, Michaud and Bonnin’s (2015) overall argument that the Hmong communities continue to engage selectively with modern technologies and state/market encroachment and resist full market dependence, however some details are contested. In particular, hybrid rice seeds have been wholly embraced by poor Hmong villagers because of their empowering effects in enabling them to be self-sufficient in rice production. While traditional livelihoods like buffalo trading, textiles and small market trade persist as minor elements, a few cash crops (cardamom and seasonal flowers) and hired labour have emerged as the most common cash earners.

Cash crops proved lucrative for some with the best land and knowhow – and who invested at the right time – but the risks of weather and market fluctuations have led to mixed fortunes and deterred most Hmong villagers from exclusive reliance on cash crops. Hired labour, either locally or abroad, is a ready source of cash income but is unpopular due to the drudgery involved and possibility of exploitation; this is probably the clearest example of the ‘everyday violence’ which Nevins and Peluso (2008) argue characterises South East Asian primitive accumulation. Few Hmong households had the assets or connections to benefit significantly from tourism, but the work was less strenuous and therefore seen as an attractive livelihood option. Most desirable of all was local authority employment, not just for the regular salary but also for all the other associated perks: pensions, influence to channel (and probably embezzle) state benefits, and so on. While the majority of households received some degree of welfare support, this was steadily being replaced by more precarious development loans.

A minority of wealthy Hmong households had stopped growing rice and maize altogether in order to focus their time and labour on other livelihood activities. Only a handful (under 5%) of interviewees had made this decision; they were either government cadres, relatives of cadres, or church leaders – both predominantly male roles (see Chapter 6). While the overwhelming majority of Hmong prioritised food self-sufficiency for good reason, rice and maize farming is nevertheless very time and labour intensive in planting and harvesting seasons, leaving little time for other livelihood activities which need to fit around this timetable (see Figure 5 above). Pastor Sai puts it bluntly: “if you spend all day working according to the Hmong traditions of the past, you cannot develop”.75 The few who abandoned their rice paddies and instead invest more in cash crops, tourism or government careers were able to earn a much larger income, after which buying rice form the market became an affordable expenditure. Thus, while rice remains an important

75 Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
livelihood for most Hmong farmers, those who can afford to spend less (or no) time and energy on growing rice are emerging as a wealthier and more flexible ‘non-subsistence’ class.

The few Hmong cadres have traditionally been the wealthiest and most powerful elites in their villages, and to some extent this trend continues as the new ‘non-subsistence’ class also have strong ties to local authorities. Even so, new cash livelihoods also presented opportunities which were seized on by some business entrepreneurs outside of the ‘cadre families’, producing winners and losers. For instance, Chang claimed that he used to be richest man of Village D, with strong government connections and plentiful land and livestock; however, he has now been overtaken by households who invested in orchids, and now Chang is belatedly trying to plant orchids to catch up with them. It is no coincidence that these new wealthy households are also Christians.

The changing livelihoods dynamics in upland Vietnam is foundational to the rise of new Christian elites discussed in Chapter 5. As will be seen later, church leaders are rarely financially supported by the meagre tithes of their congregations and must therefore balance their ministry commitments with the task of earning a living. On the other hand, they are afforded more opportunities to travel, build networks outside the village and be exposed to new livelihood ideas through theology training and denominational meetings. There appears to be an ‘elective affinity’ between the demands of a pastor role and this new ‘non-subsistence’ class, as the most successful new Christian elites abandon rice production to concentrate on more profitable livelihoods like cash crops or intensive livestock rearing, ostensibly to free time for church ministry.

Any talk of rural class formation in Vietnam’s highlands must be contextualised by ethnic politics, whereby virtually all Hmong households are poorer than virtually all ethnic Kinh inhabitants living in or nearby my Case Study Sites. Nevertheless, the move away from subsistence farming appears to be a crude way of identifying a new elite class formation within Hmong society, arising in quite different conditions to other instances of class differentiation in upland South East Asia. In Sulawesi’s highlands, for instance, Li (2014) describes the rapid accumulation of land and wealth by a minority of farmers and associated emergence of a landless majority class after the introduction of cash crops. However, in Vietnam land transfer was (and still is) much more restrictive, and Hmong communities have generally been more cautious in embracing cash crops than Li reports in Sulawesi. Another difference is that in upland Vietnam, changing livelihoods have been accompanied by pervasive social conflict triggered by Hmong Christianisation and state religious policies: this is the focus of the next chapter.

76 Interview with Chang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
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<td>Mi’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commune</td>
<td>Full-time, Permanent</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Kha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Policeman</td>
<td>$300-400</td>
<td>Giang</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>People’s Committee, People’s Council vice/president</td>
<td>$200-250</td>
<td>Cho</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>Site 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dung</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sia’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cia</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Youth Union</td>
<td>$175-200</td>
<td>Veng</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Party secretary</td>
<td>$175</td>
<td>Tung’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time, temporary</td>
<td>Tourist ticket office</td>
<td>$175</td>
<td>Pho</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Veteran’s Union</td>
<td>$100</td>
<td>Co’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Women’s Association</td>
<td>$27.5</td>
<td>Mai</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Seo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District</td>
<td>Full-time, permanent</td>
<td>Ethnic groups committee</td>
<td>$225</td>
<td>Kha</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Full-time, temporary</td>
<td>Tourism information</td>
<td>$145</td>
<td>Dua</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Full-time, permanent</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>$200-350</td>
<td>Ho’s wife</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mao</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>Site 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tam</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part-time, temporary</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>$150-300</td>
<td>Phi’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Former</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>State Bank debt collector</td>
<td>$10-50</td>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare</td>
<td>State pension</td>
<td>Former cadres</td>
<td>$150-200</td>
<td>Lu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elderly Allowance</td>
<td>Doctor’s widow</td>
<td>$25-30</td>
<td>Phi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Former union president</td>
<td></td>
<td>Co’s husband</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disability allowance</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$25</td>
<td>Bai</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 13: Local government positions occupied by Hmong interviewees, welfare support received and declared salaries*
Figure 14: Organisational diagram of commune-level state bodies, branches, unions and roles; note that more government positions will be available in the town at a more centralised district level (which will have an even larger organisational structure), as well as a single ‘Village elder’ position at the more localised village level.
**Figure 15: Summary of primary livelihood options practised by Hmong research participants (continued on next page)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Livelihood</th>
<th>Land required</th>
<th>Investments required</th>
<th>Labour intensity</th>
<th>Payback period</th>
<th>Market value / income range</th>
<th>Risks involved</th>
<th>Present at Sites</th>
<th>Prevalence at Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Large area, ideally flat, well-watered</td>
<td>Seeds, plough, fertiliser,</td>
<td>High in Spring and Autumn</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Low: subsistence crop</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>&gt;95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize</td>
<td>Large area</td>
<td>Seeds, plough fertiliser</td>
<td>High in Spring and Autumn</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Low: subsistence crop</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low: maize or rice husks</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low: $0.5-1/litre</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock</td>
<td>Small area near (or in) house</td>
<td>Animal feed (maize), vaccinations</td>
<td>Low to medium: tending cattle</td>
<td></td>
<td>Medium to high if commercial breeding</td>
<td>Livestock death from disease</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffalo trading</td>
<td>Small area near house, plus grazing space</td>
<td>Animal feed, vaccinations</td>
<td>Medium: market travel, tending cattle</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Medium to high: $750-$2000 per buffalo</td>
<td>Livestock death from disease</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardamom</td>
<td>Large area, forest cover, high altitude</td>
<td>Cardamom seeds</td>
<td>High in Summer (harvest time)</td>
<td>2-3 years</td>
<td>High: $20/kg (dried); annual income $800-$10,000</td>
<td>Crop destruction from bad weather</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orchids</td>
<td>Small area near house</td>
<td>Orchid seeds, plant pots</td>
<td>Low but regular maintenance</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Medium to high: $0.75-$15/flower bunch, $10-$500/plant</td>
<td>Market value fluctuations</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peach tree</td>
<td>Medium area</td>
<td>Peach seeds</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>Low to medium: $25-45/branch, annual income $200-500</td>
<td>May be unable to sell due to oversupply</td>
<td>1 &amp; 2</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artichoke</td>
<td>Large area near house</td>
<td>Seeds, fertiliser</td>
<td>Medium with regular maintenance</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Low to medium: $1/kg for stalks, $4/kg for leaves</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

77 These are very rough approximations based on percentage of interviewees declaring their engagement in various livelihood options.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Profitability</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Profit</th>
<th>Risk</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabbage</td>
<td>Medium area</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Low: $0.1-0.25/cabbage</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassava</td>
<td>Medium area</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Low: $0.03/kg</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinnamon</td>
<td>Large area</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plums</td>
<td>Medium area</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>Low to medium: $0.01-$1/kg</td>
<td>Market value fluctuations</td>
<td>3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tour guide</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Build networks, learn languages</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>$10-15/day upwards</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homestay</td>
<td>Small area</td>
<td>$5000-10,000 for building materials</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Several years</td>
<td>$3.5-5/night</td>
<td>Too much competition</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Souvenirs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Small area near main road</td>
<td>Low to medium: $50/month rent</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Too much competition</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hired labour</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Medium: $5-12.5/day, $150-300/month</td>
<td>Exploitation</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migratory labour</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Transport, border crossing</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Medium to high: $9.5-17/day, $5-10,000/year</td>
<td>Exploitation, trafficking, injury</td>
<td>2 &amp; 3 5-15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market trading</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Rent of market space</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Fabric</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Bribe of $2500-5000</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>2-3 years?</td>
<td>Part-time: $20-40/month, fulltime: $100-400/month</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1, 2 &amp; 3 5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 15 (cont’d): Summary of primary livelihood options practiced by Hmong research participants*
CHAPTER 4 – “Freedom within the Framework”:
State Religious Policies and Hmong Christian Responses

Linh, an ethnic Kinh former journalist, recounted a story she was reporting on over a decade ago, in a village near Case Study Site 2. In her words, there were some Hmong there who followed an “American religion” (almost certainly Protestantism) and the local authorities had banned it. She interviewed some Hmong women there who were illiterate in Vietnamese but amazingly, in Linh’s opinion, could read and recite their holy scriptures. They were trying to argue from law (quoting the article) that Vietnam had freedom of religious belief, to which the policeman present countered: “freedom, yes, but freedom within the framework [tự do trong khuôn khổ]”. This paradoxical phrase features in Vietnamese Communist Party propaganda to justify authoritarian rule as serving the best interests of the people, with slogans such as “Freedom must be placed within the framework of the law” and “Only freedom within the framework is truly freedom”. However, Hmong Christians like those interviewed by Linh have been on the sharp end of the inherent contradictions of this slogan – and have sometimes resorted to taking action outside of the ‘framework’.

This chapter tracks the multifaceted and evolving relationships between various Hmong Christian actors and Vietnamese state agents over the past 30 years. It contributes to the overall thesis by demonstrating the political and economic discrimination converts face from heavy-handed (and unsuccessful) state attempts to stop Christianity from spreading. By highlighting the agency of marginalised Hmong actors in complying with, evading or resisting the state’s attempts to dominate their religious lives – and space for manoeuvre beyond the official ‘framework’ – this chapter also exposes the limits of state territorialisation in upland Vietnam and the multifarious contestations within the Vietnamese state. Conceptually, this chapter focuses more on the ‘actor-centric’ aspect of EPE by applying everyday politics to the religious realm – which does not entail reducing all religious experiences to a crude materialist interpretation of religion as pacification or protest, but rather exposes the variety of interpretations and decisions which everyday actors within the same religious movement take in response to attempts to govern them, often violently.

Chapter Outline

The chapter begins with a critical literature review of Vietnamese-language state and academic documents, in order to ‘see like a state’ (Scott 1998) and understand the government’s perspective of Hmong Christianisation. While I managed to interview a few Communist Party elites who had some influence in central state religious policies, written sources provide a more holistic account of

78 Interview with Linh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
the ‘official’ stance, exposing its biases and limitations. Prominent themes include the involvement of hostile forces, millenarianism, social conflict and migration in Christian conversion – generally regarded within this literature as undesirable. These narratives are then compared in stark contrast with the lived experiences of Hmong Christians who have been subject to persecution, discrimination and monitoring. Fieldwork interviews are corroborated with written testimonies from a missionary archive which enables a longitudinal analysis, although obviously the original purpose of the sources requires critical engagement.

Next, an everyday politics analysis reveals the different tactics Hmong Christians use to comply with, evade or subtly resist heavy-handed state interference, and some unintended results. These include on the one hand ignoring state regulations, holding unregistered religious meetings in secret, challenging the authority of state in religious affairs – and on the other hand, proactive obedience to the law and tactical attempts to reconcile with local authorities in order to secure goodwill and religious freedom. Special attention is paid to the many Hmong Christians who have evaded religious persecution and migrated both within Vietnam and abroad, which is seen by the state as both an ideological and practical threat to stability, with unforeseen political ramifications as Hmong asylum seekers in Bangkok make contact with human rights organisations, who in turn criticise Vietnamese lack of religious freedom to an international audience. Religious migration not only overlaps with the prevalence of transnational economic migration (see previous chapter) but also accelerates connections between Hmong Christians and international religious networks, which play important roles in supporting and financing new Christian elites (see Chapter 5).

The variety of everyday political responses highlights not only the agency of Hmong everyday actors but also the diverse and competing interests and agendas informing different state policies and attempts to govern Vietnam’s highlands. Reflecting on the intersections of Hmong compliance, evasion or resistance with the spectrum of government attitudes towards Christianity, based on chronological, geographical, ethnic, hierarchical and institutional factors within the state, reminds us that the state is in fact comprised of “a wide range of diverse independent actors” (Fforde 2009: 484) and rejects the myth of a centralised Vietnamese state (Gainsborough 2017). This is crucial for understanding later chapters about local elite struggles (Chapter 5) or variegated degrees of neoliberal advance across Vietnam’s highlands (Chapter 7), as well as assessing the conditions under which Christianisation can be considered empowering for Hmong communities.

**Vietnamese-language literature**

From an official perspective, the Hmong are a governance headache, being a mobile, cross-border community, aloof from the national culture, “uneducated” and therefore easily duped by the overseas missionaries who proselytize via short-wave radio, and potentially threatening to national interests. (Taylor 2008: 21)
In *Seeing Like a State*, Scott (1998) argues that the centralised state desires to make ‘legible’ the livelihoods and practices of its citizens in order to make them easier to control. In situations where academia is not independent from the state, social science research of fringe groups can in fact be used as a ‘weapon of normalisation’ to increase the legibility of the territory and its population (Michaud 2015: 362). In doing so, however, the ‘thin simplifications’ employed by the state to reduce complexity and implement universal policies often result in harming the people whose conditions it is purportedly attempting to improve. The following review of Vietnamese-language literature\(^{80}\) on Hmong Christianity exemplifies this, with prominent discourses and themes that have informed repressive policies, but which are out of kilter with everyday lived experiences of Hmong Christians.

Social science research in Vietnam has a complex and dependent relationship with the state. Academics working in national institutions are required to be Party members and discouraged from overtly criticising government policy; those who push the boundaries are occasionally punished with expulsion from the Party (and therefore loss of job).\(^{81}\) Ever since the Vietnamese Communist Party rose to power in 1945, social science research has been seen as a potential tool to propagate the Party’s message, or at least to practically advise the state on how to “foster and maintain national unity” (Koh 2004: 1). This is manifested by the policy recommendations at the end of every thesis and academic book, from anthropology to religious studies, in order to ‘resolve’ whatever academic puzzle is being posed. In addition, Vietnamese-language social science tends to be positivist, aiming at the ‘scientific’ and framed in implicitly objective terms. For instance, most writing about Hmong Christian conversion devotes a significant portion to laying out the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ effects of the phenomenon, with the benefit to the State as the main criterion to determine the utility of the effect. Nevertheless, Koh argues that more recent academic discussions “reveal greater reflectiveness, sensitivity and even cultural relativism” (Koh 2004: 12), a trend which is supported in this literature review.

In this section a variety of Vietnamese-language journal articles, doctoral theses, academic books, website articles and government papers are reviewed in relation to the social, economic and political impacts of Hmong Christian conversion.\(^{82}\) Surprisingly, native Vietnamese speaker Tâm Ngô (see Chapter 2) makes almost no reference to this rich source of data in her research on Hmong Protestantism. Most related literature has been written in the last decade, since it is a relatively new phenomenon – but it is also less ‘politically sensitive’ to talk about this now than

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\(^{80}\) A note on bibliographic referencing of Vietnamese authors: I have endeavoured to retain the spelling of authors’ names as they appear on the cited publication. As a rule of thumb, this means that references containing Vietnamese diacritics (e.g. Nguyễn) are originally in Vietnamese and I have translated the quotes, while Anglicised versions (e.g. Nguyen) are written in English by Vietnamese authors. One important exception is Tâm Ngô’s heavily referenced work, who retains Vietnamese diacritics in the spelling of her name in her English-language publications.


\(^{82}\) All Vietnamese-language sources have been translated into English by the author.
even 10 or 20 years ago. While academic documents go into more detail than government sources, they display a remarkable resemblance in terms of content and style, so they have been grouped together in this section. This reflects the lack of clear distinctions between state and academia in Vietnam which encourages native researchers to reproduce the ‘official’ stance more often than overtly critiquing it (Salemink 2013).

Writings do not always state or cite the evidence upon which they make claims, and rarely clarify what (if any) fieldwork they have undertaken. In light of this, the repetition of phrases, rhetoric and themes may be a case of ‘towing the Party line’ rather than independent researchers triangulating evidence and arriving at the same conclusions. This observation is not intended to condescendingly write off Vietnamese literature on Hmong Christianisation as invalid or unreliable, but rather to point to the political pressure which Vietnamese academics have to work under, and how such constraints limit their potential for critical deviations from ‘official’ orthodoxies. Furthermore, there is a concern that some research conducted by Kinh (Vietnamese ethnic majority) on minorities transmits the same condescending essentialism and ‘internal orientalism’ (Schein 2000) that permeates ethnic politics in Vietnam (Taylor 2008). One obvious example of this is Lê Đình Nghĩa’s generalisation of Hmong ‘nature’, posited as a self-evident fact with no need for reference or evidence:

In general, Hmong have a strong but unstable nature, the outward manifestations of which are being very easily influenced, even reacting violently and having a very anxious state of mind to sudden reports which are unrealistic but are related to personal and family life. In everyday life the Hmong are quick to laugh but also to cry at their conditions; they love and hate very violently. (Lê 2001)

Despite these problematic dynamics, it is possible to identify different opinions and emphases that arise, albeit within a rather homogenous set of documents. The prominent narratives regarding the political implications of Hmong Christianity include hostile forces, millenarianism, social conflict and migration. This body of literature is also referenced sporadically later on in the thesis in relation to specific themes of new religious elites (Chapter 5), gender equality (Chapter 6), cultural ‘progress’ and assimilation (Chapter 7). In general, the recurrent repetition of ideas and lack of clarity regarding fieldwork and research methods leads to the suspicion of duplication of previous scholarship (Vuong 2018). In addition to evidence of pejorative views about the Hmong – for instance, them being gullible and easily deceived by ‘bad elements’ (phận tử xấu) – concepts of ‘development’, ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’ are uncritically utilised without discussion about their precise meaning and value.

83 Online references in this section are either official government websites or articles authored by academics.
Hostile Forces and Social Conflict

A heavily repeated phrase is ‘hostile forces’ (thế lực thù địch): in fact, it permeates through the literature and sets the context for Protestant conversion as an issue of national security. Hoàng Nam (2005) claims that “everyone knows that behind the Protestant activities are the plots to disturb the peace and disrupt order, security and social stability” (Hoàng 2005: 179). As Chapter 2 has shown, this must be understood in the historical context of Vietnam’s nationalist struggle during which Catholicism was justifiably associated with French colonialism, and later Protestantism was (somewhat more tenuously) linked to American imperialism. CIA Cold War intentions are illustrated in the intelligence report entitled Highland Peoples of Southeast Asia’s Borderlands with China: Their Potential for Subversive Insurgency (CIA 1970), and indeed in 1949 the CIA employed a missionary to network with ethnic minority groups elsewhere in Thailand and Myanmar (McCoy et al. 1989: 186). However, while the unusual nature of Hmong proselytisation through foreign radio broadcasts understandably aroused suspicions among Party officials, the ‘hostile forces’ discourse in this literature portrays the Hmong as vulnerable to being ‘duped’, and effectively denies their agency. The following section is taken from a Government Committee on Religious Affairs (GCRA) training resource intended for internal circulation only, but is also typical of many academic articles reviewed:

At present, hostile forces are continually looking to take advantage of religious issues to serve their political interests. This religious exploitation by hostile forces is closely related to human rights and ethnic issues and has made the most of some grassroots-level mistakes made when carrying out religious policies in the past, in order to distort the religious situation in the country. What’s more, they incite elements of defection in religions to create internal instability. (GCRA 2010: 4)

These usually unnamed hostile forces play a major role in accounting for the extraordinary growth of Hmong Protestantism. It is sometimes framed as part of the ‘peaceful evolution’ (diện biên hòa bình) plots which come “in many guises: science research, socioeconomic development investment projects, environmental protection, tourism, philanthropic activity… with the purpose of opposing our regime, fighting the primary role of the Communist Party in Vietnam” (Trần 2002: 70). Lê Đình Nghĩa asserts that “America funded and supported FEBC [radio station] to implement evangelism” (Lê 2001: 40), and recommends that the Central Communist Party investing in a radio station in the language of ethnic minorities, in order to compete with FEBC (Lê 2001: 82). Meanwhile, Hmong Protestants who have migrated to the Central Highlands (see below) are apparently at risk of becoming embroiled in ‘reactionary’ (phản động) political organisations such as “Dega state” (Nguyễn 2010: 41), another name for the Montagnard autonomy movement FULRO which was militarily and politically defeated long ago, surrendering in 1992.

Intertwined with this discourse is a narrative of the millenarian nature of Hmong Christian conversion (see Chapter 2 for historical context). Evangelistic ringleaders are accused of
“exploiting low intellectual levels, backward customs and economic hardship to deceive the people and force them to follow Vàng Chứ” (Cao 2001: 11), a traditional Hmong word (Vaj Tsw) meaning ‘God of heaven’ imbued with cultural and historical significance. Nguyễn Minh Quang (2001: 59) incorrectly claims that Vàng Chứ means ‘The king appears’, invoking the messianic legend of a returning Hmong king. Lê Đình Nghĩa claims that “the majority of believers have been intimidated, coerced or deceived by this religion” (Lê 2001: 65), which forced impoverished people to contribute money and resources and waste a lot of their “potential productive time” by attending millenarian gatherings, following prophecies that Jesus/Vàng Chứ was about to return and bring prosperity to the Hmong (Cao 2001: 18–19). Đoàn Đức Phượng explicitly links this activity with hostile forces by stating that some Hmong “still foster the distorted belief of Jesus Vàng Trừ and the illusion of an autonomous Hmong kingdom, which has been used by external enemy forces to agitate for a Hmong state” (Đoàn 2015: 177). One prominent ethnic Hmong government official even suggested focusing Party propaganda efforts towards promoting Hồ Chí Minh, the widely revered nationalist hero (among the Kinh at least), as a rival Hmong ‘saviour’ to Christian God Vàng Chứ:

Previously the reactionaries’ work was to set up the ‘Vàng chứ’ figure to propagate, entice and incite the Hmong to follow them, undermining our Revolutionary work. In my opinion there is a need to construct the role and position of president Hồ Chí Minh like a saviour of the ethnic Hmong. His life, work and great ideas have occupied an important position in the memories of all Hmong people, who have themselves elevated Him up to something of a deity of their ethnic group. (Vương, D. B. 2005: 79)

There are also more critically reflexive passages about the causes of mass conversion, which do not only blame Hmong educational deficiency or ‘superstition’. An unusually candid confidential paper, intended for circulation within the Party’s Central Committee only, criticises the official discourse for treating Protestant growth as a “spreading oil stain” (vết dầu loang) and subsequent heavy-handed interventions by local authorities which “play into the hands of hostile forces” (Anonymous 2008). Trần Hữu Sơn’s early warning that “this issue cannot be resolved by brutal means or by declaring war on religion, nor can it be banned by law or forcing people to return to traditional religion” (Trần 1996: 189) appears to have fallen on deaf ears. One acknowledged reason for the Hmong wanting a radical alternative to their current situation is that “the recognition of, and belief in, the Party and State has been corrupted in the minds of many Hmong believers” (Lê 2001: 50). Phạm Văn Lực’s website article contains a rare admission that this is in part due to “corruption, wastefulness, and oppression among some local authorities” (Phạm 2013).

Meanwhile, Nguyễn Văn Thắng maintains that external influences including the ‘hostile forces’ discourse has been overemphasised (Nguyễn 2009: 21), while Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm claims that alleged links between so-called ‘American religion’ and anti-Vietnam strategies must be rejected

84 The paper was sent to me by the author after a private interview.
Significantly, anthropologists Thằng and Trâm are the only authors in this literature review who clearly state having conducted long-term ethnographies among Hmong communities, which adds weight to their arguments. However, these counternarratives are generally only voiced to a limited audience; the official message to the general public is exemplified in the publication of an anti-Christian booklet entitled *Don’t believe the Snake Poison Words* (Vi Hoàng 2001), printed in both Vietnamese and Hmong script (see Figure 16). A similar piece of propaganda from as recent as 2011, also distributed in Vietnamese and Hmong, gives caricatured descriptions and patronising instructions concerning the ‘illegal’ new religion known as the New Way which entails:

a life of roaming around, a life without house of home, dying a slow death in many different countries, placing their belief in an afterlife… These beliefs lead Hmong people not to believe in the present and to think of the foggy issue of a life after death, and this in turn leads them to migrate illegally, abandon their homes, and leave their family and friends and run into the forest into a lair, and pitch a tent to try to get shelter from sun and rain, running around the forest without food to eat, always looking for roots and leaves. This means the old people are scattered, and young have no school to study, and when people become sick there is no clinic or medicine to help them… There is no special Kingdom for the Hmong, there is only a country belonging collectively to the community of ethnic minorities, a country that our Hmong ancestors along with other ethnic minorities spent bone and blood building up, preserving and protecting. (Lý 2011: 5, 8–9, 18)

![Figure 16: Front cover of anti-Christian literature entitled ‘Don’t believe the Snake Poison Words’ (Vi Hoàng 2001)](image-url)
This leads to the next theme of social conflict and instability caused by Hmong conversion. The GCRA training manual lists some ‘negative’ effects of Protestant evangelism: “production stagnation, free migration, disunity among families, villages, ethnic groups and so on, loss of social order and safety” (GCRA 2010: 24). While ‘production stagnation’ probably refers to the millenarian activity mentioned above, free migration is mainly discussed in relation to Hmong Christians moving south into the Central Highlands, who move in search of land and freedom of religion (Nguyễn 2010: 40). Migrants settle in very isolated areas and avoid contact with local authorities, causing difficulties for state attempts to administer land or maintain order (Doàn 2015: 168). Conversion and migration are described by Nguyễn Văn Thằng (2009: 115) as mutually reinforcing processes: Hmong conversion in the North triggers hardship from government discrimination and increases the appeal of moving to the Central Highlands; conversely, migration severs family/clan support networks, providing another incentive for new migrants to adopt Christianity and integrate into their new religious communities.

Another trigger of more localised migration is that Hmong converts in predominantly non-Christian villages often become isolated and discriminated against for not partaking in traditional ceremonies, leading many to migrate to another area with more believers in order to earn a living (Nguyễn 2009: 157). This social cleavage, which threatens to break up families and villages, is mentioned by most authors: “‘New Hmong’ [Protestants] call ‘old Hmong’ backwards and stagnant. ‘Old Hmong’ say ‘new Hmong’ have lost their roots, abandoned their ancestors and lost part of their soul” (Trần 2014). As Chapter 5 elaborates upon, following Protestantism often clashes with traditional leadership hierarchies and conventions regarding clan responsibilities, creating conflict with other members – an oft-quoted phrase attributed to Hmong Protestants is ‘religion before clan’ (đạo quan trọng hơn họ).

Others are concerned with the ‘wounding’ of traditional Hmong culture caused by the religious ‘intolerance’ of Protestantism (Nguyễn, K. D. 2015): “Protestants are not allowed to sing [folk] songs, play the [traditional] flute or qeej [free-reed pipe], not allowed to cry when someone dies, and not given permission to visit or greet those outside the faith” (Lê 2001: 52). This lament at the loss of ‘valuable cultural practices’ is somewhat ironic, because it is often accompanied by an approval of the ‘positive’ Protestant contribution towards eradicating ‘backward customs’ (tàp tục lạc hậu). Indeed, the GCRA manual advises local authorities to “create the right conditions” for new converts who want to return to traditional beliefs (GCRA 2010: 20) – the very same beliefs which state policy previously considered ‘superstitious’ and outlawed (Ngo 2015:291). Nguyễn Quang Hùng is critical of heavy-handed implementation of such policies: “brutal measures aimed to restrict the increase of Christianity among the Hmong, but wherever preventative measures were taken the numbers of Protestants not only increased but also flared up” (Nguyễn, Q. H. 2015: 158).
Official discourse vs local experiences

While not totally unfounded, the above prominent narratives found in Vietnamese-language literature are largely inconsistent with Hmong Christians’ accounts about both their own actions and those of the state actors. In addition to fieldwork interviews and focus groups, this section engages with another valuable data source: an archive of letters from listeners of the FEBC radio channel which initially introduced Protestantism to upland Vietnam in Hmong language (see Chapter 2). This archive contains English translations of over 1000 Hmong-language letters sent from Vietnam, Laos, China, Thailand and Myanmar, received by the FEBC in the time period between 1994 and 2011. This archive represents only a random sample of the several thousands of letters sent in, and is not open for public access or used by FEBC for any religious promotion or other political agenda.85 Letters range from just a few sentences to several paragraphs; content varies widely but prominent topics include expressing gratitude to radio presenter pastor John Lee and his wife, asking questions about particular theological teachings, describing their conversion experience, reporting the response of family and neighbours to Christianity, requesting more religious materials and prayer for hardships.

It should be noted that for remote, impoverished Hmong villages in South East Asia, to send a letter abroad would require no small amount of effort and resources, and it is also probable that many attempts to write to FEBC would have been intercepted and confiscated by Vietnamese authorities. Therefore, it is fair to say that there must have been a strong motivation behind these letters, of which one purpose may have been to expose and highlight the brutality of Vietnamese state crackdowns on Christian conversion. A large proportion of the 339 letters in the archive originating from Vietnam mentioned this theme, of which a few illustrative quotes are included below. An FEBC letter from 2001 shows one permutation of the ‘hostile forces’ accusation so common to official literature, invoking the infamous Cold War anti-communist general Vang Pao (see Chapter 2):

[local authorities] said that the reason why they won’t allow Hmong tribes in Vietnam to become Christians is because Hmong people believe in the American efforts of General Vang Pao, to fight against the communists. They somehow believe that these church services are indeed planned efforts to battle the communists again… Vang Pao and American CIA have lost the war to the North Vietnam government, that’s why he has fled to the USA but the gov’t believes that some day he will come back to rule Laos and Vietnam again. They believe that he will try to use his own people to broadcast militant orders called Bible study, and preach God’s word with beautiful Christian music to touch Hmong people all over South [East] Asia to believe in him… The only way to protect themselves is to stop Hmong tribal people… believ[ing] those broadcaster’s ideals. Everybody

85 Indeed, my request to reference letter excerpts was subject to careful scrutiny by FEBC to ensure the protection of the letter authors.
would go back to practice their own spirit worship. This is our Hmong traditional culture and beliefs according to our ancestors. Whoever disobeys will end up in jail or possible death!86

Such wild accusations are categorically denied by both international missionary agents like FEBC and Hmong Christians themselves, especially church leaders who try to represent Christianity in a non-threatening light to the state forces they deal with (see below). While some official academics and central policy makers have now conceded the weakness of the ‘hostile forces’ argument, on the ground it is still very pertinent – a 2014 survey asking for multiple causes of Christian conversion among ethnic minorities found that 55% of grassroots cadres and party members in the Central Highlands chose the option ‘plot of hostile forces’, the second highest response only behind ‘low intellectual levels’ (Lê 2014: 175). I also heard this discourse banded about by local officials I interviewed, as had Hmong Christian students:

I often hear them say that to follow religion is illegal; so probably they worry about, or fear that when we gather together to worship God, they think we’ll do something to oppose the state, so they don’t allow it. I think they’re afraid about ideas to resist the country, ideas infiltrated from abroad, because we’re not people with high cultural standards, maybe we’re easily attracted to oppose our country; I think that’s why they don’t like it and forbid the ethnic [minorities] from believing in God too much.88

This quote also reveals the extent to which pejorative attitudes towards Hmong culture have been internalised by Christian students: other focus groups repeated the claim that Hmong people have low ‘cultural/intellectual standards’ (dân trí) and went unchallenged by other participants.89 Ngô (2016) notes how both the Communist state and Christian missionaries “see the Hmong as ‘backward’ and consider their culture an ‘irrational’ impediment to progress” (2016: 6). The degree to which church-state relations can be seen as competitive or complementary is an interesting question which we revisit in Chapters 5 and 7. With regards to the millenarian narrative, FEBC response letters indicate that this was no mere government fiction:

A certain man is now claiming that he is the awaited Messiah. The same one you teach of on the radio, and the same one that is to save us at certain coming of age. He says that all the Hmong in Northern Vietnam must follow him and follow him in order to be saved. Because of his relation to your broadcast, he is gaining much popularity here with the Hmong. As of now, he has been thrown into jail, but his words are still being spread.

I want you to announce to all of Hmong people to [be] aware of the false messiah that has appeared in North Vietnam and Southern China recently. One of the Hmong leaders in our province has boasted about this false messiah and has claimed that he is the real Jesus Christ that came down

86 Anonymous response letter from Hmong listener (2001), reproduced with permission from FEBC.
87 Interview with Kha; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
88 Focus group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
89 Focus group 4 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
from Heaven to save our Hmong people in Vietnam and China. He is coming to rule the whole world and everybody can depend on that messiah, which has already existed in Vietnam and will be coming to China to rule.\textsuperscript{90}

Some Hmong church leaders I interviewed acknowledged that in the early days various millenarian rumours had ‘deceived’ new converts who had not yet been taught about orthodox Biblical teaching, with only FEBC radio broadcasts to inform them.\textsuperscript{91} The general consensus among both Hmong Christians and non-Christians is that these activities had subsided over time, with the significant exception of the Mưông Nhé incident in May 2011 (Rumsby 2018). This notorious event entailed several thousand (mostly Christian) Hmong gathering in an obscure hamlet in Mưông Nhé district (adjacent to the Laos and China borders) for a number of days, in what has been described as a religious event, mass demonstrations against the government, a bid to establish an autonomous Hmong kingdom, or a combination thereof. While orthodox Christian voices have attempted to distance themselves from this overtly political form of religious expression (Ngô 2016: 98), well-informed non-Christians like Party member Ho associated Mưông Nhé with Christianity:

\begin{quote}
Many times, they use the word ‘religion’ to betray the country, to betray their brothers, causing public disorder. So, that’s why the Vietnamese society now shuts down those problems. Those religions are good for nothing, no one knows where the boss who comes up with them comes from, like sending them from abroad for example. Like the uprising in Mưông Nhé, Điện Biên [province] - the Mèo king, the Hmong king… In reality, there’s no Hmong king. This news is rubbish. But because of our lack of understanding we were also corrupted. So when they went over there, they were also hungry, they had abandoned their livestock and went off, abandoned their houses. But in fact, where was the Hmong king? They returned, because there was nothing. And then the state came to the rescue, providing aid.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

**Persecution and discrimination**

Unsurprisingly, the majority of Hmong Christians emphasised the extensive and systematic persecution, discrimination and state monitoring they had been subject to – something notably absent from official narratives. More surprisingly, Tâm Ngô’s (2016) otherwise comprehensive and balanced ethnography devotes little space to religious persecution, also playing down the extent of state-sponsored brutality. Conversely, harrowing accounts from other academics (cf. Reimer 2011) and human rights watchdogs correlate with my interviews about converts being widely intimidated, arrested and imprisoned, beaten or tortured, fined, forced to do hard labour, having property confiscated, being forced to renounce Christianity and partake in traditional religious ceremonies, and so on. These Hmong FEBC response letters are just two of countless examples:

\textsuperscript{90} Anonymous response letters from Hmong listeners (1994 & 2001 respectively), reproduced with permission from FEBC.

\textsuperscript{91} Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\textsuperscript{92} Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
When my family became Christians, two months [later] the government arrested me and put me in jail for one year. They tortured me, they used electric shocks [on] me [so] right now my half body [is] paralyzed and they released me in 1992 but they called [on] me every day to go to the court and asked me [the] question, do you still believe in God? I said Yes. In 1993 we found a church in Hanoi. After that the government arrested 3 of us, put in jail for 12 days. The government released me and sent me to tell every village that I denied God and not believe God anymore, so all the Christians [would be] afraid and… go back to evil spirit worship, but I did not accept that, I said to them, I believe God. In 1995 through 1996 the government fellow [sic] me closely and wanted to arrest me again. On December 25, 1996 [as] we celebrated Christmas the leaders in our village and the Vietnamese government burned our 1/10 [of rice] that we [tithed] to the Lord, all destroyed.

At this time, we are facing some serious hardships. The Government recently found out about our church. The officials were so angry that they took me to jail and fined me $5 million Dong, which is equivalent to $500 dollars in the U.S. I didn’t have a lot of money, so I paid 2 million dong, and borrowed another 3 million dong from other people. Right now I am extremely under massive amounts of pressure. Not only do I have debts to pay back but the officials are looking for me again. Things are so bad, that I must hide in the midst of the jungle, away from my family and friends. I cannot show my face in public whatsoever. All I can do right now is reside in the secret cave deep in the jungle. My only source of nourishment is when my congregation brings me food at night.

As both quotes highlight, religious persecution can translate into negative economic consequences for already impoverished Hmong households; several interviewees talk of their livestock being killed or confiscated after conversion, or even farming land being seized. The scale and severity of conflict varies widely depending on the location, temperament of local government leaders and relationships between church and authorities. For example, some Hmong converts in Village D were initially arrested but pastor Ban has since cultivated unusually good relationships with local officials (see Chapter 5), so that local Christians did not mention much religious harassment. In stark contrast, interviews in cadre-heavy Village E reveal intense ongoing hostility towards Christianity, with the threat of physical violence given as a reason why so few villagers convert. Over time, persecution towards Hmong Christians has decreased in most areas as church groups become more established and are perceived to be more ‘stable’ – although new reports of state-sponsored brutality are reported in provinces like Bác Kạn, Điện Biên, Sơn La and Tuyên Quang, where Christianity is spreading among the Hmong for the first time and fresh waves of ‘dynamic’ conversions unsettle local authorities who still hold negative prejudices towards religion.

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93 Anonymous response letters from Hmong listeners (2006 & 1997), reproduced with permission from FEBC.
94 Interviews with Dao / Leng / Tu, Sa & Sinh / Focus group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.
95 Interviews with Si / Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
96 Interviews with Ban / Tu, Sa & Sinh; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
97 Interviews with Co / Ngoc; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
98 Interviews with Ban / Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21. Also see https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/03/hmong-christians-hospitalised-mob-attack-vietnams-northwest/ (accessed 18/05/20).
99 Interview with Anh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
Yet even in more ‘stable’ areas, Hmong Christians still experience day-to-day discrimination as they are denied access to civil service jobs which, as seen in Chapter 3, are one of the few ways of securing a reasonable regular income in remote areas. This particularly hindered Hmong men, who are more likely to complete their studies and aspire to government employment, which may be a factor in the gender imbalance of Christian conversion (see chapter 6). A few former cadres were forced to resign after converting or waited to retire before becoming Christians, while one student’s father was offered a government position on the condition of renouncing his new faith. The only Hmong Christian cadre I met was a low-level village elder in majority-Christian Village D; in other Christian villages, local officials were the only non-Christians in the entire village. One Christian man had spent years working and studying in Hanoi for his teaching qualifications, but returned to his home village only to find local authorities demanding a $6,000 bribe for him to work in the local school. While the practice of paying a bribe to secure any permanent official employment is common (see Chapter 3), the amount asked is well over double the ‘going rate’, apparently because authorities expected him to have rich foreign friends through religious connections – and not without reason (see Chapter 5). For now, he has returned to farming, and hopes to negotiate a lower bribe price after a while.

Multiple sources report Hmong converts being refused medical fee exemption papers from local authorities, effectively denying them access to (otherwise expensive) hospital treatment. Some claimed that local authorities deliberately overlooked Christian households and villages when distributing state benefits and development aid, although this might also be explained by nepotism rather than direct religious discrimination. Both Christians and non-Christians accused local cadres of prioritising their family and relatives on various levels (see Chapter 3), and the families which converted were usually those who were already marginalised from the benefits of state-led development by virtue of being unrelated to the families of prestige and power (cf. Chaudhry 2016). Another prevalent situation faced by young Christians was not being awarded scholarships for them to pursue further education, which in turn limits their chances of gaining employment afterwards. For instance, the parents of Sai from Village F were told that if they signed a declaration of their renunciation of faith, their son would get a full university scholarship: they refused, so instead Sai went to Bible school and became a pastor. This is an example of how state attempts to disincentivise conversion may have counter-productive effects, since young Hmong Christians are left with Bible school as the only way to gain an education – and are then likely to become religious leaders and evangelists (See Chapter 5).

100 Interview with Cua / Focus Group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.
101 Interview with Hang; see Appendix 1 Figure 2
102 Interview with Kim; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
103 Interviews with Seng / Kim; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 23.
104 Case Study 3 with students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
105 Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Finally, many Hmong Christians (especially leaders) reported being subject to invasive monitoring of, and restrictions to, religious activities. Church registration is a complicated bureaucratic affair even for those in approved denominations (see Figure 17), which uneducated church leaders may be unable to navigate (Ngô 2016: 130). Therefore, many – perhaps the majority of – Hmong church groups are unregistered, and therefore technically illegal. As a result, unregistered Christians must meet in people’s houses and conduct religious activities in secrecy, under constant fear of being discovered and punishment by police.\(^{106}\) Officially registered churches fare little better, with prominent pastors being followed wherever they go and facing opposition conducting religious activities such as proselytisation, organising big events or inviting external speakers.\(^{107}\) In practice, groups usually just try to organise events without requesting official permission (which would invariably be denied anyway) and hope to avoid detection.\(^{108}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Denomination name</th>
<th>English Translation</th>
<th>Year registered</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Tin lành Việt Nam (miền Bắc)</td>
<td>Evangelical Church of Vietnam (North)</td>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Ban’s denomination (see Chapter 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Tin lành Việt Nam (miền Nam)</td>
<td>Evangelical Church of Vietnam (South)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Operating among Hmong communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội truyền giáo Cơ đốc Việt Nam</td>
<td>Vietnam Christian Mission</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Operating among Hmong communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Tin lành Trường lão Việt Nam</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church of Vietnam</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Operating among Hmong communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tông Hội Báp tịt Việt Nam (An dien Nam Phuong)</td>
<td>Vietnam (Reformed) Baptist Association</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáo hội Báp tịt Việt Nam (Nam Phuong)</td>
<td>(General) Baptist Convention of Vietnam</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Mennonite Việt Nam</td>
<td>Vietnam Mennonite Church</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Liên hữu Cơ đốc Việt Nam</td>
<td>Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Seng’s denomination (see Chapter 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Phúc Am Như tuân Việt Nam</td>
<td>Vietnam Pentecostal Church</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Operating among Hmong communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hội thánh Phúc âm Toàn vên Việt Nam</td>
<td>Vietnam Full Gospel Church</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáo hội Cơ đốc Phúc lạc Việt Nam</td>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist Convention of Vietnam</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Operating among Hmong communities; not officially categorised as Protestant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giáo hội Các thành hữu Ngày sau của Chùa Giê su Kỳ tô (Mắc Môn)</td>
<td>Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter-day Saints (Mormons)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Not officially categorised as Protestant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 17: list of officially approved denominations associated with Protestantism in Vietnam.*\(^{109}\)

\(^{106}\) Interview with Doa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\(^{107}\) Interviews with Seng / Focus group 3 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.

\(^{108}\) Interviews with Sai / Thao & Quoc; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

Everyday politics: resistance and evasion

This blatant disregard for official regulations and restrictions is an example of Hmong agency within the politics of everyday life in Vietnam’s highlands. In the face of considerable hostility, different Hmong Christians have adopted various tactics to contest, avoid or reconcile with arguably much more powerful government actors in ways which are usually discreet and mundane but may still undermine state authority. Kerkvliet’s (2009) everyday politics typology of resistance, modifications (or evasions) and compliance is a useful way of distinguishing responses to religious policy, since most Hmong Christians regarded such responses as primarily religious, and not overtly political. Although individual activity which challenges or ignores state authority may seem to be negligible, the cumulative impact of hundreds and thousands of such acts cannot be ignored (Scott 1989) and has been credited with catalysing major policy U-turns. For example, Vietnamese peasants’ quiet but persistent non-compliance of assigned work roles and appropriation of socialist collective resources for private use crippled the planned economy and arguably forced the state to implement doi moi reforms (Kerkvliet 2005).

From an everyday politics perspective staying unregistered, refusing to request official permission and holding unofficial church meetings can be seen as acts of everyday resistance against Vietnamese religious policy and practice. Further examples include inviting and working with foreign missionaries (another illegal activity), usually from the US Hmong diaspora who can blend in and are not as easily detected by the police. Indeed, Salemink (2009) argues that in some cases the very act of Protestant conversion in Vietnam – given its controversial minority status – may arguably “be interpreted as a protest against the state and its dominant culture” (2009: 53). On a conceptual level, Hmong Christians may also associate state obstructions and political tropes with demonic activity, signalling a profound mistrust of Vietnamese governmental authority:

> In my village, they say that Protestantism is an American or English religion, so they think that if we have a meeting, then they say that we’ll oppose the State. Also, maybe that is the authority of Satan, and the Bible says that if we follow Jesus, then we will also be arrested. Vietnam says it has freedom of religion, but in reality, it’s not like that; because they still think Protestantism is influenced by America, the UK or some other country.

According to Kerkvliet, “[b]etween everyday compliance and everyday resistance are everyday modifications and evasions of what authorities expect or the political system presumes” (2009: 237). They lack the intentional opposition towards superiors of resistance tactics, however in Vietnam these acts have caused just as many headaches for the state, if not more. A major ‘adjustment’ tactic which tens of thousands of Hmong Christians have made to their lifestyles is to migrate away from areas where they have experienced hardship, often entire villages at a time.

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110 Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
111 Focus Group 4 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
Thawnghmung (2019) mentions economic migration as an ‘exit strategy’ in the everyday politics of economic survival in Myanmar, while Rojas-Wiesner & DeVargas (2014) propose “strategic invisibility as everyday politics for a life with dignity” amongst Guatemalan women migrants wishing to avoid control and surveillance by others – this ‘strategic invisibility’ resonates with the spirit of ‘not being governed’ (Scott 2009). It requires significant coordination and social upheaval unlike other more mundane tactics, however Hmong migration in Vietnam fits the other hallmarks of everyday politics tactics: it is opportunistic and conducted in secrecy, without requesting official permission.

As seen in Chapter 2, Hmong history is littered with mass migrations in times of crisis, war or state encroachment, one of the reasons why Scott’s state evasion theories (2009) make more sense for the Hmong than most ‘Zomians’. Indeed, traditional Hmong resource-use systems and cultural attitudes towards land (Tomforde 2003), combined with their poverty in Vietnam, have made it relatively easy for them to pack up and take their livestock, leaving little of value behind. Moreover, religious migration intersects with the continuing incidence of economic migration as part of Hmong livelihoods (see Chapter 3), as migrant interviewees spoke of fleeing not just religious persecution but also grinding poverty, and migration as the search for a better life – both spiritually and economically.

A few distinct migration routes and destinations can be observed. Firstly, several thousand Hmong Christians moved from one area of North Vietnam to another, for example from the intensive state-monitoring of Hà Giang or crowded Lào Cai provinces to the more empty, remote corners of Điện Biên province (see Chapter 2 Figure 3).112 Smaller-scale migrations also occur, such as moving from non-Christian Village E to another village just 30km away after converting, in order to avoid social isolation and find other Christians.113 This has the effect of polarising religious affiliation among Hmong communities, with migrants gathering in Christian-majority villages and entire districts – while ‘emigrating’ regions have hardly any Christians left. Non-Christian Dua from Village E used to have a Christian classmate while growing up, but since the latter’s family emigrated she no longer has any Christian friends, creating what she calls an “antagonistic distance” through the middle of the Hmong community.114 On the other hand, Hmong emigrations from Case Study Site 1 had the unexpected effect of giving remaining Christians more bargaining power with local authorities, given the threat of ‘voting with their feet’:

They continued to oppress us, didn’t let us work on our paddy fields or mountain fields; wherever we wanted to go, they did not accept me as a civilian; they really caused us hassle. But afterwards, many people moved far away, and then [the cadres] were afraid, because they had caused hardship for their people, so the people didn’t tolerate and moved away. So afterwards there might be no

112 Focus group 3 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
113 Interview with Thong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
114 Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
people left, they were afraid of this... They were afraid that we would disappear, like today we stay here but tomorrow if they cause us trouble then we could run away to live somewhere else, abandon our fields or sell cheap to others, then we move to another country to live, and don’t stay here... [Christians] moved to where there are no cadres to give them grief for the people, where they know they can work on the fields so they have things to eat, no one tells them what to do, to force us. But those of us who stay here, if we follow God, and they come down from the commune to force us and accuse: “why do you follow God and not the old way, but the new way?” That’s not acceptable [anymore]. When the State banned it and what not, then it was hard to live. So the people didn’t want that. But now the state doesn’t ban it anymore. Now it’s relaxed.

Another major destination for Hmong Christians migrants is the Central Highlands, a large region spread across five provinces and bordering Southern Laos and Cambodia (see Chapter 3 Figure 2). This area is the indigenous home of several ethnic minorities who have their own unique histories and complex relationships with state-building and colonial projects; some groups like the Ê-dê, Kơ-ho, M’nông and Stiêng are also majority Christian, although conversions have taken place over a longer time period than with the Hmong (Salemink 2009). Hmong migration to the Central Highlands predated Hmong Christian conversion; however, since 1990 the numbers really picked up in what has been likened to the Exodus of the Old Testament to a ‘promised land’ (Nguyen 2009: 201). Upon arrival, Hmong immigrants would generally set up new villages in the most isolated hills far away from urban areas, where state encroachment would be more difficult. Migrants may have been new converts fleeing from persecution, or they may have converted upon arrival; even official estimates admit that 45,000 of the 50,000 Hmong in the Central Highlands are Christians.

This undocumented mass migration was an administrative nightmare for governing authorities, who branded it as illegal and tried in vain to stop the Hmong movement – at the same time as encouraging ethnic Kinh lowlanders to move up to the Central Highlands to exploit the land and create a loyal ethnic majority population which now outnumber the indigenous minorities (McLeod 1999). The Hmong were not part of the plan, however, and certain Party elements again saw it as an American plot, with former deputy prime minister Đặng Công Tân apparently stating that the Hmong must not be allowed to make contact with Cambodia for reasons of national security.

Eventually, Central Highlands authorities acknowledged Hmong presence and have since been attempting to register them, although this by no means straightforward; one evasion tactic entailed all the Hmong adults in a village leaving their houses very early to work on their remote fields and returning after the end of the working day during weekdays, to avoid the local cadres who kept encountering an empty village!

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115 Interview with Dao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
116 Academic conference in Hanoi; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
117 Interview with Hieu; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
By most accounts, Hmong inhabitants of the Central Highlands have improved standards of living when compared to the northern highlands, in spite of the hardships associated with leaving homes behind, being robbed en-route and having to start anew. The more plentiful land at lower altitudes mean that more profitable cash crops like coffee and pepper can be grown, whilst hired labour wages are more variable, ranging from 130,000-600,000VND ($6.50-30/day).\(^{118}\) Some women returning to Case Study Site 3 to celebrate the Lunar New Year with their relatives spoke of Central Highlands life as more relaxed, with Christians taking the Sunday off work – unlike in the North where they had to work harder.\(^{119}\) On the other hand, new livelihoods and increased market interaction have made Hmong migrants more dependent on the cash economy:

In my opinion earning a living is easier in the South, but the hardship is that in Central Highlands everything costs money, you must buy everything; so after paying for everything in the year you still have nothing left, just like in the North! ...In the North we plant our own rice, and rest in some seasons – we still have to buy some food, such as MSG – but in the South you have to buy everything and work all year.\(^{120}\)

Earlier migrants to the Central Highlands could choose the best land to settle on and are now more established, whereas nowadays it is rumoured that there is no more ‘free’ land left, thus making late migration less attractive now to those still in the North. With more recent Hmong immigrants getting a much worse deal and being forced to sell their labour instead of working their own land, there is a greater potential for inequality between the rich older immigrants and the landless poor within Hmong communities in the Central Highlands.\(^{121}\) Furthermore, as with Kinh migration, Hmong migration has sometimes caused tensions with indigenous ethnic minorities who complain that migrants have caused environmental destruction by chopping down all the trees on the ‘free’ land.\(^{122}\) Nevertheless, those who migrated south for freedom of religion have attained what they were seeking, with a consensus that there is much less intrusion on religious activities for Hmong Christians in the Central Highlands.

**Transnational migration and advocacy**

The final migration route for Hmong Christians led across the border into Laos and, for some, all the way to Bangkok and beyond. En route, some of the luckier ones encounter and receive assistance from transnational ethnic/religious networks or civil society organisations, which are also increasingly establishing contact with Hmong Christians who remain in Vietnam (see Chapter 5). It was difficult to interview transnational migrants/refugees, however several harrowing FEBC

\(^{118}\) Interviews with Sai / Toa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{119}\) Interview with Lia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{120}\) Focus group 7 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
\(^{121}\) Interview with Toa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{122}\) Interview with BPSOS staff; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
response letters are written by Hmong Christians from Vietnam who have fled religious persecution to Laos:

There is one person in particular… He was persecuted by the government and imprisoned. However, when he was finally released from the prison, he engineered a plan for most of the Hmong people to move to Laos… Most of them have died. Even over there in Laos… The Vietnamese government were not satisfied. They traced his steps and arrested him in Laos and brought him back to punish in Vietnam.

Due to having been jailed many times, I decided to move to Laos. We lived there for two years and then the Laotian government attempted to chase us back to Vietnam. When we did come back, we were short of food and about everything else. Again, we were told to not have Church service nor tell others about Christ. Because of the restrictions from our government, we then moved to another part of the country of Laos again. We were there for three years and things got worse and worse. At last, I decided to bring my family back to live permanently in Vietnam.

I have listened to your broadcast for many years now in North Vietnam I have become Christian as a direct result of listening to the lessons taught from the Bible. Unfortunately, the government persecutes all the Christians in our area and has forced many of us to go back to worshipping evil spirits. We decided that it was in the Lord’s will to move to Laos for freedom to worship God. Because we are so poor, we don’t even have money to buy food, [even] less build a house. So please pray for my family. We try to live day by day and walk in His path. Currently, we don’t have any legal papers to stay in Laos so we’re not sure what our future will be like here.\textsuperscript{123}

As with refugee experiences across the world (Crawley et al. 2017), these excerpts show how migrations were multi-staged and nonlinear, with Hmong Christians occasionally moving somewhere new temporarily, before being ‘chased’ by government powers or realising the new context is economically untenable and moving again. In 1989, when Doa from Lào Cai province was 11 years old, his parents converted to Christianity along with the whole village after listening to the FEBC radio broadcasts.\textsuperscript{124} In 1994, policemen arrested Doa’s father (the church group leader) and beat him so badly that he died of his wounds a week later. To add insult to injury, the local authorities forced Doa’s family to give his father a traditional funeral, contradicting the statutes of their new faith. By the age of 18, Doa was married and a church leader himself, so the police started targeting and attacking him as well. In 2000, after Doa was arrested for organising a Christmas festival, he decided to take his family and move down to Đăk Nông in the Central Highlands. After two years, however, the police caught up with him and started harassing him again. From 2002-2010 Doa relocated twice within South Vietnam, saw his house burned down by the police, got arrested multiple times, and fled to China for 6 months to escape further arrest warrants.

\textsuperscript{123} Anonymous response letters from Hmong listeners (1992, 2002 & 2004 respectively), reproduced with permission from FEBC.
\textsuperscript{124} Interview with Doa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
In 2011, Doa took the long journey through Laos to Bangkok, partly by bus and motorbike while crossing borders illegally on foot, having learned about this option through transnational connections. A month later, he brought his family over, renting a room off another Vietnamese Hmong Christian who had come before them, and applied for refugee status on the grounds of religious persecution. In 2012, the UNHCR rejected all Hmong asylum claims and told them to return to Vietnam, however this was overturned due to advocacy campaigning by a number of charities and US Hmong diaspora networks. In 2015, Doa was accepted as a refugee and given legal documentation to live and work in Bangkok, while awaiting his repatriation to a third country. In the meantime, he is the pastor to a congregation of Vietnamese Hmong Christians in Bangkok (where I met him), serving a community of up to 1000 asylum seekers. Although he cannot return, Doa is in contact with other Christians in Vietnam, giving advice and assistance to families who also want to flee the country. Furthermore, he has become an important channel of information and evidence for advocacy groups who are critical of human rights abuses in Vietnam.

Life for Hmong migrants in Bangkok can be dangerous and difficult – especially upon arrival, before they have learnt Thai language. These days, organised networks help them to seek refugee status upon arrival; 30 days later they are given a UNHCR card which gives them some legal recognition as an asylum seeker. They must then wait up to 3 years for an assessment interview, during which they must fend for themselves and find informal work – often in construction, transport or textiles. Asylum seekers will be informed of the result 6-12 months after the interview; if successful, they will secure more rights in country (such as the right to gain formal employment), but like Doa they still have to wait until another country is ready to host them, which is of course where most refugees want to end up. If their case is rejected, then appeals can take up to a year; during this time, they have no legal status and have to stay under the radar. Throughout this process, Christian networks are key actors in supporting Hmong migrants in both legal advice and practical support such as food distribution.

Predictably, the Vietnamese government denies all accusations of religious persecution, and claims that Hmong Christians in Bangkok are economic migrants. Doa maintains that most migrants have genuinely experienced persecution, but that many don’t have the evidence they need – namely, physical scars from torture or arrest warrant documents. Another Hmong Christian in Bangkok, Chien, is still waiting for the outcome of his family’s asylum application. He confided to me that he wasn’t a ‘proper refugee’, but that his family had left because of religious restrictions in Vietnam, and wanted to find somewhere to practise their religion freely. Despite being only 21, he is the only person in his extended family of 16 people in Bangkok who has managed to find work, and has a huge weight on his shoulders trying to provide for everyone. In spite of these hardships, it is

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125 Interview with BPSOS staff; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
126 Interview with Doa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
127 Interview with Chien; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
rare for even failed asylum seekers to return to Vietnam, since they usually sold off their land to fund the migration and would be liable to arrest upon return anyway.

Although the number of Hmong asylum seekers in Bangkok is insignificant compared to those who remained in Vietnam, they have had a disproportionate impact on raising the international profile of Vietnamese religious discrimination. As noted above, Hmong refugees have made contact with a plethora of organisations in Bangkok such as BPSOS,128 CSW,129 the Jesuit Refugee Service and so on. Doa’s story shows how Hmong Christians not only receive material and legal assistance from these organisations but are also actively utilising them to publicise the plight of their ethnic comrades in Vietnam. Doa claimed that many of the internet’s Hmong Christian persecution stories emerge because victims of state brutality in Vietnam call him via extensive Hmong Christian networks, then Doa reports this to an international organisation in Bangkok, who publish the story online in English language. The BBC Vietnamese language service also recently published a long article on Hmong Christian asylum seekers, based on testimonies information given by BPSOS.130

Such reports are then further circulated and latched on by other religious advocacy groups, US-based diaspora networks and international human rights watchdogs who have no direct contact with Vietnamese Hmong Christians, but who nevertheless lobby on their behalf. These networks of accountability have managed to exert some degree of pressure on the Vietnamese state, especially before 2007 when it was attempting to improve its international image in order to gain access to the World Trade Organisation. However, pressure groups failed to stop the US State Department from removing Vietnam from their list of ‘countries of particular concern’ regarding religious liberty. This may reflect the limits of minority group lobbying, when coming up against more powerful interests, namely, the White House’s desire to seek closer ties with Vietnam in recent years to counter the growing threat of regional Chinese hegemony. Conversely, the link between Hmong Christianity and human rights watchdogs feeds into and fuels the ‘hostile forces’ discourse within state narratives, as BPSOS is listed as one of the “reactionary forces actively opposing the Vietnamese State”.131

A similar secular human rights advocacy group called VETO! operates undercover in Vietnam by attempting to raise the awareness of legal rights among discriminated groups. The director, a German citizen of Vietnamese (Kinh) heritage, has made multiple trips to Vietnam’s highlands to promote human rights among Hmong communities. During a revealing interview, he said that to

128 ‘Boat People SOS’ is an US-based charity, largely supported by the Vietnamese diaspora and originally set up to support Vietnamese refugees from the American war.
129 Christian Solidarity Worldwide is a UK-based pressure group which advocates for religious freedom issues.
130 ‘ChuyểncuaThao[TheStoryofThao]’BBCVietnameseService,
https://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/resources/idt-sh/hmong_vietnamese (accessed 18/05/20)
his surprise, and in contrast to traditional villages, Christian villagers were very enthusiastic about human rights and said that they with already familiar with the principle of individual worth and dignity, if not the legal specifics, because they had learned it from their Bibles. So it seems this intimate link between human rights and Christianity in Vietnam’s highlands is a reinforced by both external practical input from the likes of pastor Hoa as well as a theological emphasis on individual rights. This foreshadows the issue of Christianity and the cultivation of individualism, given the commonly-held compatibility between human rights discourse and neoliberalism (Klein 2007, Marks 2013), which is returned to in Chapter 7.

The above sections on everyday forms of resistance and evasion show how Hmong Christians are not content with the official religious ‘framework’ but hold alternative visions of how life should be – and are prepared to act on them. This reveals the limit of state power in upland Vietnam, with governing authorities regularly resorting to violence and coercion when nationalist propaganda has failed. Furthermore, aggressive implementation of religious policy has even had counter-productive results (from a state perspective) by radicalising Hmong converts, prompting chaotic migration and drawing international attention to human rights abuses. It should also be reiterated that resistance and evasion tactics have not protected Hmong Christians from experiencing state persecution and economic destitution, prompting others to seek more conciliatory tactics.

**Ambivalent compliance**

Of course, the majority of Hmong Christians have not migrated, but instead adopt a combination of everyday resistance and compliance to differing degrees. Whilst compliance is often seen as a passive subordination to political authority, in fact active compliance or support “involves deliberate, perhaps even enthusiastic endorsement of the system” (Kerkvliet 2009: 234) and should therefore be treated as a tactic, like resistance or evasion. Hmong Christians in Vietnam are all too aware of their unenviable position in society, both at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy and as part of a suspect religious minority. Influential church leaders emphasised and taught the Biblical principles of submitting to authorities, regardless of whether they were good or bad. At the same time, the same leaders who advocate civil obedience also routinely break the law by organising unregistered meetings and ignoring religious restrictions, indicating that religious duty trumps loyalty to state.

One interesting slogan formulated by Mr Chu, the only official village elder I met who was also a Christian, was to “revere God and love the country” (kính Chúa yêu nước). While this may sound quite patriotic, the ‘love’ for the country is secondary and does not carry the same linguistic connotations of fear, respect or obedience as the ‘reverence’ for God. It was not an unequivocal

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132 Interview with Phuong; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
133 Interviews with Ban & Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
134 Interview with Chu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
endorsement of state legitimacy, but was rather explained to me in the context of why the Vietnamese authorities should not be afraid of, or discriminate against, Christianity. De Kadt (2009) notes that Protestantism promotes a particular respect for the rule of law, which may lead to challenges to political authority and demands for accountability when the rulers commit legal (or human rights) violations. This is salient for Hmong Christians who try to assert their religious freedom according to national law while, off the record, regularly complaining about local authority hypocrisy, corruption and embezzlement of public funds (see Chapter 5).

Church leaders directly contribute to civil obedience by discouraging underage marriages, encouraging couples to be legally registered, promoting school attendance and opposing the use or trade of illicit drugs. Indirectly, changes in Christian lifestyles and everyday behaviour are reported to be contributing to the fashioning of more governable, resilient subjects – this is explored in more detail in Chapter 7. In addition, some Christian communities choose to go above and beyond by actively ‘reaching out’ to unfriendly local authorities by inviting cadres to special Christian festivals (if they get permission) or presenting goodwill gifts at special occasions. Tensions remain, however; when I attended a Lunar New Year meal for which a Christian pastor has invited local cadres in Case Study Site 1 to his house, the non-Christians ended up sitting on a different table to Christians because the former wanted to drink alcohol, which is taboo for the latter (see Chapter 6).

These deliberate attempts at reconciliation reveal the agency of Hmong Christians, many of whom think that demonstrating the ‘practical improvements’ in their lifestyles has led to a general (though uneven) decrease in religious persecution.\(^{135}\) Others think that changes in government attitudes were more in response to Hmong resistance than compliance, as authorities realised that attempts to ‘persuade’ Christians to give up their faith were futile. Further evidence for the counter-productive effects of religious policy comes from government research which concluded that Christianity tended to be more ‘unstable’ and develop very rapidly in areas where persecution was strongest, while it was less ‘dynamic’ in regions where the authorities were more ‘relaxed’ about religious affairs.\(^{136}\)

At any rate, attitudes of government officials I interviewed were ambivalent, given the paradoxical combination of compliance and resistance tactics they encountered. On the one hand, they were deeply impressed (and sometimes threatened) by the authority which pastors wielded over their congregations, in contrast to their own experiences of Hmong villagers not complying with state-led development initiatives. People’s Council vice-president Long, of Case Study Site 1, said about pastor Seng (whom we will meet in Chapter 5): “whatever he says, then the people really listen. They really follow.”\(^{137}\) One former advisor to the Central Committee in Hanoi realised that Christian teaching was much more effective than government propaganda in influencing Hmong

\(^{135}\) Interviews with Hang / Si; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{136}\) Interview with Anh / Academic conference in Hanoi; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
\(^{137}\) Interview with Long; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
communities, and proposed that local cadres should learn from and work with pastors in order to
achieve their shared goals of “constructing a new countryside” (xây dựng nông thôn mới). However, his suggestions went unheeded at the time and are still outnumbered by voices of suspicion over the potential for dissent within a community where power is in the hands of non-state actors:

The role of pastors and missionaries is also crucial. Not only have they guided ethnic minorities spiritually, they have also aided them economically. The household income among Protestants in the upland areas has been growing for a variety of reasons including rejecting traditional customs such as expensive offerings at rituals and ceremonies, excessive drinking, and a general wasting of time and natural resources. They are also assisted in the learning of new skills, negotiating for lower interests for their loans, and in applying new economic models to their work. As such these pastors and missionaries have more influence over evangelized ethnic minorities than local officials, resulting in the state’s fear that it may lose the loyalty of the ethnic minorities. (Chung 2017: 5 emphasis added)

Intra-state contestations

Chung Van Hoang’s quote refers to the role of church leaders as new elites within their communities as well as the economic dynamics of lifestyle changes, which are explored in future chapters. For now, a few words will be devoted to what this chapter reveals about the Vietnamese state. For all the variety and nuances of Hmong Christian everyday political behaviour from different actors, there is just as little coherence in government religious policy and everyday practice (Gainsborough 2010a). First, the literature review of Vietnamese-language material showed debates between the academics and ministers, with a chronological trend of increasing acceptance of Christianity and decreasing scepticism of the ‘hostile forces’ plot over time. This is broadly reflected in the diminishing violence Hmong Christians have experienced more recently, however it is far from consistent as fresh conflicts have flared up in new ‘frontier’ zones where Hmong communities and local authorities are experiencing Christianity for the first time.

Second, both Hmong Christians and government officials acknowledged that geographical variation in church-state relations is partly contingent on the attitudes and interests of local officials on a provincial, district or even commune level. For instance, Lào Cai province’s ethnic and religious affairs have long been influenced by senior official and academic Dr Trần Hữu Sơn, who is author of a book on Hmong Culture (1996) and can be seen as a moderating force contributing to the gradual (relative) relaxation of religious discrimination. On the other hand, Hà Giang province remains very unwelcoming for Hmong Christians, and it is no coincidence that important provincial positions are held by members of the powerful Vường clan, who consistently produce negative reports about Hmong Christianity (cf. quotes on pages 111 and 133). These ethnic Hmong

138 Interview with Viet; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
ministers are descendants of Vương Chính Đứ, the so-called ‘Meo king’ who governed Đồng Văn, Hà Giang in the early 20th century, making deals with French and later Vietnamese communist authorities (see Chapter 2). Conversely, in specific locations with unusually positive church-state relations, such as in Village D, Hmong Christians tend to attribute this to the ‘skill’ of the church pastor in initiating the establishment of dialogue and cooperation.

Third, this leads to the observation that uneven religious persecution is also subject to ethnic variation regarding the composition of local officials. FEBC letters and fieldwork experience show that areas with large numbers of ethnic Hmong cadre, such as Case Study Site 3, are consistently more hostile towards Hmong Christianity than ethnic Kinh-dominated local authorities. During a 2016 conference for academics and policy makers in Hanoi which I attended, entitled “Researching the religious lives and beliefs of the Hmong people and implementing religious/ethnic policy in the Northwest at present”, ethnic Hmong presenters were much more critical of Christianity than ethnic Kinh presenters.\(^{139}\) This perhaps surprising finding is rooted in the historical alliance of traditional Hmong religious leaders and state actors, which is expounded in Chapter 5.

Fourth, to further complicate matters, Hierarchical variation refers to the contestations between central, provincial, district and commune-level authorities. For example, another pattern from the 2016 conference was that Hanoi-based presenters representing central ministries or research institutes were generally more accepting of the positive contributions of Christianity in Hmong society, while provincial religious affairs ministers tended to be more negative and continued to espouse the threat of Christianity being exploited for political unrest. The oft-quoted Vietnamese proverb “the king’s law yields to the village customs” (Phép vua thua lệ làng) may be relevant here. For example, these days central authorities often blame ‘backward’ local authorities for not understanding the law, ignoring new guidance from Hanoi and continuing to persecute Christians.\(^{140}\) On the other hand, Reimer (2014) argues that this narrative gives top officials a scapegoat on the international stage by shifting the blame onto local officials, whilst implicitly sanctioning ongoing persecution by not punishing or disciplining the offending officials.

Fifth and finally, there are also institutional differences intersecting the Vietnamese state, whereby various ministries and departments respond to Hmong Christianity according to diverse (and sometimes competing) agendas or incentives. It is widely known that the police and army are the most hostile state bodies towards Christianity, given their concerns with ‘national security’ and social order. Conversely, the fact that the majority of Christian interviewees who experienced police harassment continued to receive welfare provision (with a few exceptions) indicates that local People’s Committees were not exclusively dominated by police interests. Some Hmong Christian students in Hanoi are even studying subjects like ‘civil management’ in the hopes of securing a job in some ministry outside of the police, with discrimination being seen as uneven:

\(^{139}\) Academic conference in Hanoi; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.

\(^{140}\) Interview with Viet; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
Until 2009… civil service meant [cadres] couldn’t follow religion, and those who followed God means you couldn’t follow civil service. But the information I heard from local authorities is that from 2010 they will start selecting people from Christians for civil service jobs; that’s just what I heard, I don’t know yet whether it’s really like that or not… The political bureau just close their mouths about it, so do the religious affairs ministry; my friends who study say that they have religious freedom, but the police ministry just remain silent; they don’t say that they will relax [about religions], so I have to stick to civil management. As with anything [involving change], you have to wait for more time.¹⁴¹

Gainsborough conceptualises the Vietnamese state not as a coherent unit but rather an arena of competing interests and multiple contestations: “what comprises ‘the state’ rarely moves in the same direction, rarely works together, and rarely sings from the same hymn sheet” (2010a: 180). The general lack of clarity with which Hmong Christians have to base their decisions on in situating themselves vis-à-vis local authorities also resonates with Gainsborough’s observation that “[k]eeping people in a state of uncertainty about what they can and cannot do is a sure way of exercising power over them” (2010a: 181). However, this is only one side of the story; the next chapter reveals how Hmong Christian elites also have agency in negotiating intra-state contestations and using them to their advantage.

Conclusion: degrees of freedom within (and outside) the framework

This chapter has drawn out some of the reasons why the ‘freedom within the framework’ slogan makes little sense to the lived experiences of Hmong Christians in Vietnam. Firstly, the official legal provision for religious freedom has not been put into practice in the highlands: instead, Hmong Christianity has been engaged through the territorialisation lenses of national security and ‘internal stability’, both of which override matters of religious rights. State actions towards Hmong Christianity have ranged from everyday discrimination and monitoring to brutal persecution, which have not been applied consistently but depend on chronological, geographical, hierarchical, institutional and ethnic variations. This reveals the internal contestations and contradictions within the Vietnamese state which do not give a clear ‘framework’ to operate within, but which have generally caused a great deal of misery for Christians.

One poignant observation I have reflected upon is the general lack of outrage or anger communicated by Hmong Christians during interviews about state-sponsored persecution or discrimination, which has often had serious negative effects on their personal and economic situations. Some respondents would even laugh while recalling how they were beaten up or locked up in a school which had been converted into a temporary prison without even knowing what crime they had committed, but usually these rather traumatic accounts were conveyed in a very plain,

¹⁴¹ Focus group 5 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
matter-of-fact manner as if it was to be expected from the state. Cultural norms of displaying emotion notwithstanding, I wonder if this reflects a very low expectation on behalf of the Hmong for state authorities to have their best interests at stake, implying that the ‘social contract’ is not an especially insightful way of framing the relationship between Hmong Christians and the Vietnamese state (Fforde and Homutova 2017).

Hmong responses to state religious policies have been far from uniform, although they tend not to conform to early state narratives of hostile forces or millenarian plots. Everyday resistance is common as Christians routinely ignore official restrictions on religious activity and covertly organise meetings without state permission. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of Hmong Christians took more drastic evasive action by migrating to other parts of Vietnam or across the border, resulting in a polarisation of Christian and non-Christian Hmong communities. Other church groups actively comply with and reach out to local authorities in a bid to win their trust, however this paradoxical combination of everyday political strategies causes a headache for those attempting to govern and means that local authorities continue to show ambivalent, albeit improving, attitudes towards Christianity.

Everyday politics takes a nuanced perspective of empowerment by claiming that much of the activity which people undertake to improve their lot and exert their political power happens under the radar in subtle, unorganised ways, in contrast to the more visible forms of formal, communal empowerment initiatives. That is not to say that Hmong Christians have always been successful in achieving their goals of religious freedom and better economic prospects: some who migrated found themselves ‘out of the frying pan, into the fire’ of further hostility from foreign authorities and destitution on the run. Nevertheless, the more common tactics of everyday resistance of religious restrictions can arguably be credited with compelling the state to rethink its strategy of managing Hmong Christianity, while simultaneous active attempts by churches to demonstrate their positive influence on society are beginning to be noticed by state researchers (see Chapter 7).

State attempts to govern and control Hmong religious activities have been inflammatory and sometimes had unintended consequences: refusing scholarships for Christian students forces them to seek a religious education and become the next generation of church leaders, while persecution appears to fan the flames of Hmong anti-patriotic sentiment and fuel conversion and religious conviction. Seeking asylum abroad is a thorny topic since it represents an ideological threat of citizens expressing their rejection of the Communist Party’s rule by ‘voting with their feet’ – which is why it is so vehemently denied by the Vietnamese government. Meanwhile, divergent actions by both state and church actors have opened up a space of political ambiguity which some ambitious local church leaders have managed to occupy, giving rise to a new class of local Christian elites: this is the topic of the next chapter.
According to official Vietnamese literature,\(^{142}\) Hmong Protestantism is causing inter-generational disharmony and confrontation as younger Christians challenge and undermine the authority of elders who are less likely to embrace the new faith (Nguyễn 2009: 149). Prominent Hmong academic Vương Duy Quang puts it bluntly: “The belief of a number of Hmong in Vàng Trứ has made the shaman become ‘useless’” (Vương, D. Q. 2005: 193). Cao Nguyễn (2001) also sees the undermining of traditional leaders as a negative influence on Hmong culture. However, Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm (2016) sees it in a more positive light; Christian doctrine that everyone is equal before God contradicts traditional Hmong hierarchies, weakening the role of village elders or heads and “giving space for a ‘new class’ – those leaders of Protestant groups, pastors, evangelists, etc. – most of whom are young people” (Nguyễn 2016: 88).

Nguyễn Văn Minh notes that these new elites “aren’t only religious actors but ‘spokespersons’ of the community, acting on behalf of the village with regards to communicating and making proposals to the authorities” (Nguyễn 2010: 42). One government article reports that in Mường Chà, one of the poorest districts in all of Vietnam, a denomination’s leader received a relatively opulent salary of $300/month (Le 2009). A confidential Central Party paper pejoratively labels them ‘ringleaders’ with ‘low cultural standards’, some of whom are even illiterate (Anonymous 2008). Nevertheless, the author also urges the Party to integrate religious leaders into local authority structures, hoping for a more constructive dialogue between State and Protestant organisations. He even goes as far as recommending that local council ‘cultural houses’ should be offered as Sunday meeting venues for new Protestant groups without a church building – a very radical cooperation/co-option proposal given the antagonistic State-religion relationship in Vietnam seen in the last chapter.

The above excerpts touch upon many factors accompanying a subtle but crucially important power shift within Hmong communities of upland Vietnam: the rise of new Christian elites. Whether acting as ‘development consultants’ and ‘brokers’ for their communities, challenging local authority power, mimicking state forms of governance or accumulating wealth and prestige for themselves, the political and economic implications of this emerging trend cannot be underestimated. It contributes to the broader questions of the thesis by highlighting the contextual specificities of religious, political and economic intersections in Vietnam’s highlands, as cultural concepts of power and authority create surprising political opportunities for some Christian leaders – in the context of changing religious norms and low levels of state legitimacy among marginalised highland communities. This chapter affirms the agency of Hmong elites in reading conjunctures, identifying potential for action, and rearticulating political discourses (Sum and Jessop 2013: 219), some of which are more empowering and redistributive than others. Furthermore, the male

\(^{142}\) See Chapter 4 for a contextualisation of Vietnamese language government and academic literature about Hmong religious change.
dominance of both traditional and new religious elite positions has significant implications for shaping and reformulating gender relations within Christianisation (see Chapter 6).

**Chapter Outline**

This chapter begins with an analysis of traditional Hmong forms of religious power, which explains why church leaders wield such spiritual *and* political authority. In particular, I draw on Mai Na Lee’s concept of Hmong elites as ‘political brokers’, negotiating between state agendas and villager aspirations. Equally important to consider are national and transnational religious networks which can be seen as new ‘patrons’ in addition to the state, providing alternative sources of funding, networking and education opportunities. Existing and aspiring pastors are ideally positioned to tap into new financial and information flows, thereby assuming an informal role akin to Lewis and Mosse’s ‘development brokers’ (2006). The next section provides some general classifications of different generations of church leaders in order to identify the features of the most powerful emerging Christian elites.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on three extended case studies which illustrate the power, ambitions and tactics of Hmong Christian elites: Phu the evangelist-cum-business-consultant for Hmong students, Ban’s success story in bringing market and tourism to Village D, and Seng’s rise to political influence amidst controversy balancing competing patrons. These narratives show how these prominent leaders combine spiritual authority, charisma and extensive networks to impact local political economies in both accumulative and empowering ways. Powerful pastors may act as rival authorities to state actors because of their ability to mobilise and advocate on behalf of their Hmong congregations. At the same time as critiquing government corruption, they may also mimic some of the state’s technologies of governance in their attempts to mobilise their communities and expand Protestant influence.

**Everyday elites and methodological issues**

Given the thesis emphasis on everyday actors and agency, this chapter’s focus on ‘elites’ requires a few words of justification. Attempts to loosely define elites as “those with close proximity to power” (Lilleker 2003: 207) imply that there is a spectrum of ‘elite-ness’ dependent on many variables including source of power, type of power, proximity, etc. Hmong church leaders have little-to-no formal state recognition, but on a local level they are often very influential because of the relative authority they hold in the community (Chung 2017). Furthermore, within this group of religious leaders, there is a minority who have also accrued significant economic resources and now belong to the wealthier ‘non-subsistence’ class (see Chapter 3), enabling them to further specialise in political and development brokerage. This chapter centres around the stories of three such pastors who should be treated as elites compared to the average Hmong farmer, even though
they may be seen as marginal (or be completely unacknowledged) within wider Vietnamese politics.

Empirical fieldwork reveals that such religious elites play a crucial role in both perpetuating Hmong Christianisation and channelling its empowering and disempowering effects; as other chapters show, they cannot be ignored in everyday livelihoods dynamics, church-state relations or gender relations. Everyday political economy does not seek to marginalise the importance of the dominant or reify the agency of the weak; rather, it should “analyse the interactive relationship between the two; one that in many ways constitutes a dialogical, negotiative relationship” (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007: 14). Conceptually, this chapter adds a layer of complexity by exploring the role of ‘everyday elites’ or middle-men who mediate such dominant-weak relationships as nodes within broader webs of power relations, often with feet in different camps.

At the same time, this thesis highlights the everyday, mundane ways in which such religious elites wield power in their communities – with both empowering and oppressive aspects. Much of the data for this chapter takes a narrative form as I compare the stories church leaders tell with the perspectives of others in the community, participant observation of pastors’ behaviour in both religious and social settings as well as media reports where relevant. Claims which pastors made about their own actions and influence are thus triangulated and corroborated or contested as far as is possible within the confines of a politically sensitive research environment (see Appendix 2). Nevertheless, there remains the problem of village power imbalances which may have discouraged church members from voicing negative opinions about their leaders in interviews. This made the ethnographic element of my research methods all the more important, since it could move beyond interview data to more critical insights through observations of a pastor’s behaviour or contesting claims made through off-the-cuff remarks or jokes within informal exchanges (Forsey 2011).

Hmong politico-religious structures

In his analysis of modern peasant politics in Thailand, Walker (2012) demonstrates that embedded perceptions of power as dispersed, ambivalent and accessible through a variety of material and spiritual means have important ramifications for Thai politics. In order to understand the prominence of Hmong Christian elites, therefore, it is necessary to contextualise the localised and geographical concepts and forms of power that constitute upland Vietnam’s ‘spiritual landscape’ (Allerton 2009). Hmong traditional worldviews are variously classified as animist (Chindarsi 1976), shamanist, pantheist (Tapp 1989b) or indeed not a religion at all (Borja 2014). In stark contrast to Christianity, the lack of consensus and wide regional variety in traditional belief is unproblematic for practitioners: “The inconsistency or even contradiction between two sets of beliefs does not give the Hmong any concern. They are interested in gaining practical benefits from the spirits, not in orthodoxy of belief” (Chindarsi 1976: 17).
In a spiritual landscape of both benevolent and malevolent forces – house spirits, mountain or forest spirits, and personal spirits (Tapp 1989b) – Hmong shamans traditionally play a unique mediating role in resolving practical problems (e.g. illness) as well as ensuring spiritual harmony in key life cycle ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. This service can also be seen as a form of livelihood – while practising shamans I interviewed did not articulate it in these terms, Hmong Christians often (rather cynically) pointed out the fee shamans exacted from performing funeral ceremonies and healing rituals, in addition to the animals which needed to be sacrificed. In contrast to Culas’s claim that the shaman’s spiritual efficacy “confers upon him no superior status, no political role” (2004b: 102), my findings support other research which point to the intimate connection between religious and political leadership, since there is no clear distinction between spiritual and secular spheres:

foreigners and officials are considered “strange” and unpredictable just like the spirits; therefore the person best equipped to deal with these capricious powers is the shaman. In a recent study of a Hmong commune in Yen Bai province [Vietnam], it was found that all Communist Party cadres and ex-cadres were simultaneously shamans! (Corlin 2004: 304)

This revealing observation helps explain why ethnic Hmong cadres were particularly hostile to Christianity, going ‘above and beyond’ central government edicts and taking the law into their own hands in their attempts to stop conversions (see the previous chapter). While Kinh officials have regarded Christianity with suspicion as a threat to social stability and possibly a plot of ‘hostile forces’, Hmong officials additionally recognise the personal threat to their authority within the Hmong community, since their legitimacy rests partly on their role within the traditional religious system. This antagonism is of course fuelled by the Christian framing of traditional religious activity as ‘evil’, and traditionally placated spirits as demonic. Some Hmong Christians were disappointed that their ethnic comrades inflicted such hardship on them – “it [is] sad that Hmong people go against each other” – but this should not come as a surprise, as Hmong history is in fact rife with intra-ethnic conflict and power struggles (Lee 2015).

Tâm Ngô (2016) identifies another fault line which has intersected with religious division, namely, linguistic variation. Most high-ranking Hmong cadres in Vietnam speak the ‘Green Hmong’ dialect and the official Hmong script, devised by the Vietnamese communists in 1950s but not widely used, is based on Green Hmong pronunciations. On the other hand, FEBC radio broadcasts were in ‘White Hmong’, a mutually intelligible dialect which is more associated with Hmong populations in Laos, Thailand and the diasporas. Christians in Vietnam have leapt at the chance to study the missionary-created RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet) in order to read the RPA Bible translation which, despite being primarily used to write White Hmong, is widely considered to be easier to

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143 Interview with Sua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
144 Interviews with Dao / Gia / Mua & Khou; see Appendix Figures 21 & 22.
145 Anonymous response letter from Hmong listeners (1994), reproduced with permission from FEBC.
learn than the official script.\textsuperscript{146} However, Green Hmong-speaking cadres criticise the RPA as the language of ‘American Hmong’, and have tried to promote the official script as a counter to growing White Hmong/Christian influence (Ngô 2016: 58). This campaign appears to be largely unsuccessful, as the Kinh-dominated central government shows little interest in promoting any minority script and local pleas for funding to teach Hmong in schools have fallen on deaf ears.\textsuperscript{147}

Historian Mai Na Lee (2015) has developed a useful model for recognising the dynamic relationships between Hmong local elites and state actors. Researching Hmong leadership during rebellions and peacetime within French Indochina between 1850 and 1960, she observes a cycle between two types of chiefs: “the prophet or messianic leader who rejects the state and proclaims the Mandate of Heaven; and the secular political broker who, with state backing, achieves paramountcy as the supreme chief or ethnic representative of the Hmong” (2015: 12). After messianic revolts against French colonial exploitation were invariably defeated, the Hmong would temporarily accept a political broker as leader, but in times of political or economy distress the broker would be overthrown by a new millenarian prophet who directly opposed the state (2015: 26).

Whereas the messianic leader’s legitimacy comes from both traditional religious authority and charismatic (often supernatural) powers, the political broker may also display charisma but relies primarily on state patronage for ‘legal-rational’ authority, in terms of Weberian ideal types. Knowledge of the state language and literacy is essential for the political broker to negotiate agreements with the state; the challenge is “to balance Hmong aspirations to be free and the state’s desire to extract goods and services as well as impose assimilation” (Lee 2015: 33). The latter role also came with economic perks from state patronage, enabling a level of social prestige similar to the ‘big men’ in historical Central Highlands ethnic minority communities:

\textit{Usually such ‘big men’ were very influential in one or even several villages by virtue of their position in the trade networks that linked Uplands with Lowlands and Highlanders with Vietnamese, Laotian, Siamese and Chinese traders and polities. Their political and ritual status depended on their wealth, their military prowess, and their capacity for organizing feasts, which would ensure their ritual primacy within their village. (Salemink 2011)}

While Hmong Christian conversion in Vietnam has had millenarian elements (see Chapter 4), Mai Na Lee’s binary leadership cycle does not perfectly fit with recent experiences, since modern Hmong millenarian movements are no longer openly violent affairs (Rumsby 2020). Instead, Christian elites who initially started their leadership in the fires of persecution, promoting ‘illegal’ activities (such as unregistered church gatherings) and evading local authorities, are gradually adapting their role to resemble that of the political broker – negotiating with, submitting to, and

\textsuperscript{146} Interviews with Ho / Hoa / Tra & Phinh; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\textsuperscript{147} Interview with Sau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
occasionally even gaining legitimacy from, the state. The most potent pastors also exhibit some aspects of Mai Na Lee’s messianic leadership such as impressive charisma and supernatural ability, yet more widespread are their ‘secular’ broker credentials: fluency and literacy in the state (Vietnamese) language, familiarity with legal and bureaucratic structures, strong negotiating skills and, sometimes, state patronage.

**Christian networks as competing patrons**

According to Mai Na Lee, “while the Hmong yearn for independence, the legitimacy of their leaders has [historically] rested largely on outside patronage” (2015:12). To add a new variation, however, in Vietnam there are now alternative sources of legitimacy, wealth and power to the state in the form of national and international external Christian networks. It should be stressed that the overwhelming majority of Hmong Christians in Vietnam have never interacted with wealthy foreign missionaries, and most converted in a context of relative isolation from wider Christian networks: it took Hmong believers several years to even make initial contact with the ethnic Kinh Protestant church in Hanoi in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, more recently, with the relaxation of visa restrictions for foreign workers and the expansion of denominational networks in the Northern highlands, certain well-placed Hmong Christians have been able to access alternative sources of finance, information and business opportunities through Christian networks. Ngô (2016) devotes a whole chapter to the ‘remittance of faith and modernity’ passed through two-way relationships between the USA Hmong diaspora and Vietnamese Christians, however she doesn’t explore the impacts of these relationships on local elite contestations. My fieldwork suggests that they cannot be underestimated as an alternate source of power to those who may be excluded from state-led development agendas.

For example, for young Hmong Christians who are unable to access a government scholarship (see Chapter 4), the costs of both tuition and living expenses in a big city like Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City are immense, well out of financial reach for an average Hmong income. Moreover, Ngô (2016: 117) highlights the risks of poor rural Hmong trying to find urban work without the right connections to be duped and exploited. However, a number of alternative support options have now emerged for Christian students through various denominations and organisations. The Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) in Hanoi has opened a Bible school on their premises in the city centre and allow ethnic minority students (most of whom are Hmong) to stay in halls of residence for a very low rent, with similar initiatives through other denominations in Ho Chi Minh City.

The Hanoi Hmong Student Fellowship, which receives funding from a number of churches and individuals from the Hmong diaspora in USA, rents a 2-storey apartment which houses over a dozen students and acts as a base for religious activities, but also functions as an invaluable short-term lodging for Hmong passers-by from rural areas who need somewhere to stay in Hanoi while
they look for work, or if they have a hospital appointment, and so on. In addition, foreign Christians living in the city have connected with these students and are offering free English lessons to ‘empower’ them in the face of ethnic discrimination – this opportunity was open to ethnic minorities of any or no faith, but almost all the students in the classes I visited were Hmong Christians.\(^{148}\)

While the majority of Hmong Christians in the big cities are studying theology, they learn a lot more than the Bible as they are exposed to a fully marketised, consumer-oriented environment with new ways of thinking, earning a living and monetarised moral economies (Truitt 2013) – one student described it as “like opening up my mind up to a new world”.\(^ {149}\) During a ‘theology’ class I observed in Hanoi, the teacher Phu (to whom we return later) spent the session teaching students about basic accounting and how to start a business, after it emerged that many students were in financial difficulty. This demonstrates the Hmong teacher’s holistic understanding of religious education: he was prepared to teach practical skills needed by students used to a semi-subsistence lifestyle in the countryside. Other classes provided by Christian networks include teaching on marriage, parenting and family budgeting: these are attended not only by students but also Hmong pastors living in the countryside who attend Christian meetings in the city and return to pass on the teaching to their congregations. Such networks also give Hmong pastors the opportunity to meet foreign Christians, which opens up other economic opportunities such as promoting tourism in home villages.

National and transnational Christian networks can have a significant developmental impact, however access to these potential benefits is uneven. Main denominations which are officially recognised by the government are better funded and can organise regional meetings more easily than smaller, unregistered church groups. Access to student networks seems to be spread quite widely by word of mouth, and even those from extremely remote and poor provinces can, and do, study at Bible school; the majority (but by no means all) of theology students were male. Crucially, the primary beneficiaries of most financial and information flows are either church leaders or aspiring church leaders. This often leads to pastors being the most well-connected, and sometimes the wealthiest people in their Christian communities. The extent to which these benefits are accumulated or redistributed to others in the community varies, as will be explored below.

Wells-Dang (2007) highlights the demand of religious NGOs for local partners: since the total number of Vietnamese Protestants is fairly low, so the many international Protestant groups are “tripping over themselves to work with them” (2007: 420). While religious investment is easier in big cities, for now international Christian organisations have limited direct access to remote highland areas, which have greater restrictions or controls on the activity of religious NGOs (with a

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\(^{148}\) Interview with Kim; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.

\(^{149}\) Interview with No & Su; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
few exceptions). Instead, these new patrons must rely on Hmong Christian elites to channel their influence into local communities, in a similar role to Lewis & Mosse’s ‘development brokers’:

skilled brokers (managers, consultants, fieldworkers, community leaders…) who read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters, constantly creating interest and making real… against the ever-present threat of fragmentation. Brokers deal in people and information not only for profit in the narrow sense of immediate reward, but also more broadly in the maintenance of coherent representations of social realities and in the shaping of their own social identities. (Lewis and Mosse 2006: 16)

While Lewis and Mosse are specifically concerned with the local actors employed or funded by external NGOs, Hmong pastors face comparable tasks in representing the local populations, expressing their ‘needs’ (Bierschenk et al. 2002) and translating for external Christian donors. As with state patronage, this gives some Hmong pastors and evangelists considerable authority as spokesmen, and in the best-case scenario they may even be able to select or play off competing patrons. However, as seen in the case studies below, by “maintaining the tensions which provide the dynamic of their actions”, ambitious church brokers have to face “in two directions at once” (Wolf 1956: 66) by balancing the interests of patrons with the aspirations and concerns of local congregations, or else risk losing legitimacy.

Generational features

Hundreds of thousands of Hmong Christians in Vietnam equate to thousands of congregations and perhaps tens of thousands of church leaders (mostly men), both official and unofficial. Almost all of them will have experienced the hostility of, and subsequently usurped the position of, traditional religious leaders. While invariably holding a prestigious role within their congregations, there is wide variation in the degree to which pastors attain enough power to become political or development brokers in the ways formulated above. In this section we consider some general features and examples of different Christian leaders, in order to reveal which demographic of leaders are most likely to become significant political elites. Despite Christianity reaching the Vietnamese Hmong only 30 years ago, already three distinct generations of Christian leaders can be identified.150

The first and oldest generation of leaders are those who converted as adults through hearing FEBC radio broadcasts in the late 1980s or early 1990s. These leaders may have already had positions of power in the community, or they may have been the first to listen the radio station in their village, and thereby assumed spiritual leadership. Being isolated in the highlands and with no other means of Christian communication than the radio, this generation led unofficial church groups for years through often severe government persecution and discrimination. Many were uneducated, illiterate,

150 Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
and by the time they made contact with wider church denominations in the late 1990s, this first generation of leaders had large families to provide for with little means of, or desire to, go to theology school. Although they have now learnt to read the Hmong script in order to read and teach from newly imported Bibles, most of them do not have the official title of ‘pastor’ because they have no formal training. First generation teaching tends to focus primarily on ‘spirituality’ or morality rather than ‘worldly’ affairs such as business or politics, perhaps due to their first-hand experience of persecution and lack of education.\(^{151}\) While leaders of this generation are therefore unlikely to engage in political brokerage with state actors, they are still able to tap into Hmong-language Christian networks.

One example of this first generation is Ky, a 49-year-old married man living in Bac Kan province with 8 children and several grandchildren. Ky heard the Gospel from the “American radio” and converted in 1995, aged 28, along with his whole family and most of the village.\(^{152}\) He receives no salary for leading the local church group since the tithes are too small, like most leaders of his generation – indeed, a prerequisite for denominational ordination is for the local church to financially support the pastor.\(^{153}\) Therefore, Ky balances his religious duties with growing rice and maize, raising pigs and cows. He never went to school and is proficient but not fluent in Vietnamese; nevertheless, in his village Ky is by far the most connected with the lowlands, having ethnic Kinh acquaintances and occasionally visiting Hanoi for Christian conferences. At one such meeting, Ky met a Hmong man from Thailand who advised him a technique for raising pigs, which Ky implemented upon return and it yielded impressive results. He was also advised by Phu (see below) not to buy any more mountain land, but instead to invest in land down by the road, which is accessible by motorbike. Heeding this advice has improved his livelihood opportunities, and Ky is now persuading his fellow villagers to “have a long-term mindset” and move downhill, interestingly echoing a 1980s government territorialisation Hạ Sơn campaign to forcefully “Move [the Hmong] Down from the Mountains” away from ‘undesirable locations’ near the borderlands (Ngô 2016: 23, see also Chapter 2).

The second generation of Hmong leaders also converted to Christianity via FEBC broadcasts during the 1990s or were teenagers when their parents converted. The major difference is that they were younger than the first generation and more likely to have attended school, since access to education in the Northern highlands improved markedly during the 1980s/90s. Furthermore, these young people were mobile enough to take advantage of opportunities to attend theology training once their communities had established contact with wider church denominations. In general, this second generation of leaders are more likely to be official pastors, more fluent in Vietnamese and better connected outside of their villages. Within denomination hierarchies they have surpassed the

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\(^{151}\) Interview with Toa / Focus group 6 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.

\(^{152}\) Interview with Ky; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\(^{153}\) Interview with Ban, see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
first generation in positions of authority, reflecting the ‘anti-traditional’ Christian disregard of age hierarchy which official documents criticise (Cao 2001: 17).

For instance, Pastor Hoang is 31 years old and lives in Case Study Site 1 with his wife and 4 children. He converted aged 15 in 1999 after visiting relatives in Lau Chai province, starting his own church group upon returning home. Becoming a Christian afforded Hoang opportunities to travel to both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, where he could see how others lived and learn from them – especially “how to earn extra money”. A few years ago, he managed to rent out some land to a mobile phone company, who have built a signal tower, guaranteeing him a steady income. Although Hoang learned about this way of earning money from someone else and he took steps to approach the company, he attributed his financial prosperity directly to God’s blessing. Now he drives the most expensive motorcycle in the village and invested in building a small restaurant for tourists, where he employed another Hmong Christian, but the business venture turned out to be unsuccessful. Hoang complains that he is always too busy, with other members of Hoang’s congregation making use of his Vietnamese proficiency and familiarity with official procedures by requesting him to represent them to state bodies, for example, in order to register a motorbike license.

The third generation of leaders (or soon-to-be leaders) comprises those who were born into already-Christian families. As a result, unlike the first or second generations, they do not have conversion narratives of persecution and lifestyle changes. Some of them do not really know any Hmong non-Christians, since many have grown up in villages where everyone identifies as Christian. Perhaps because of this, this third generation are more aware or concerned about those who were ‘real’ Christians and those who called themselves Christians but did not ‘really’ practise it, a distinction not mentioned by older church leaders. They are also the most well-educated and well-travelled; I interviewed them at theology schools in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh, where they were living and studying – an opportunity unavailable to earlier generations. Their exposure to lowland church structures also means that this third generation expect to be at least partly paid for their role as pastors. Another unique feature is that some theology students are women, although it is unclear whether they will be allowed to become pastors in the future (see Chapter 6).

28-year-old Trong is a typical third-generation leader who was born into a Christian family in Tuyên Quang, now married with one son. His parents made huge sacrifices – selling buffalo, pigs and possessions – to allow Trong to study theology in Ho Chi Minh City for seven long years. This education and experience profoundly affected him, so that when he returned to his home village Trong noticed that he could see business opportunities that others didn’t. As a full-time pastor (with a church salary), he has no time to exploit these opportunities so instead he guides

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154 Interview with Hoang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
155 Interview with Gia / Focus groups 4 & 7 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figures 21 & 22.
156 Interview with Trong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
other Christians to engage in trade in order to ‘develop’. For instance, as a result of Trong’s encouragement, three households invested in renting a truck to transport bananas to export directly to China, thus cutting out the ethnic Kinh former middlemen. This was very successful and Trong used this to evidence the positive impact of Christianity to antagonistic local authorities. In his opinion, the Hmong are afraid of doing business and too risk-averse, even when they have enough investment capital; he considers education to be crucial for changing this mindset among the next generation, so that they can develop and don’t ‘fall behind’ any further.

The above examples hint at the ways in which church leaders are exposed to new ideas, education and external contacts which are not directly available to their fellow villagers, giving them economic advantages that may be translatable to other members of the community. In addition to the religious authority they already possess which extends to the political realm, church leaders gain further respect and legitimacy as community spokespersons when they travel out of the village and bring back new advice on livelihoods, market economy opportunities or administrative procedures. This everyday transfer of knowledge and, more rarely, funding, is arguably at the heart of Christianity’s potential developmental impact on Hmong communities, making church leaders key actors in the story of religious and economic transformation in Vietnam’s highlands.

At present, the most prominent Hmong Christian elites come from the second generation of leaders, though they will doubtless be eclipsed by the third generation over time. Leadership generations here are determined by age at conversion and do not fit precisely into strict demographic boxes; for example, 29-year-old Seng is a young member of the second generation because he became Christian as a teenager (early 2000s), while Phu is older but technically belongs to the third generation because he was just a baby when his family converted (late 1980s). The following case studies of three of the most influential Hmong pastors in Vietnam detail the potential powers, ambitions, challenges and opportunities of this new class of Christian leaders.

**Phu: evangelist and business consultant**

33-year-old Phu was one of my research assistants, and is perhaps the most well-connected and well-travelled Hmong Christian I met in all of Vietnam. Although his wife and two daughters live in his home village in Tuyên Quang province, Phu is based in Hanoi where he teaches part-time at a Bible school for ethnic minority students as well as running his own tourist agency. Previously, Phu worked full-time as an itinerant ‘evangelist’, travelling around the Northern highlands to train other church leaders in religious matters whilst simultaneously giving livelihoods advice (as in the example of Ky above). Once Phu had children, he found that the church salary was not enough to provide for his family, so he started his own tour-guide business on the side, finding his niche in the market by advertising online and targeting the US diaspora entirely in Hmong language.

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157 See Appendix 1 Figure 1.
In his days as an evangelist, Phu found himself on the wrong side of the law a few times, once being arrested and imprisoned for ‘smuggling’ Hmong-language Bibles across the Chinese border and another time for accompanying an ethnic Kinh evangelist in a ‘politically sensitive’ area. These days, however, Phu’s role as a tour-guide requires actively building friendships (and even drinking alcohol) with civil servants and police officers, in order to secure official permission to take tourists to various parts of the highlands. Since changing his stance towards the government from resistance to cooperation, Phu must keep his relationships with policemen secret from his theology students, as he does not to give the impression that he is ‘doing business’ with the police, which is considered inappropriate by many Christians who have experienced police brutality.

Phu’s extensive networks give him considerable influence, enabling him to channel not just advice but also financial support from wealthier patrons to ordinary Hmong Christians. When his cousin was about to abandon his teacher training due to financial difficulties, Phu used his connections to secure a hardship scholarship from a Christian fund in Ho Chi Minh City (which of course most Hmong people would never have known about): the cousin went on to complete his studies and became the first Hmong schoolteacher in the entire district. Phu’s financial success paid for his two younger brothers to study at university without government scholarships: now they have moved to the Central Highlands to start a pepper plantation. Although he is not an official church pastor like other Christian elites, Phu has a powerful role in shaping the younger generation of Hmong leaders who study under his teaching in Hanoi. Indeed, students who also want to access the tourism industry are copying his online marketing strategies by targeting the Hmong US diaspora.

Phu criticises Hmong churches who become dependent on external funding, and actively promotes the importance of business to his students, in opposition to older church leaders who see it as ‘worldly’. Phu laments his fellow Hmong who live in poverty and miss chances to improve their lot because, in his opinion, they “refuse to change their thinking” or are too afraid to try new ways of earning a living. Instead, Phu encourages the Hmong to take a leaf from the book of the Kinh who are “born for the economy” (sinh ra để làm kinh tế). This perception of the business-savvy (and potentially untrustworthy) lowlanders was shared by other ethnic minority students, who make a linguistic joke that the Kinh majority derive their ethnonym from the word for ‘business’ (kinh doanh). Phu is also unique among Hmong Christians I interviewed in his appreciation of Hmong traditional music, customs and history, perhaps due to greater interaction with non-Christians on his travels. Nevertheless, he does not regret that most Hmong Christians have abandoned traditional culture because, in his words, “none of those things ever helped us develop in the past”.

Phu’s case bears strong resonances with other religion and development literature (see Chapter 1), especially regarding Pentecostal/Charismatic churches led by ‘highly entrepreneurial’ pastors who start new churches, organisations and companies from scratch (Heslam 2014: 367). In China,
Nanlai Cao focuses on Christian pastors who are enthusiastic about “applying Bible principles to enterprise management” and “transforming faith to productivity” (2010: 66) while facing similar ambiguities to Phu in justifying their negotiations with local state actors – the church’s former enemy – to facilitate religious and economic activities. In addition, a key shared theme in many studies is the radical ‘break with the past’ (Meyer 1998), both in terms of abandoning traditional practices (Scheer 2017) and also adopting new economic rationales (Freeman 2012a). These comparisons with Pentecostalism and neoliberal governmentality is explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

**Ban: the Village D success story**

Pastor Ban is a shrewd 42-year-old man with 5 children living in Village D (case study site 2); another villager called him “the most intelligent person” who knows everyone and “has friends everywhere”. As the first person to convert in his village of around 100 Hmong households in 1992, aged 18, he became the default church leader (now about three quarters of the village are Christian). Five years later, Ban travelled to China for three years to study theology: it was a big financial and emotional sacrifice to leave his wife and children to fend for themselves, but he considered it necessary for the welfare of the village:

> At that time, firstly… the whole village was addicted to smoking [opium]. I didn’t know how to change this village. Secondly, the authorities persecuted us very badly. So I wanted to study, in order that when I returned, for instance, I could equip them with knowledge, so we could withstand the persecution of the authorities, and then change my community in order to move away from this misery. So I was determined… whatever hardship, I would try and work hard to study and return.

In 1999 Ban returned home only to learn that his church denomination, the ECVN, did not recognise the Chinese Bible school qualifications, so in the following years he attended more Christian leadership lessons in Hanoi, travelling there for a week at a time and staying in church-provided accommodation. Through these trips and regional meetings, Ban has developed extensive Christian networks and is now the denominational leader for Hmong churches in his province. Although Village D has a Christian village elder and two (non-Christian) Party cadres, pastor Ban displays the most influential leadership in the community. His legitimacy as leader rests on a mutually reinforcing combination of spiritual authority, financial success, and strong connections outside the village. Despite initial tensions after conversion, Ban has cultivated good relationships with the local authorities by adopting the ‘active compliance’ tactic described in Chapter 4, namely, giving gifts to them at new year and encouraging his congregation to obey the law. Ban also sold some land for the border guard to build a sentry post there (near the Chinese border) in exchange

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160 Interview with So; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
161 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
for a car, which is a huge status symbol as he is probably the only Hmong car owner in the province.

Over the past five years, Pastor Ban has persuaded his fellow villagers to embark on a number of remarkable endeavours using communal funding and labour, which have transformed his village from an impoverished backwater to a thriving tourist destination: building 5km of road from their remote village down to the main road, establishing a weekly market from scratch and connecting to the power grid for electricity. In Ban’s words, some non-Christian villagers didn’t want ‘civilisation’ to reach their village, but he was able to win over the majority with a vision of shared economic benefits. Now the main road enables villagers to sell flowers and livestock, either directly to visiting customers or to traders who can drive large vehicles up there. Furthermore, the market brings crucial trade and wealth into the village which makes it easier for most to earn a living than previously, and the rent paid by stallholders goes directly to the church. Hmong Christians from near and far visit what is reputedly now the wealthiest Hmong village in all of Northern Vietnam, to learn from and buy peach tree or orchid seeds to try planting back home.

Ban has been confronted about his close relationship with local authorities by other church leaders, who think pastors should not get embroiled in worldly affairs. There also appears to be some rivalry between Ban and village elder Chu, who has a small government salary. Despite also being a Christian, Chu played down the role of church input in the village’s transformation, instead pointing to his own leadership and mobilisation as representative of the local authorities. This alternative narrative of state-led development is propagated by official websites about the village’s progress, however it is not supported by most of the villagers I interviewed. A Hmong visitor from another village said the difference with Village D is that “they know how to calculate [tính toán]; they have a pastor who works to make things convenient, they know how to work, so they’re better off, richer”. Market stallholders and locals spoke of their gratitude towards the church, pointing to conversion as the crucial turning point in the village’s fortunes:

But only when… she realised that God loved her, only after that did she receive God, only after that did her life change; and that they have as much as they do now, it’s also because of God. Without God, they’d be very poor… She says that if they didn’t have God, they’d surely be very poor… they’d have nothing to eat, would live in a rickety old house which you can see into from outside. She said that God has taught them a lot, which has made them change a lot, so that they could have as much as now… She says that before she believed in God, it was like in her thinking there was worry, and it was very foggy and unclear, and lots of worries, like about making offerings and the like. But after believing in God, she felt more comfortable, at peace and happy.

162 Interview with Chu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
163 Interview with Hang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
164 Interview with Bau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Before I followed God, I thought I would work on, say, some plan and think, at the end of the year I will harvest and see if I have anything, but at the end of the year when harvesting, I didn’t have anything, just a little bit – not enough to eat. But now I follow God, when I start a plan, I think, I’ll just give it a go and I’m not sure whether it will work. But at the end of the year, when I harvest, I had a really big harvest for my family, so when I think about it, I feel within me that certainly God blessed me; now I work little but earn a lot. But in the past, I worked a lot but earned little.  

These quotes also allude to the ways in which Hmong Christians perceive economic change as driven both directly by internal, spiritual transformations which cause them to think differently, and also indirectly by external, supernatural blessings. These themes, as well as references to ‘civility’ and ‘calculativity’ in the above paragraphs, are returned to in Chapter 7.

**Keeping the state at arm’s length?**

After seeing their progress on the main road, the local authorities decided to support the initiative by contributing some raw materials for the road and electricity pylons. In 2015 the village was designated as an official tourist destination, which had a huge economic impact as it gave villagers permission to use their houses as homestays for both national and foreign tourists. The village is situated near an impressive waterfall, but Ban attributes this ‘blessing’ to the fact that villagers take care of the natural environment, which in turn stems from his preaching about the Biblical sanctity of creation. Nevertheless, his good relationship with local authorities must also have been a crucial factor. During my fieldwork in Village D, pastor Ban let the head of his commune (who is also Hmong) borrow his car, who in turn consulted Ban for advice on how to organise an upcoming cultural performance event.

Pastor Ban is well aware of contestations within the political economy of tourist development. “We want to learn from the experience of other [tourist] areas like [Case Study Site 1]”, he said, where the Kinh reap all the benefits of ‘ethnic tourism’ while the Hmong on display get almost nothing. Because Ban is trying not to let outsiders get a foothold in their village, he wanted the villagers to build everything themselves, so that they wouldn’t owe anyone anything. In other Hmong tourist sites such as in Site 1, tourist entrance tickets are sold by local authorities who pocket the revenue and discontented locals don’t see any direct benefits. In contrast, ticket sales and market stall rental income of Village D is administered by a village council consisting of 3 or 4 members (including both Ban and Chu), who allocate the funds for village maintenance or market infrastructure and do not pay anything on to the commune People’s Committee.

Villagers refused to sell off the waterfall land, but this is an ongoing threat. Local authorities gave Ban a deadline to start building a larger tourist resort by next year, otherwise they would forcibly

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165 Interview with Cao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
166 Interview with Pho & Se; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
buy the land and sell to a big outside company to further exploit this opportunity. By the time of deadline, the villagers had not yet raised the collective funds to embark on this project, however Ban was able to negotiate with the authorities, who backed down and gave villagers more time to raise funds. Subsequently, Ban utilised his external Christian networks to borrow a large interest-free loan from a Singaporean Christian organisation and has recently joined forces with 12 households to invest in the construction of new luxury ‘Eco resorts’, an idea Ban picked up from fellow Hmong in Thailand. So for now, Ban’s village have managed to keep the state at arms’ length, as Scott (2009) might say – but crucially, this is enabled by the support of other non-state patrons.

In an interesting turn of events, Village D has of late been heralded by state actors as an exemplary model of ‘community development’ which others can learn from. In 2018 the deputy prime minister Vương Đình Huệ and his entourage visited Village D to inspect the tourist site and interview prominent villagers, including pastor Ban, with an eye to promoting the Village D ‘community development’ tourist model to other areas.167 The significance of this visit cannot be understated – for such a high-ranking minister to not only visit but seek to learn from a Hmong community is unprecedented and highly prestigious, even if it was partly a PR stunt. Apparently Ban told the deputy prime minister that they were Christians and God had blessed them, as well as sharing some more practical elements of village planning and mobilisation. Soon after, when I was visiting, a team from the state-owned radio station Voice of Vietnam approached me for an interview about the village from an international tourist’s perspective. During the recorded interview which was later broadcast nationally, it became clear that the presenter wanted to promote a narrative that Village D’s success lay in the inhabitants’ taking the initiative, looking for their own opportunities and “not waiting for the state” to support them.

This relatively new discourse of self-responsibility and self-reliance strikes a chord with Nguyen and Chen (2017) about neoliberal governance in Vietnam shifting the moral obligation of welfare away from the state, except in this case the emphasis was not placed on the individual’s burden as much as on the local community (see Chapter 7). It resonates even more with McCarthy’s (2019) work on the responsibility of development in contemporary Myanmar where communities must prove themselves to be eligible for state benefits by proactively engaging in communal development projects, as Village D inhabitants did by building the road themselves before local authorities saw and contributed resources. In doing so, McCarthy argues that state aid becomes seen as contingent and not a right, thus justifying the exclusion of certain ‘undeserving poor’ groups including ethnic and religious minorities. However, in upland Vietnam the state-promoted vision of self-reliant village tourism development masks the significant non-state support received through Ban’s development brokerage, which other villages without the right connections could not easily emulate. Furthermore, as mentioned above local state actors are not simply leaving Village D

167 The news articles which corroborate the visit are not cited in order to preserve the anonymity of Village D.
to find its own path but are attempting to muscle in on the profits in an ongoing political struggle over land and resources.

**Development, discipline and tensions**

One important structure of Village D, which was not present in any other Hmong village I visited, is a regular ‘development’ meeting held in the church building on Saturday evenings; in theory it is open to everyone in the village, but in practice non-Christians rarely attend. The primary purpose of these meetings, according to organiser Ban, is to create a space for sharing advice and experience on how to practically apply Sunday sermons into everyday life. At least once a month, villagers gathered to discuss explicitly economic issues such as rearing livestock, growing different plants, budgeting etc. Afterwards, attendees would put new ideas into practice, then give feedback on the results in the next meeting. The meetings would be attended by 50-100 adults, both men and women, who gained important skills, knowledge and inspiration to try new livelihood options.

While Saturday meetings are relatively participatory and open to audience contributions, a secondary function is to ensure village discipline in achieving the goals of local elites. This emerged through participant observation of a session over the Lunar New Year, the high period of domestic tourist visits. Vietnamese tourism reviews of Village D consistently mention “the good-natured, reserved smiles of the women and the wholehearted help and sharing of the men in the village”. This hospitality is in fact an intentional strategy promoted and enforced in Saturday meetings; on this occasion, however, recent tourist feedback complained that villagers were not around to greet or guide them. Pastor Ban and village elder Chu joined forces to reprimand the attendees and urge them that everyone has a responsibility to help out tourists even if they don’t stay for lunch, since the village’s friendly reputation was at stake. Another popular (and unique) feature of Village D for tourists is its pristine environment, with each household taking responsibility for clearing litter off its land. It is probable that this initiative is also prescribed and governed through Saturday meetings. Ban went on to teach about the health importance of a balanced diet, demonstrating the holistic nature of Saturday meetings content.

The developmental impact of Ban’s church is not limited to Village D. More recently, they have embarked on a new mission to support a nearby village with a similar ratio of about 75% Christians but, like most Hmong villages of the district, considerably more impoverished. Initially, Ban accompanied the neighbouring church leader Sang where they carried out household assessments based on such criteria as walls and floor material, condition of cooking equipment (or lack thereof), ownership of motorbike or not, etc. Ban and Sang then created a ‘poverty list’ of the neediest 15

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168 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

169 Author’s translation, website address is restricted for purposes of confidentiality.

170 Interview with Sang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
(out of 77) households in the village, in a remarkably similar manner to state poverty reduction scheme procedures. This is surely an imitation of state ‘legibility’ technologies (Chaudhry 2016), although the church’s resources are much more modest and little cash or rice was provided to poor households. Instead, over the new year when there was less farming to be done, a team of volunteers from Village D visited the neighbouring village for a day of ‘encouragement’ (động viên), with three objectives: (1) to ‘share their faith’, (2) to advise and teach on personal/food hygiene, and (3) to give livelihoods advice. The goals of improving living conditions and evangelism (or building the faith of converts) are intimately linked, which is unsurprising given the lack of secular-spiritual divide in Hmong worldviews as elucidated by one of the volunteers:

Because if I have [more], but I see all the poor people, I feel it’s not ideal, and I cannot be happy. So whatever I have, I share with everyone, and if I can do anything for them to develop faster, then I share for everyone so they can follow me, so they can know their economy is equal to mine… [non-Christians] don’t like us, so they don’t come [to Saturday meetings]. We don’t ban them, we said if they want to come then they can. But they’re afraid, they don’t dare come. But we will gradually share to them, we will set an example for them first, so that eventually everyone here will follow God… I cannot propagate to all of them, but in our families we can build our economies, learn how to do things for them to see, then they’ll feel that we can do these, and they cannot catch up, so they’ll ask what do you do, that I can do? Then I’ll say, whatever we do, God goes before me, and I follow Him. Studying the word of God, following Him and then God blesses me. So if we do that, then they’ll see that whatever we do, God blesses us, then they’ll follow us. And gradually the entire village will follow.¹⁷¹

In this case, the 15 recipient households of ‘encouragement’ in the neighbouring villages were all Christian, since apparently the non-Christians didn’t welcome or trust them. Nevertheless, tensions of inequality emerged as Ban accused the poorer neighbouring village of being envious of the economic success in Village D. In his opinion, the most pressing task before economic development is to improve people’s spiritual lives, otherwise they will not receive God’s blessing. It was problematic that in stark contrast to the Village D success story, the neighbouring villagers were also Christians but were still extremely poor. Echoing ‘prosperity theology’ narratives which have some import among Hmong Christians (see Chapter 7), church leader Sang of the neighbouring village attributed this inequality to his congregation’s ungodliness:

But those people are poor. Why? Why are they backwards? Because they don’t pray to God. They don’t visit church. They reportedly believe in God but all day they drink alcohol and play disorderly, gamble with cards, so they’re poor. The [local authorities] have propagated a lot, but they don’t listen. Only this year has pastor Ban come down and we asked Ban to come down and check, to supervise and see how many, and ask God, because we’ve believed in God for 20 years, but haven’t yet moved [forward] one bit. So Ban has to consider it, he came down to see.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ Interview with Cao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
¹⁷² Interview with Sang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Inequality is also emerging *within* Village D as some households have benefitted more from economic growth than others; this is evident by the impressive new houses and homestays of a few Christian families, including Ban and Chu’s. With the introduction of the market, as well as more villagers trying to enter the homestay industry, the spectre of increased intra-village competition surely threatens to undermine the village unity and cooperation which has contributed to its success. Concurrently, Salemink (2003: 172) sees the Christian eradication of traditional ritual feasts, where rich households redistributed wealth and food in order to gain prestige, as a step of capitalist privatisation by freeing the wealthy of their communal obligations. On the other hand, Ban challenges this by claiming that before Christianisation, villagers used to be more individualistic and selfish. Neither did market sellers or poorer households admit any complaints about increasing competitiveness or inequality when I asked them; for now, the benefits seem to be reaching the majority of Village D. This in turn poses other challenges for pastor Ban, who is more concerned about the impact of ‘materialism’ on Hmong Christianity:

If, for example, any province or district has great pastors, evangelists, church group leaders to lead the brothers to follow God and obey Jesus, then the richer they become the more they will love God… But the majority don’t have this. So now I really worry, it’s not a future issue – it’s already happening. The more people’s economies are developing, the weaker their faith is becoming, it keeps going down, because they run after the world, they go and earn more money, but as for their reading the Bible, and connecting with the church, it’s very little. So their faith will diminish and disappear. This will certainly happen.\(^{173}\)

**Seng: from state confrontation to cooperation**

In rare cases, a skilful political broker may attempt to be the client of both state and Christian patrons. Seng is a charismatic 29-year-old pastor from an influential family in Village A, where around 70 of the 270 households are Christian. He describes his conversion in 2004 as a “reformation of thinking”;\(^{174}\) his father Si, a former shaman, and youngest aunt also converted around the same time. This caused serious family conflict as Seng’s two uncles and other aunt did not convert; what’s more, uncle Long had just attained a prominent position in the commune People’s Committee. Long tried to persuade them to reconsider, offering Seng an official position if he renounced his faith. When he refused, uncle Long got angry and disowned him – Seng dramatically emphasised this grievous insult in his narration of their dialogue by switching Long’s use of personal pronouns from ‘uncle/nephew’ (*chú/cháu*) to the disrespectful ‘me/you’ (*tôi/mày*) halfway through the sentence.

\(^{173}\) Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\(^{174}\) Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Soon after, widespread religious persecution began across Case Study Site 1 with local authorities confiscating (and encouraging non-Christian relatives to steal) livestock from Hmong Christians, which then escalated as non-Christian relatives seized land from 12 households – not Seng or Si but converts from less prestigious families. Anyone who spoke out faced being arrested and locked up in a toilet cell at the People’s Committee. In response, Seng was sent to Hanoi to make contact with a Kinh Christian lawyer there, who helped him research the religious law and submit a complaint case to the central authorities, triggering an official investigation. The local authorities did not like this at all, and police were sent round to intimidate all the witnesses before the Hanoi cadres arrived. In spite of this, the investigation resulted in the commune president being transferred, local authorities being warned not to use force against citizens and land being returned to the Christian community.

Pastor Seng’s social status rocketed after this intervention, as Christians were afforded protection under his leadership while officials learned to respect (or be intimidated by) his advocacy abilities. Indeed, Seng has taken a more confrontational approach to government hostility than most church leaders by teaching Christians to film instances of persecution or police brutality, so it can be used as evidence – either to higher authorities or to international human rights groups. He also warns cadres that if the Hmong are not allowed to live as Christians here, then they are quite willing to migrate and seek asylum abroad with their evidence (see Chapter 4), which would cause an embarrassment to the local authorities. As the most well-travelled person in his community and having contacts with various state bodies, Seng understands the ways in which state actors can be pressurised and utilises them when necessary (although he appeared to exaggerate or embellish stories about his own political clout). This strategy seems have been largely successful as Seng’s church – the largest in the district, with several hundred members – has been officially recognised, and the current commune president uncle Long has apparently let bygones be bygones. In an interview, Long praised the positive effects of Christianity on some formerly unruly families who “don’t drink alcohol anymore, then they don’t fight and curse each other, so their lives are better”, but also bemoaned the Hmong people’s lack of knowledge about traditional customs. Long also relies on his nephew Seng’s authority for resolving civil disturbances among the Hmong Christian community.

Seng’s unusual relationship with local authorities has enabled his church to embark on a variety of social outreach projects and public events which would be unthinkable for most Hmong congregations in Vietnam. These have included a scheme to distribute pigs to poor households in the community, whereby successful breeders in the church were encouraged to act as mentors to newcomers, and providing electricity generators to impoverished villagers among a different ethnic

175 Interview with Si; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
176 This lawyer was probably the prominent (and now exiled) human rights activist Nguyễn Văn Đài, who was perhaps the only lawyer willing to defend Hmong Christians in the early 2000s before his arrest in 2005.
177 Interview with Long; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
minority group. Apparently, when local authorities turned up and demanded official permission (which had not been attained), Seng replied, “we’re helping the people that you’re unable to help, why aren’t you happy about it?” 178 Another time, the pastor overstepped the mark by inviting a team of Korean doctors to set up informal ‘open clinics’ at churches for sick locals to be diagnosed and treated; in Village A there were no repercussions, but in a nearby village the doctors were detained and forced to pay a fine of 20 million VND ($1000) for not seeking official permission for the visitors. These constraints are a source of resentment for Hmong Christians towards the state, who seem to try their hardest to prevent outsiders from helping the Hmong without offering any help themselves.

In recent years, church and state relations in Village A have shifted further away from confrontation towards more cooperative interactions. A turning point was in the Summer of 2014, during which Sino-Vietnamese tensions had reached critical levels during the naval standoff surrounding the placement of a Chinese oil rig in disputed waters (Kim, J. 2015). With reports of Chinese troops massing near the border, government authorities across the Northern Vietnamese highlands saw invasion as a very real threat. During this time, church leaders from across Case Study Site 1 were summoned to the commune People’s Committee; to their surprise, they were not being arrested on suspicion of hostile activity but rather being recruited to ‘mobilise’ their congregations. Recognising the communal influence of pastors like Seng, cadres asked them to support the national cause by relaying information on evacuation procedures (in case of invasion) to congregations and dissuading anyone from crossing the border. Apparently, they were even encouraged by the socialist authorities to pray for the welfare of Vietnam, to which Seng agreed and commissioned his church members to fast and pray for three days. Nowhere else in Vietnam has such an intimate church-state partnership been forged through the fires of borderlands tensions, if only temporarily.

Seng was also invited to attend and speak as the sole Christian representative at an academic conference in Hanoi on Hmong ethno-religious policy, which I observed in 2016.179 The invitation was an unusual and bold move by the conference organiser (a university professor), since official discussions around ‘politically sensitive’ issues are usually kept behind closed doors. At the conference, Seng was largely ignored and cold-shouldered by other academic and government attendees, eventually being given just a few minutes to present near the end of the day. In his speech, Seng emphasised the positive life changes of Hmong Christians while arguing that the state’s ongoing concerns about subversive Christian activity was actually perpetuated by official restrictions on training opportunities for church leaders. Tactfully raising concerns over institutional religious discrimination, he cited Police Circular 23, in effect since 2012, which states that communes in which ‘illegal religion’ (i.e. Protestantism) has developed have failed the ‘public

178 Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
179 Academic conference in Hanoi; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
order’ criteria and are unable to attain the prized ‘new countryside’ (nông thôn mới) status.\(^{180}\) There were no questions or remarks from the audience after Seng’s presentation.

Over the Lunar New Year of 2017, Seng pulled off his most noticeable political achievement to date: coordinating a one-day interdenominational Christian festival in Case Study Site 1, attended by around 2000 Hmong people from surrounding villages. The logistical operations were achieved with the cooperation of nine churches across Site 1 and was hosted in another pastor’s village where it was possible to rent a large plot of relatively flat land. Each church took up an offering for the event, which provided a modest budget of 30 million VND ($1500) for the stage, equipment, speakers, food, transport etc.\(^{181}\) The festival started at 8am and continued for the duration of the day with various activities including preaching, worship songs, secular musical and dance performances, a talent contest, traditional new year games and so on.

The main stage was a raised platform with a large backdrop containing an image of a Western caricature of Jesus Christ looking over the iconic landscape of Site 1 (see Figure 18). The backdrop text, wishing a happy Hmong new year in bold red capital letters, is all the more striking because it is written in the ‘American Hmong’ RPA script which (as noted above) is frowned upon by the Hmong officials and almost never seen in such a bold public context in Vietnam. Mimicking


\(^{181}\) Interview with Va; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
aspects of state-organised festivals and cultural performances in format and style, this festival was a political statement of authority and ability to wield symbolic power to challenge or perpetuate the dominant ‘regime of representation’ (Hall 1997), since no-one else apart from the state organises such large public events in the Northern highlands. Pastor Seng was key in securing official permission at a district level, and a few commune cadres showed their face in the morning but left almost immediately. Nevertheless, the festival was considered a big success and pastors of Site 1 aspired to expand it into a two-day festival in the future.

**Controversy balancing patrons**

In my initial interview with Seng, he reiterated the importance of obeying the authorities, using imagery that verged on state propaganda: “the state is like a house, and the people are like the materials – everyone must contribute”. However, over the course of further conversations during fieldwork, Seng disclosed deep frustrations and anger towards government corruption, ethnic discrimination and poor leadership. He accused officials of turning a blind eye to socio-economic problems such as drug trafficking, human trafficking and poor infrastructure because they don’t want to do anything about it: instead, they devote their energy to paperwork, fines and bribes. Quoting a hackneyed Communist slogan, Seng charged that Party cadres had a duty to “follow Hồ Chí Minh’s moral example” and serve the people. The problem, however, was that state actors only had principles or laws (nguyên lý) but no love or affection (tình) for the people, which undermines their legitimacy in the eyes of large swaths of upland Vietnam’s multi-ethnic population.

According to Mai Na Lee, “the state’s lack of benevolence was a sign that the Mandate of Heaven [divine right to rule] was up for grabs” (Lee 2015: 132). Legitimacy is a key everyday political economy concept by which the subordinated can express their voice (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007), and Seng’s invocation of the Party’s own moral standards to condemn hypocritical state actors may be used to justify ‘rightful resistance’ in Vietnam’s moral economy (Kerkvliet 2014).

Pastor Seng then contrasted this critique with church leaders (such as himself) who believe that God sees everything, therefore they must live accountable lives. Ironically, however, ambiguous accountability is a controversial issue surrounding Seng’s ministry. He is a pastor of the ‘Christian Fellowship Church of Vietnam’ (see Chapter 4 Figure 17), which shares the same theological stance as the more established ECVN but has a less formal leadership structure, and does not require pastors to attend Bible school before being ordained. Seng is revered by most of his congregation and local church leaders, since he is such an effective political broker and indeed his church’s outreach activities have benefitted poorer members of the community. Nevertheless, his unusually intimate relationship with local authorities has aroused suspicion (or perhaps jealousy)

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182 Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
183 Interview with Binh; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.
184 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
185 Interview with Cai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
among other Christians further afield. For instance, the well-informed Phu questions how Seng was the first Hmong pastor in all Vietnam to gain official permission to build a church, and takes issue with his proud demeanour which is not fitting for church leaders.\footnote{Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} Phu joked that it was no longer clear whether Seng was working for the church or the state – or perhaps both!

Another concern is that Seng is ostensibly the wealthiest Hmong Christian in the area, owning a large building complex which includes not only the church structure but also several homestay rooms and medicinal bathing rooms. Exactly how he accrued all this is subject to some speculation, as Seng himself acknowledges. When local authorities demanded to know his sources of wealth (perhaps for taxation purposes), Seng replied that he runs a successful business of rearing livestock, and allegedly asked them whether they want the Hmong to stay poor, if they were so suspicious of anyone doing well for themselves?\footnote{Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} However, non-Christian neighbour Cai (also from Village A) disputed this by asserting that Seng also receives a significant income by administering and providing security for a large plot of nearby land on behalf of a private company.\footnote{Interview with Cai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} Seng never mentioned this seemingly important information when I asked about his livelihoods. Like other Christian elites, Seng is an astute businessman; while visiting and preaching to Hmong Christians in Laos, he also took the opportunity to bring and sell traditional clothing made by women in his family and home church.\footnote{Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.}

In addition to a degree of state patronage, Seng has also managed to establish a partnership with a Korean missionary network, which visits Village A occasionally and has also funded an international trip for Seng to accompany them on a mission trip to Laos. Trang is an ethnic Kinh missionary living in Case Study Site 1, who has had to work with Seng as the primary gatekeeper to the community she wants to minister to. She asserted that Seng had received large sums of money from Korean partners for the sole purpose of constructing churches, but that he had used some of it to fund his own building complex, which the community benefits from but is unaware of the source of this investment.\footnote{Interview with Trang; see Appendix 1 Figure 23.} Trang accused Seng of ‘loving money’ and robbing God of glory by accepting the prestige for the good works he has done with Korean money. Similarly, she criticises Seng’s latest cooperation with local authorities to distribute educational resources and children’s clothing to schools, which he claims credit for in spite of official funding. At the same time, it should be considered that Trang displayed some pejorative attitudes towards Hmong people and may well be unhappy being under the authority of an ethnic minority pastor.

The cases of Ban and Seng illustrate the opportunities and risks facing Hmong Christian leaders who attempt to play political broker with the state, Christian networks, or both. By attracting external capital and business prospects, these new elites not only consolidate legitimacy from their
local communities but also accumulate wealth for themselves. However, they must balance their own interests with the various agendas of patrons – be it Vietnamese local authorities who want to exploit ‘ethnic tourism’ and buy off land, or foreign Christian missionaries with strings attached to funding. Many Hmong are empowered by Christian connections, and pastors have also assumed the role of mediator with local authorities, themselves benefitting to various degrees in the process. However, there is a fine line between collaboration and compromise, and those like Seng who are seen to have crossed over to the state side may lose legitimacy from Christian patrons in the long run.

**Conclusion: empowerment, accumulation and mimicry**

This chapter has demonstrated the profound impacts of the rise of Hmong Christian elites on the political economy of Vietnam’s Northern highlands. Firstly, we explored traditional Hmong concepts and structures of religious and political power, noting the convergence of traditional religious leaders and Hmong local officials in Vietnam. Mai Na Lee’s (2015) analysis of historical Hmong leadership helpfully conceptualises Hmong elites as ‘political brokers’ who enjoy both state patronage and village authority – so long as they are able to balance the interests of both sides. By usurping the power of traditional Hmong elites, some younger Christian leaders have established themselves as new political brokers, representing their community’s interests to local (and sometimes even central) governing bodies in both confrontational and cooperative exchanges. What’s more, through travel abroad and to the big cities for religious study and meetings, Christian elites may also become ‘development brokers’ (Lewis and Mosse 2006) for powerful external Christian networks who can provide knowledge, finances and prestige; these networks can become alternative ‘patrons’ to the state.

The extent to which benefits are redistributed or accumulated by Hmong pastors and church leaders varies. The three elites illustrated in this chapter, Phu, Ban and Seng, have all done very well for themselves – indeed, their financial success only adds to their spiritual authority and external networks to legitimise their political status. Despite the suspicions of non-Christian onlookers, most pastors complain that the church tithes are too small for them to take a salary from. Rather, Christian elites utilise their education, experience and external networks to become wealthy through largely mundane business opportunities – although they may present this to their congregations in the more romantic language of ‘God’s blessing’. They also expressed a common feeling of obligation to help their congregation ‘develop’ and improve living standards, however this was usually done through education on economic activity and acting as business consultants rather than direct transfer of cash or material goods. Most non-elite Christians I interviewed considered the brokerage, advocacy and advice of their pastors to be empowering for the community and expressed little concern about the unequal distribution of improvements; even
Seng’s questionable use of external resources was most alarming for outsiders, rather than local Hmong villagers.

Their combination of religious and political legitimacy enables ambitious Hmong Christian elites to mobilise and coordinate grassroots development activities to a level which local officials admit is beyond their ability. Village D is a prime example of Ban’s ability to persuade villagers to change their lifestyles and contribute time, labour and money to communal initiatives – in stark contrast to the state-led development schemes which are often ignored or mistrusted by marginalised Hmong communities. However, Ban also needed external Christian patronage as well as a more intrusive governance structure (i.e. the Saturday meetings) to ensure village discipline and coordination than is found in other Hmong Christian communities. Again, this is largely viewed as a positive thing by the congregation of Village D – although it also has the effect of excluding the non-Christian minority from some development opportunities.

Elites benefit disproportionately, but their role as brokers also has positive impacts on the economic and political status of a large section of Hmong Christian communities, often those who were previously most marginalised from the ethnic and religious discrimination they faced. From this perspective, it could be argued that this local elite power shift has been broadly empowering in many cases. Most of these business-consultant pastors are also extremely busy, engaged in a flurry of economic and religious activities which are a marked disjuncture from the seasonal pattern of Hmong traditional livelihoods (see Chapter 3). While this busyness was probably quite bewildering to older Hmong farmers, younger Christian elites are modelling a new entrepreneurial lifestyle at an accelerated pace of life; this is one way in which capitalist expansion into the highlands is felt at the everyday level (Freeman 2012a: 176; see also Chapter 7). What’s more, their spiritual authority enables these men to influence gender norms within the Hmong Christian community and it is no surprise that Phu, Ban and Seng all contribute to this debate (see Chapter 6), in more and less empowering ways.

Another interesting feature of Hmong Christian elite activity is the way they have copied or adapted state technologies of governance and displays of power. Examples include Ban’s implementation of household assessments and ‘poverty lists’ in order to decide how to distribute church relief aid, and Seng’s bold Christian festival in the public arena which imitated prestigious government festival activities and format. Apparently Hmong Christians are not the only religious group in Vietnam who compete with state welfare for local moral authority “in ways that resemble the state’s governing approach through a combination of moral discourses and social control” (Nguyen and Chen 2017: 241). While Nguyen and Chen attribute this to a wider ‘welfare socialisation’ agenda which is promoted by state actors, this mimicry also has the potential to undermine state authority:
Various religious development initiatives are undertaken to counter, subvert, disrupt, or reconfigure state power. Other initiatives are undertaken as part of a kind of shadow or parallel state which operates alongside the formally recognised one, and thereby construct a kind of religious counter-public. (Fountain et al. 2015: 24)

As with everyday political activity seen in the last chapter, local authority responses to church elite interventions differ: on the one hand, some are supportive and even attempt to co-opt their positive contributions to society; on the other hand, others see state mimicry as a rival challenge and are threatened by church attempts to govern. Perhaps the most poignant threat they pose is an ideological one. Even if they don’t air their criticisms publicly, Vietnam’s citizens are generally well aware of government rent-seeking and nepotism at almost every level (Gainsborough 2010a). Christian elites present Hmong communities with an alternative model of ‘servant leadership’, which is not always realised in practice but nevertheless implicitly critiques the hypocrisy of Party morality propaganda.

It should be reiterated that the majority of Hmong pastors and church leaders will not reach the levels of political brokerage of Ban or Seng – these are among the most visible Christian elites of the Northern highlands. Despite commanding strong respect and authority from their congregations, most older leaders struggle to gain the acceptance of hostile local authorities, haven’t developed the same external Christian networks, and don’t have much knowledge, experience or interest in new business opportunities. Conversely, the next generation of leaders who attend Bible schools in the cities are learning from entrepreneurs like Phu and have bigger aspirations of influencing the political economy of their rural communities when they return. The question of to what degree aspiring female Hmong students will be able to become local elites requires a thorough investigation of gender power relations in Hmong society and the gendered impacts of Christianisation, which are provided in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 6 – Gender Relations

Protestantism is widely supported by Hmong women. Hmong women following Protestantism have strong impacts on their husband’s religious belief. In conventional families, Hmong women are strenuous while their husbands are patriarchal. They are alcoholic and maltreat their partners, but this does not happen in a Protestant family where men get rid of alcohol and treat women appropriately. Besides spending time worshiping, they concentrate on working to increase their family income. We had mobilized the local people to get rid of alcohol and violence for years but it didn’t work; now, for the Christian Hmong, people do it voluntarily without any mobilization. (Nguyen 2017: 195–6)

This interview quote is given by a local authority leader from Bảo Thắng district in Lào Cai province, a district which has taken a notoriously hard line towards Hmong Christian activity and generated reports of severe religious persecution.191 It is therefore all the more remarkable that this candid leader not only asserts the allegedly gender-empowering aspects of Christianisation, but also admits the failure of government campaigns to do likewise. This invites comparison of the effectiveness of church and state in transforming Hmong communities (see previous chapter) as well as raising questions about the overlap of state and church in their civilisation and modernity projects among the Hmong (see Chapter 7).

Through exploring the agency of women informed by a postsecular feminist perspective, this chapter contributes to the overall thesis by complexifying the idea of empowerment as a nonlinear process, embedded in different forms of patriarchy and oriented towards different notions of progress within wider political economy transformations. Empirical data reveals the everyday importance of gendered religious conversion and practices which intersect with livelihood changes and state policies to produce new opportunities (and constraints) for Hmong women. This supports the wider findings of the thesis that those who stand the most to gain from Christian transformations often belong to the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society. In doing so, it also addresses the puzzle arising from mainstream feminist literature as to why women would “actively support a [religious] movement that seems inimical to ‘their own interests and agendas’” (Mahmood 2005: 2).

Chapter Outline

To do this, I begin with a brief overview of postsecular feminist literature, which critiques the mainstream assumption of secularism being gender emancipatory whilst emphasising the broad spectrum of forms between resistance and submission which religious women’s agency can take. This is then contextualised within the unequal gender relations of Vietnam and the ruling Communist Party’s mixed attempts to promote women’s agendas while governing a recent

191 Interview with Ngoc; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
resurgence of religious activity, including Protestant Christianity. On the other hand, gender dynamics within Hmong communities where I conducted fieldwork were more clearly influenced by traditional cultural-religious attitudes than by state policies. The following sections identify patriarchal clan structures, marriage practices and patrilineal inheritance norms as reinforcing and perpetuating gender inequality, as manifested in the preference of sons over daughters, an unequal gendered division of labour and domestic violence.

This builds the backdrop for the remarkable Christianisation of many Hmong communities in Vietnam’s highlands, which has been largely initiated and propelled by women. Conversion (often through supernatural experiences) and the subsequent influence of her family’s religious behaviour is seen as a form of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ (Kandiyoti 1988) by which Hmong women display their agency to secure a more favourable position in society. The ‘domestication’ of Hmong men in family life is evidenced in subsequent sections with the Christian ban on alcohol, transformation of ritual activity, and new narratives about marriage and lineage emerging as key factors. On the other hand, indications of continuing and new forms of sexism within church leadership reveal the limits of Christianity as a means of gender emancipation. Rather, religious women’s agency is better understood along the multi-directional paths towards ‘alternative modernities’ (Gaonkar 1999) which are simultaneously entangled in broader political economy transformations of upland Vietnam. Lastly, the conclusion reflects on the contribution of postsecular feminism to the wider thesis questions of why, how and to what extent Christian conversion among a marginalised minority group in Vietnam can be considered empowering.

**Theorising religious women’s agency**

In general, religion is usually seen by academics as consolidating unequal gender power relations, both historically and to the present day (Woodhead 2012). Mainstream feminist literature, founded on Eurocentric emancipatory struggles and descending from the Enlightenment critique of religious dogma and clerical authority, assumes secularism to be a more empowering foundation for women (Braidotti 2008). On the other hand, it is also well-documented that across the world, women are generally more committed to religion (Frances 1997), despite rarely holding positions of authority which are reserved for men. This naturally leads to the question: “why would such a large number of women… actively support a movement that seems inimical to ‘their own interests and agendas,’ especially at a historical moment when these women appear to have more emancipatory possibilities available to them?” (Mahmood 2005: 2). Mahmood’s seminal study on religious women’s agency in Egypt, along with Asad’s inquiry into the ‘anthropology of the secular’ (2003), has inspired a ‘postsecular’ turn which challenges the secular assumptions within feminism, explores more seriously the agency and desires of religious women and the contexts in which they are formed and understood (Deo 2018).
Mahmood and others find it unreasonable to dismiss all religious women’s agency as ‘false consciousness’, instead critiquing the imposition of a ‘liberatory’ normativity on feminist research and arguing for a more nuanced understanding of agency as a broad spectrum between the two poles of submission and resistance (Frisk 2009). While some studies reveal women tactically redeploying certain religious practices advantageously as an act of resistance to official patriarchal ideology (Hollywood 2004), others problematise “the universality of the desire… to be free from relations of subordination and, for women, from structures of male domination” (Mahmood 2005: 10). Instead, Mahmood builds on Butler’s insights on the consolidating and destabilising potentials of reiterative norms, as well as the Foucauldian concept of subjectivisation, to explore how women actively engage in processes and technologies of subordination, to locate the ethical discourses and rationales for their actions. Gender identity should not only focus on ‘negative’ or confrontational aspects of agency as resistance to or dislocation from dominant norms, but also the “creative or productive aspects immanent to agency in order to explain how, when faced with complexity and difference, individuals may respond in unanticipated and innovative ways which may hinder, reinforce or catalyze social change” (McNay 1996: 5).

Another contribution of postsecular feminism is to debunk the Eurocentric notion that secularism is somehow congruent to gender equality. On the contrary, Joan Scott demonstrates that “gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity” (2017: 3), entailing a new subordination of women to the private sphere in order for men to dominate the public realm. The discourse of secularism and women’s emancipation is a rather recent construction for the ‘clash of civilisations’ era whereby Islam is seen as a threat and Western cultural superiority is purportedly evidenced by its treatment of women (Braidotti 2008). With strong imperialistic resonances, discourses about the Christian origins of democracy, the modern work ethic and state sovereignty, secularisation can be seen as “an operation of mutated Christianity” (Bracke 2008: 55). Therefore, Christianity is often co-opted on the side of secular gender equality and Western dominance (Scott 2017) in stark contrast to Islam and other non-Western religions. Secularist feminist assumptions can also be found in ‘gender and development’ frameworks (see Chapter 1), although the rationale is somewhat different in socialist regimes like China and Vietnam (Jaschok 2015).

The postsecular turn is not without its critics. Vasilaki (2016) persuasively challenges Mahmood’s scepticism towards autonomy as the foundation of agency, which can lead to an ‘anticritical’ stance that rejects the possibility of comparison and accepts social hierarchies – particularly dangerous in a time when traditional religious values are being promoted to re-establish capitalist inequalities (Cooper 2017). Nor are all the critiques of Western secularism applicable to the Vietnamese context, as will be seen below. Nevertheless, postsecular feminism is a useful point of reference for this chapter because it takes seriously the role of women in religious transformation, as well as the potential contribution of certain types of ‘spiritual renewal’ to the feminist cause (Braidotti 2008).
Furthermore, the postsecular prioritisation of emic understandings of women’s agency and utility in understanding “how a historically disadvantaged group’s practices are viewed by dominant groups” (Deo 2018: 11) is particularly relevant for research on marginalised Hmong women in Vietnam.

Even so, any suggestion of mainstream Christianity as a force for gender empowerment inevitably raises some eyebrows, given the wealth of academic writing on the contrary – including from postsecular feminists (Braidotti 2008). Firstly, its historical legacy as part of Western colonial agendas pitched Christianity as “the mark of white superiority” (Scott 2017: 20) as missionaries often saw their role as “reconstructing the ‘native’ world in the name of God and European civilization” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 6), with the effect of destroying indigenous gender relations and domesticating women into the heteropatriarchal family that has been posited as a foundation of capitalist economies (Federici 2004, Mies 1987, Simpson 2017). The civilised/Christian discourse and conquest of the backwards/primitive/oriental ‘other’ has long outlived the colonial era (Said 2003); does the claim that Christianisation is beneficial to Vietnamese Hmong women, in comparison to traditional social structures, fall into this problematic dichotomy? Moreover, in highlighting the patriarchal elements of Hmong culture, do I risk obscuring the reinforcement or intensification of gender inequalities under capitalist modernisation or Christian conversion?

In response to these questions it is instructive to consider the ‘alternative geographies of modernities’ (Jaschok 2015) which considers the nonlinear, multi-directional dynamics of ‘development’ or ‘empowerment’ – “from where? For whom? Towards what goal?” (2015: 50)

Religious transformation can challenge existing types of gender oppression and replace them with new patriarchal structures, or it might not dismantle traditional gender norms but simply inscribe new practices on top of existing structures, creating new historically and spatially contingent configurations which may be seen as desirable and empowering by some women and not others. The acknowledgment of different forms of patriarchy (Kandiyoti 1988) and diverse manoeuvres by religious women fits with the postsecular feminist rejection of simplifying ‘agency as resistance’. Furthermore, these creative adaptations towards ‘alternative modernities’ (Gaonkar 1999) must be researched within the contemporaneous changes to the political and economic landscape, in order to understand the wider power dynamics and structural violence associated with religious and cultural transformations.

It is also worth devoting a few words to issues of research positionality and fieldwork methods, particularly given the ‘double marginality’ ethnic minority women face in upland socialist Asia (McAllister 2013). As detailed in the Introduction, empirical data was generated from in-depth interviews and focus groups, combined with ethnographic observations of everyday behaviour. For the themes of this chapter I conducted a few female-only focus groups as well as using a female interpreter for in-depth interviews where possible, trying to create an environment where women
could speak as freely as possible about sensitive issues. This was not always possible, and of course my own positionality as a male researcher will have had an impact. Therefore, it is important to rely on data generated from participant observation which, although it may sound anecdotal, reveals key insights regarding gender roles and everyday sexism which participants may be unable or unwilling to articulate in the interview context.

Before that, however, I present a brief introduction on Vietnamese gender politics at a national level before describing the particular operation of patriarchal structures within Hmong society. The sites where gender inequality is most clearly displayed and reproduced are in clan structure, marriage, inheritance, attitudes to children, division of labour and domestic violence. This contextualises the subsequent analysis of the agency of Hmong women and men in adapting to, negotiating or contesting patriarchal structures through Christian conversion and practice. Christianisation is shown to influence many of the sites of gender inequality in relatively empowering ways, although there are also enduring and new forms of patriarchy within Christian communities. I return to some of the above tensions and questions in the concluding remarks.

**Vietnamese gender politics**

Patriarchy is present in practically every society across the world, but its manifestations and intensity vary significantly over time and space (Kandiyoti 1988). There is some literature which proposes a relatively ‘high status’ of women in historical South East Asian societies as inheritors of land and property which, although undermined by colonialism and missionary activity (Errington 1990), continues to influence modern day society (Reid 2003). The validity of this claim has been challenged, especially with regard to Vietnam with its legacy of East Asian Confucian influence (Andaya 2006). On some gender indicators, Vietnam looks quite impressive with international development bodies regularly praising the high levels of female labour participation and female business leadership (cf. Banerji et al. 2018). This is attributed to the communist revolution and subsequent war periods, during which women were at the forefront of opposing and fighting the French and then Americans (Lessard 2010). Following the war, there has been a resurgence of Confucian values in Vietnamese society; as in China and Russia, the early commitment to the emancipation of women soon yielded to a “more economistic, class-based, vision that relegated gender to a minor role” (Tai 1983: 89).

Truong (2008) blames structural barriers to female advancement such as discrimination in education and employment or inequitable divisions of labour in the family, as well as “ingrained notions of male superiority” (2008: 18). Economic changes occurring since mid-1980s Đổi Mới (renovation) policies have been accompanied by pronounced shifts in gender roles: “most authors see the reform era as detrimental to women” (Werner and Bélanger 2002: 20) due to a combination of low percentage of women in state employment, the much lower salary which women receive,
the commodification of women’s bodies through the growth of the sex industry and neo-traditionalist discourses placing domestic pressure on women to nurture and be responsible for ‘family happiness’ (Phạm 2007: 223). Furthermore, endemic problems of domestic violence and female foeticide remain as prevalent as ever, despite receiving a very low media profile as ‘sensitive issues’ in Vietnam.

Since the modern Vietnamese state was founded on a communist secularism, without the history of pervasive Christian influence, the Eurocentric conflation of Christianity with secularism (cf. Scott 2017) is not relevant here. Instead, Christianity is generally seen as a foreign religion tarred by its association to historical imperialist invaders, ambivalent to Vietnamese culture and potentially antagonistic to secular state authority, the latter of which resembles an ‘operation of mutated Confucianism’ (Ileto 1993: 279). Like other new religious movements in Vietnam’s ‘re-enchantment’ (Taylor 2007), Protestant growth is characterised by a majority of female converts and followers (Le 2018) – but not in positions of authority. A recent article criticises the Vietnamese state for indirectly contributing to religious patriarchy by failing to intervene on behalf of women within Protestant churches and ignoring discriminatory practices in church leadership training, which is ironic given how much effort is expended controlling and restricting other aspects of Protestant church activity (Ly 2019). Nevertheless, this research is based on the experiences of lowland ethnic Kinh churches in predominantly urban areas, which is a very different socio-political context to that of Hmong Christianisation.

For the majority of Hmong who did not join the Communist revolution but have rather lived in remote highland areas with little exposure to ethnic Kinh culture or state education, the primary influence of Vietnamese State gender policies is through the Women’s Union. This official ‘mass organisation’ is “committed to improving the conditions of the female population of the country by representing the interests of Vietnamese women to the state, and state policies to its members” (Rydstöm 2016: 210). With a network of selected members which reaches into Hmong-inhabited highland areas, local unions run information meetings to discuss a range of concerns from mending clothes to reproductive healthcare. However, their effectiveness among the Hmong population is questionable: the 2019 national census reports that just midwives attended just 38% (compared to 95% national average) of Hmong women who gave birth in the past two years192 – this is ostensibly one of the Women’s Union’s top priorities in rural areas.193 Most of my interview participants showed little evidence of being influenced by state policies or ethnic majority practices regarding gender relations – apart from a growing awareness of the importance of education for girls, which is at least partly due to sustained government campaigns specifically targeting the Hmong (Nieke and Luong 2013).

193 Interview with Mai, see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Hmong worldview and clan structure

Vang, Nibbs and Vang (2017) emphasise the combination of subordinations imposed on contemporary Hmong women – which in this case includes the legacy of French colonialism, ethnic Kinh chauvinism, Vietnamese state institutional inequalities and, more recently, Christian activity. Despite this complexity, fieldwork data and other literature suggest that the most potent influence of patriarchy among Hmong women in Vietnam is rooted in traditional social organisation and power structures. Whilst the following presentation of Hmong culture contains unique gender configurations which distinguish it from wider Vietnamese society, this is not meant to parochialise or exoticise Hmong culture. On the contrary, patriarchal structures within Hmong society such as preference for sons and exploitation of daughters’ labour are mirrored in much of the East Asian world (Gao 2003), which is not surprising given the historical influence of Han Confucianism on Hmong communities (Tapp 1989c).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, there is considerable variation in what exactly is considered to be the traditional Hmong worldview, both from academics and within the Hmong community. However, fieldwork interviews corroborated with existing literature to confirm the salience of certain features present among Hmong communities in upland Vietnam. Along with the lack of distinction between spiritual and secular spheres, there is a pervasive belief in a “variety of natural and supernatural spiritual forces living in and animating all things” (Tapp 1989b: 60). These may be geographically based (e.g. forest spirit or household spirit), ancestral or personal – everyone is born with a spirit – and may be benevolent or malevolent. One’s material circumstances may be considered a symptom of some spiritual cause, for instance sickness is often attributed to a problem with the subject’s personal spirit. The person best equipped to engage with the spiritual world in the shaman, who is usually male (although I also met a couple of female shamans in Case Study Site 1).

Another key feature of traditional Hmong society is the clan structure, which correspond to Hmong surnames and are patrilineal. The number of clan names is fixed, and they have a transnational salience: “two Hmong who share the same clan name will usually feel some sense of kinship even if their respective roots are geographically very far apart” (Ricklefs et al. 2010: 8). For this reason marriage is clan exogenous, so it is considered improper (or even incestuous) to marry someone within the same clan. Several authors have noted that the clan is a barrier to Hmong political unity, as clan divisions and rivalries have historically undermined the potential for ethnonationalism (Lee 2015, Culas and Michaud 2004, Tapp 1988), therefore the ethno-national implications of Christianity on weakening clan structures are by no means insignificant (see below). For now, it is important to note that at a local level a clan will be led by ‘big men’ – prestigious elders to whom other clan members turns to in order to resolve a dispute and should submit to.
Courtship and Marriage

According to Lemoine (2012), the first landmark of gender inequality is seen in courtship: a boy is free to choose whom he wants to marry, but “the decision of giving away his daughter is entirely in her father’s hand backed by his lineage and the entire local clan segment. Quite often the decision is made taking no account of the girl’s feelings if she does not want to marry or does not want this particular husband.” (Lemoine 2012: 5). The Hmong ‘marriage-by-capture’ practice has been sensationalised and exoticised in Vietnamese media, and there is much debate within the Hmong community as to whether this practice is inherently sexist or a culturally appropriate way of negotiating marriage. For instance, Tâm Ngô (2016) rejects claims that it is oppressive to Hmong women, and views it rather as a tactic which young couples use as a way of forcing their parents’ hand to get married. However, I interviewed several Hmong women who had been married off this way, usually with their father’s approval, and had experienced fear or anger at being pressurised into marrying a stranger and joining a new family:

He came to her house to take [a wife], she just followed… she was 15 years old… she says they ‘kidnapped’ [kéo] her and she didn’t like the husband, but the neighbours… at his house, the aunt was her mum’s sister, so they forced her… She didn’t like her husband, but they paid [the bride price] money to her parents’ house… it took her 7 years before she liked him! …Now she likes him but not very much, because he often drinks alcohol!194

In the past, 20 years ago, I didn’t love [my husband], we just studied in the same class, and he loved me… I saw a guy following me… I walked a bit more and my husband grabbed and led me home to marry… I was very angry, but couldn’t do anything. Once I returned [to the man’s] home they took a pair of chickens, let me stand by the door… called the spirits, and considered me to be his wife, I was their daughter-in-law now, I could not get out. In the morning, they called my relatives for the proposal, I said I didn’t like him, it was only because he dragged me home, but my parents still said, well in the end you stepped into their house, so… even if you don’t like each other, you must still marry.195

During traditional wedding rituals, the bride loses her parents’ clan spirit and is initiated into her husband’s spiritual lineage. This ceremonial severing of ties mirrors the demand that wives move into the household of the husband’s family, and fall under the authority of the new clan’s hierarchy. From then on, “Other people will only address her as ‘wife of so and so’ that is: her husband’s personal name… [showing] that she has lost her past identity to be reborn in another family and hereafter belongs to a different lineage in a different clan” (Lemoine 2012: 6–7). Often by physically moving away from her home village, brides lose contact with their friends and nuclear family, which can be a traumatic prospect: during his fieldwork, ethnomusicologist O’Brien

194 Interview with Xong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
195 Interview with Kha; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
(2018: 83) noticed that Hmong brides tended to be very upset on their wedding days. After that, they are no longer considered part of their parent’s family – to the extent that when I asked older people whether they had grandchildren yet, upon replying they wouldn’t count their daughters’ children, only their sons’ children.

In return for losing their daughter to another clan, the bride’s family are given a bride price, which Lemoine deems to be the cornerstone of gender inequality in traditional Hmong society. This bride price varies depending on the perceived qualities of the bride in question, but “is also considered compensation to her parents for raising her. This is called ‘the price of milk and burden’ (nqi mis nqi nog)” (Vang 2015: 392). Crucially, the wife’s “submission to her husband and to his family is expected as part of the deal and, in case of adultery or a domestic row, her husband may feel he has (at least) the right to beat her, ‘because I have bought you a heavy price from your father’” (Lemoine 2012: 12). Patricia Symonds puts it in stark terms: “The bride-price payment… ties a woman to her husband and his lineage, giving them rights to her labor, sexuality and reproduction.” (2004:41-2).

During married life, if there is any serious domestic dispute or violence then the husband’s clan bears primary responsibility for resolving the conflict, which is highly problematic and usually leads to “patriarchal practices that lift the man’s status and minimize the woman’s safety.” (Vang 2015: 294). In desperate situations a woman may flee back to her parents’ home, but eventually the father will return her when the husband comes to seek resolution. “Social customs are here enforced by the fact that her father may not want to refund his son-in-law with the heavy bride price he has pocketed, to which may be furthermore added the expenses of the wedding ceremony (sacrificed pig and chickens provided or paid by the son-in-law).” (Lemoine 2012: 7). During one interview with a Hmong village elder over the Lunar New Year period, he told me:

Yesterday the guy was drunk and was violent to his family, beat his wife, she ran away, so today I went to encourage the guy, he went to fetch his wife… He’ll probably have to apologise to her parents, just apologise to the parents, bring a bottle of alcohol to appease the parents, and confess his guilt, how he beat his wife, and the wife ran so he must plead guilty to her family… that’s all. Then the parents will say, next time you cannot beat her again! …If they beat many times and injure the other, then they will be warned and then sent to prison. If it’s a small thing, then just a warning. But if it’s a big deal, they must go to prison. If you cause bleeding or like that, you must go to prison. 196

Despite the elder’s assurances of upholding the law, this quote shows a worrying dynamic in which local state authority converges with Hmong patriarchal practice to potentially trap women in abusive relationships, since clan leaders and shamans are often also village elders or cadres (see Chapter 5). In addition, “within the male gender role, there is a monopoly upon religious performances: death rituals, birth rituals, rituals to ancestors and wedding rituals. Women are

196 Interview with Cu & Song; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
strictly excluded from conducting any of those rituals” (Lemoine 2012: 17). Because of these unequal dynamics, boys are generally preferred and prioritised over girls – thus perpetuating gender discrimination to the next generation.

**Children and inheritance**

But because, with the Hmong, when the daughter marries, she will be dependent on the husband’s family; you follow the husband’s house. So regarding customs and habits… my parents still teach my younger brother, who must know, for example, at funerals he must attend and learn and follow. At home, the dad must teach the boys to retain it. As for girls, after marrying she just follows the husband’s family… Another thing is that the parents will live with the son. And the son bears the responsibility to look after the parents and worry about all the parents’ rituals, like when they pass away, the son has to choose the place of burial and do all the other things. So they attach special importance to having a son.\(^\text{197}\)

Kandiyoti remarks that “patriarchal bargains do not merely inform women’s rational choices, but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization as well as their adult cultural milieu” (1988: 285). Across all three Case Study Sites, a disproportionate amount of Hmong families had several older daughters and one youngest son; this was so common that upon conducting a new interview, I would begin by asking men how many older sisters they had. Most married couples would continue trying for more children until they had a son – in spite of official restrictions which are supposed to limit families to having two children. A typical rationale is presented here:

I want a son to look after my family, so they have enough to eat, so when he marries, they can look after us when we’re old. But I want at least one son, because I have a bit of land for a son to keep. The daughters, when they grow up, will marry a husband and then they’ll only visit us one every two months. To have a son, he can sustain and look after me, for my whole life.\(^\text{198}\)

Hmong parents would often claim that they loved their sons and daughters equally, but that they needed at least one son to stay with them after marriage and look after them in their old age. This is compounded by the lack of state welfare provided to older Hmong people – former state cadres receive a minimal pension which they describe as not enough to live on, while most old people get nothing more than the general benefits allocated to poor households (see Chapter 3). A few interviewees told me that gender discrimination is a thing of the past, since girls can study as much as boys. However, in practice boys and girls are raised according to different standards and are assigned different expectations by their parents. For example, when I asked Ni, a 49-year-old lady from Village B, about her future hopes for the lives of her children, she replied that she didn’t

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\(^{197}\) Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\(^{198}\) Interview with Khu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
know what hopes she had for her three daughters, but for her youngest son she hoped “that his life becomes happier, more modern, like the Kinh people who have [better] conditions”.

Pa Der Vang, a Hmong anthropologist from the USA, highlights a traditional saying: “Nine girls are not as worthy as one son” [cua j leeg ntxhais zoo tsis cuag ib leeg tub]” (2015: 384), echoing an old Vietnamese proverb: “One boy, that’s something; ten girls, that’s nothing” [Nhất nam viết Hữu, thập nữ viết vô] (Jamieson 1995: 18). Despite the similarity, it seems unlikely that the Hmong proverb was borrowed from Vietnamese, since the US diaspora Hmong language of Vang’s analysis has historically had little contact with Vietnamese speakers – although perhaps they are both derived from the Chinese version: “Ten fine girls are not equal to one cripple boy” (Schipper 2003: 94). According to research assistant Sy, inequality persisted because people still weren’t as happy when they had a baby girl, or when a daughter completed her studies. This topic was raised in a women-only focus group from Case Study Site 2:

According to them, all Hmong people – even if they’re ‘cultured’ – if they have a boy, they’re still happier. Because if it’s a girl… then when the daughter marries off, she’ll leave for good, and they won’t have a son, so it’s like a son will take care of you back but if they have a son, then it’s their lineage, their clan descent... The lineage, preserving their race. So, in any case everyone is happier when they have a son… If they have a son, both husband and wife will be happier, because - if they have a son it’s better, because they’ll be happier. Because the Hmong husband always thinks like that; if the wife doesn’t bear a son, then that’s something quite hard for the woman.

During participant observation, I noticed how girls were expected to do more housework and childcare than boys, and at a meal I had been invited to, after the adults had eaten the remaining chicken was given to the host’s son – not the older daughters. With a few exceptions, parents have invested in their sons’ school studies at the expense of their daughters’, although this educational gap is decreasing in recent times. Another factor limiting Hmong girls’ educational opportunities is the fear of abduction for the purposes of human trafficking, which is a very real threat – this makes parents reluctant to send their daughters to study outside of their district. Regardless, it is still true that to some extent girls “are brought up with the idea that they are bound to enter another family as they embark on their future social life. The first part of their lives in their parents’ home is seen as provisional until they find by their marriage their real place in society.” (Lemoine 2012: 16) For this reason, Hmong inheritance customs dictate that family land is divided among the sons and not the daughters, who are supposed to be all married off by the time their parents pass away.

199 Interview with Ni; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
200 Interview with Sy; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
201 Focus group 9 with Hmong women; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
202 Interview with Phong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
**Gendered division of labour**

Unlike neoclassical mainstream economics which treated the household as a ‘black box’ within which decision-making processes were not of interest (Kabeer 1998), a gendered political economy recognises the household as an essential component of the economy imbued with uneven power relations. Elson’s useful alternative macroeconomic model (2000) defines the domestic sector as the realm of housework, childbearing and caring, showing how it interacts with public and private economic sectors market flows, citizenship entitlements and duties, as well as non-monetised flows of information, ethical norms and ideas. The household not only make these crucial contributions to a functioning economy, but is also inscribed with gendered structures built upon the prevailing gender order – for example, the norms of unpaid labour of care and nurture being a fundamentally female task, while the tax/benefit circuit is often structured on the assumption of female dependence on male heads of households (2000: 85).

The unequal gendered division of labour was one of the most striking issues to emerge from fieldwork data. The traditional justification is that men do a few ‘heavy tasks’ such as chopping down a tree, selling a buffalo or harvesting rice, whereas the women do many ‘light tasks’ of cleaning the house, looking after children and planting rice seedlings. This trope is replicated by Pham Quy nh Phuong (2012) who, in an attempt to push back on external judgements of inequality, emphasises the need to understand what ethnic minorities themselves think about appropriate gender relations: “For women, labor is shared according to each person’s ability, one should do what he/she does best. As a result, since the women cannot do heavy works and such responsibilities belong to the man, it is only reasonable and fair if the men do not do as much” (2012: 22). After providing some quotes from ethnic minority women which appear to support this, she goes on to claim that “Division of labor in this circumstance does not originate from the perception of gender rights, but it is associated with a common goal of maintaining life and co-existing” (2012: 23).

While I agree that it is important to pay attention and give voice to insider perspectives and value systems, Pham’s uncritical description of Hmong division of labour is problematic and appears to be based on some one-off interviews rather than ethnographic observation of lived experiences. Firstly, several of the ‘light’ tasks assigned to women are by no means easy, as anyone who has raised children can tell you! Chia and San, two women from Case Study Site 3 described the tedious and back-breaking job of ploughing land as hired labour, which the men of the village did not want to do because “it gives you a backache”. In spite of this, they still considered it to be a ‘light’ work when I asked. On the other hand, some of the ‘heavy’ tasks which men do such as looking after and trading buffaloes requires relatively little physical energy.

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203 Interview with Chia & San; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Therefore, it is apparent that the Hmong gendered distribution of labour is not based on the difficulty or effort involved but rather the prestige of the task. Men’s tasks usually have an immediate, tangible reward – having wood from chopping a tree, having rice after the harvest, having money after selling a buffalo – whereas women’s tasks tend to involve a lot of drudgery without instant gratification. Pham partly acknowledges that “the definition of heavy or light works depends on the perception of gender standards in each community” (2012: 12), however she frames this within a wider assumption a ‘sharing’ and ‘helping out’ as the default of household gender relations. Given the highly unequal power relationships established through the aforementioned patriarchal marriage and inheritance practices, this is a dangerous assumption to make. As Elson notes, “rather than the gender division of labour and income within the family being seen as the optimal outcome of free choices, it may be seen as the profoundly unequal accommodation reached between individuals who occupy very different social positions with very different degrees of social power” (Elson 1994: 38).

Secondly, much of the time women end up contributing to the men’s jobs in addition to all their other responsibilities, either to support the men in busy periods like harvest or because the men are absent. As mentioned earlier, only men have the authority to partake in and conduct traditional ceremonies (with the rare exception of female shamans). Whilst conducting fieldwork, I observed that on many occasions men were out at the weddings or shaman rituals of friends and family, spending the whole day away from home and leaving the wife to do all the work. Furthermore, men would often consume a lot of alcohol at these occasions and come home drunk, resulting in a hangover which prevented them from doing work the next day. While a few women like Chia and San seemed to accept the light/heavy task dichotomy, the majority of women whom I interviewed were painfully aware of the unequal gendered division of labour:

Women always work harder than men. If some men want to work, then they work the same amount; for others, the wives always work harder and the husband works less... some just drink alcohol and mess about, don’t work as hard, the women work harder from a younger age... Here, in [Village E] the wives don’t drink alcohol, just the men... the women just drink a little, no-one gets drunk.\(^{204}\)

Although [the men] are not ill or anything, but they’re still unwilling to work hard, don’t help the wife and children. Many others do help their wife and children, making things less strenuous. But others just drink booze all day, and don’t help their family, which makes things quite strenuous… Hmong women work harder than men. Because men just plough the paddy fields, or go earn money, or do hired labour outside. But the Hmong women raise the kids, work the paddy fields and mountain fields, sew the clothes too, and everything. So it’s much more strenuous.\(^{205}\)

And if the wife reprimands or scolds the husband, there is the threat of domestic violence – especially when combined with alcohol. It was difficult to determine the pervasiveness of domestic violence across the different Case Study Sites, with some saying that most husbands might beat

\(^{204}\) Interview with Co; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{205}\) Interview with Hoa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
their wives occasionally but only a few do it regularly. Alcoholism is a predominantly male issue and also means that Hmong men spend a disproportionate amount of the household income on alcohol, cigarettes and gambling, which women are discouraged from participating in. Of course, researchers have long acknowledged that alcohol consumption does directly not cause domestic violence but can excuse, uncover and unleash ingrained misogynist attitudes (Javaid 2015). Nevertheless, many Hmong women explicitly stated that husbands were only violent when intoxicated:

It’s because of the alcohol, when drunk, they beat their wives. Because normally, without alcohol the husband is very good, but with alcohol they are not sober. Because they are not sober, that leads to violence.207

She says the husbands are alike, because they just go to wherever there is a party or feast, they invite each other to eat. Some people go, eat, return and still help the wife, but others return and don’t do anything. And if the wife says anything, he calls her horrible and evil, so they argue and then fight each other... in her house, when the husband is angry and drunk, she doesn’t say anything anymore, because if she does they fight so [she] just works alone; although working alone doesn’t yield results, but she still has to try.208

True (2012: 20) considers the gender division of labour within the family and household economy to be a key element of understanding the material basis of domestic violence. In turn, the unequal division of labour is underpinned and justified by unequal husband-wife power relations inscribed by traditional marriage practices. Needless to say, not all Hmong men are violent or lazy; many were described by their wives as loving and responsible husbands. Nevertheless, a cultural political economy of the household highlights the patriarchal structures which allow some men to be lazy or abusive and generally force most women to work harder. Core elements include the patrilineal clan structure which ensures male ownership of land and male community leadership, as well as the unequal traditional marriage arrangements which isolate women from their support networks and encourage the preference of sons over daughters.

**Agency and bargaining**

On the other hand, many studies emphasise that Hmong women are not merely passive victims, but rather exert considerable agency in the face of patriarchal barriers (Vang et al. 2017). Duong Bich Hanh (2006) and Sarah Turner (2012a), both conducting fieldwork in Case Study Site 1, show how Hmong women embrace tourism and market trade far more than men, earning an income for themselves which in turn increases their household bargaining power. Among tourists and visitors to the area (including other Hmong), there is a general perception that Hmong women do

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206 Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
207 Interview with Xong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
208 Interview with Pa; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
everything – earning the income, raising the children at the same time – while men just sit around drinking. Another rather drastic tactic some Hmong women employed was to migrate to China in search of better living and working conditions; as mentioned in Chapter 3, this is fraught with dangers of exploitation or even being trafficked. However, female emigration from Village E, the resultant shortage in potential wives and the threat of further emigration was apparently enough to increase the remaining women’s bargaining power and deter Hmong men from being abusive.209

To help interpret the following fieldwork data generated on female-led Christian conversion, I refer to Kandiyoti’s concept of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ (1988) by which women negotiate power within the set of rules and scripts that regulate their gender relations. These gender norms, to which both genders accommodate, contest, redefine, or renegotiate, are not set in stone but vary over time and location. “Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct ‘rules of the game’ and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression” (1988: 274). During times of social breakdown and upheaval, new strategies and forms of consciousness are created through personal and political struggles, which may be complex or even contradictory (1988: 286).

This concept is relevant here because it acknowledges both the cultural peculiarities of different forms of patriarchy (and ways to negotiate it) as well as the shifting dynamics of bargaining in periods of transformation, as has already been used by scholars researching the agency of Hmong women in the USA diaspora (Vang et al. 2017). Similar concepts have been used in gender and development studies, such as Sen’s notion of ‘cooperative conflict’ (1990) to understand household relationships, by which unequal bargaining power reflects hierarchies of gender, lifecycle and class – but which usually result in collaboration rather than household breakup, albeit under threat of domestic violence (Kabeer 1998).

**Female-led conversion**

One striking way in which Hmong women have shown their agency in recent years, which perhaps fits into McKay’s category of “creative or productive aspects immanent to agency”, is by converting to Protestant Christianity. Across all of Vietnam’s highlands, a universal feature of Hmong churches is that women outnumber men in attendance and participation in religious activities. According to Tâm Ngô, “Becoming Christian seems to be more attractive for women than for men as it can be a path to empowerment; women play a leading role in many cases of conversion” (Ngô 2015: 283). My fieldwork results confirmed that women do indeed play a leading role, usually being the first in their household to convert and then persuading their husbands to follow them. This trend has also been noticed by those within the Hmong community, both Christians and non-Christians:

209 Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Especially among the Hmong, the women who believe in God are a bit more numerous... Occasionally I hear women share that, firstly, the husband often drinks alcohol, so they want their husband not to drink and want their family to change, they believe in God so that the husband doesn’t drink anymore, there will be no more arguments in the family. So they believe in God – but there are also people who are ill or in pain, there are husbands who don’t want to believe but they’ll let their wives believe in God before, so it’s like that... To see if it’s good then they’ll believe, but if not, they won’t believe. 210

She doesn’t know why there are no Christians here [Village E] and loads over there [neighbouring village], but she says that the Christians over there, where when they married they followed religion – as in, the unbelieving husband married a Christian wife and then followed religion, followed the wife. 211

Furthermore, there appears to be a gendered aspect to not only conversion but also supernatural experiences. The brand of evangelical Christianity which has been propagated in upland Vietnam affirms that God actively intervenes in people’s lives through physical healing and spiritual deliverance. Other spiritual powers which do not emanate from the Christian God are demonised as evil powers which may require being set free from – a teaching which is obviously offensive to traditional Hmong perspectives. Out of the seventy interviews I conducted with Christians, twelve participants reported that the primary reason for conversion was due to witnessing a miraculous healing or deliverance after they (or others) prayed. Remarkably, eight of the subjects to be cured were women; another two were babies, and of the remaining two men, one was a shaman who might be expected to be particularly sensitive to spiritual influences. Despite the small sample size, that fact that women account for 80% of supernatural conversions to adults is significant. Here is one example:

Previously, my wife always had pain in her arm, for more than 10 years, she couldn’t get better. She started having it after giving birth to our 3rd child, then the 3rd child went to work in the fields as normal, while the mum’s hand continued to rot, like something died in it. Then it couldn’t be treated. Then she met someone who followed God, so my wife went to ask for God to bless her and her hand stopped rotting. Then it got better. So when my wife returned, she said, "tonight I follow God! Regardless of whether you follow God or not, I will follow God. Do you want to follow your parents or me?" At that time she said the evil spirits would be chased away now... at that time I didn’t know how to respond, so I just said, okay, let’s just follow. And now I cannot live by following my parents, I have to follow my wife. I live with my wife, so I must follow my wife, and follow God. 212

It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine the psychological or medical dynamics and effects of such testimonies. What this quote highlights, however, is the extent to which Hmong

210 Interview with La; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
211 Interview with Chia & San; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
212 Interview with Dao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
women are able to influence the rest of their family’s religious practice, with supernatural experiences apparently being one tool available to them. Not only do Hmong women play a leading role in initial conversion, they are also considered to be ‘more faithful’ than men in ongoing religious life. Pastor Sai was a child when his parents converted, after which his illiterate mother taught herself to read and then taught her son how to read the Hmong-script Bible.\footnote{213} Contrast this with traditional Hmong customs, where women are excluded from the religious-ceremonial realm (see above). What’s more, during Christian meetings there are many roles which women can (and do) lead such as singing hymns, public prayers, small group Bible studies, etc. When asking a different pastor why women always outnumbered men in Hmong congregations, he replied:

Probably because women love God more than men, or women are more zealous than men. Because men do this gradually and that gradually, have a more stubborn heart, so they won’t come to church as much. But women on the other hand are more zealous, they go to church more… I don’t know to say it, but there is another thing that women have a soft heart, kind-hearted, women may be weaker but are more zealous about spiritual issues, they’re more zealous. But men care less about spiritual issues, they prefer to worry about external issues, in society... Surely this issue is a problem across the world.\footnote{214}

So there is a perception that men are more distracted by ‘external’ social issues which include making money, socialising, dealing with the government, clan and wider familial relations – while Hmong women are free from most of these distractions, and are both more ‘kind-hearted’ but also more ‘zealous’. This resonates with Nanlai Cao’s ethnography of Chinese house churches in Wezhou (2010), where there is a similar demographic imbalance and gender discourse: women are more ‘emotional’ which, on the one hand makes them more receptive to ‘supernatural’ (or ‘superstitious’) experiences like healing or deliverance, on the other hand leads them to become ‘narrow-minded’ or ‘zealous’. Men, on the other hand, are seen as more ‘rational’ and less worried about spiritual issues, accepting the need to tolerate some sinful behaviour in their worldly concerns. Cao traces these stereotypes back to traditional Chinese gender norms, although in the Hmong case it is unclear whether this pastor is more influenced by traditional or Christian attitudes towards gender.

In any case, I argue that the agency of female-led conversion can be understood as a form of patriarchal bargaining, whereby Hmong women who are marginalised by patriarchal structures are contesting to gain power in a new religious domain from which they are not excluded. As elaborated below, Christianity is seen as an opportunity for relative gender empowerment, “to maximize security and optimize life options” (Kandiyoti 1988: 274); therefore, many Hmong women not only embrace it but attempt to convert their husbands too. Indeed, they have gained such a reputation for doing so that some non-Christian Hmong men are put off from marrying a

\footnote{213 Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} \footnote{214 Interview with Tan & Nhu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.}
Christian woman out of fear of being constantly nagged to convert. Of course, they are not always successful, and I also met Christian wives who were caught in a difficult position when their husbands did not convert or converted before ‘backsliding’ (see Chapter 7). From a social perspective, Hmong men have more to lose by becoming Christians, especially cadres (who are overwhelmingly male) who would probably lose their job if they publicly converted:

In my opinion, the men often drink alcohol, or work for the State, they have many friends to go drinking with, so rarely go to church meetings. In my area there are families where mother and children all believe but the husband does not believe, does not accept because he still drinks and smokes, so doesn’t want to believe in God.215

Family life

This links to another noticeable impact of Christianisation on gender relations is in the household. As Agarwal (1997: 1459) states, religious institutions can shape local views and values in either gender-progressive or gender-retrogressive directions. Vietnamese academics have already described some of the changes which largely corroborate with my fieldwork results, although it is possible to detect ethnic Kinh chauvinism in the latter quote:

As a Christian, a Hmong woman does not have to work every day, but can enjoy a Sunday free from any labor. She does not have to spend money hosting rituals and ceremonies, which often involve lots of cooking and cleaning. If her husband is a Christian too, he will give up drinking alcohol. The Christian God also prohibits men from beating women and from having two wives. So Christian Hmong women face less of a risk of domestic violence or having to share their husband with other women. (Ngô 2016: 110)

Protestantism dignifies the role of women and equality for women, as opposed to the backward traditional customs, and promotes progress… Furthermore, the prohibition on drinking alcohol, smoking, beating wife or children, polygamy etc. also has a positive effect on gender equality in the family and society. Therefore, women are often the first to convert and there are usually more women following Protestantism than men. (Nguyễn 2009: 125, 131)

While Christians have their own rituals and ceremonies, they tend to be shorter and, crucially, both men and women are invited to participate, unlike traditional rituals during which the man might be absent for several days, leaving the woman to take the burden of household duties. The impact of the Christian ban on alcohol cannot be underemphasised. This is reported by Hmong interviewees as the most difficult thing about converting, since drinking alcohol is traditionally an obligatory form of male bonding. But for those who manage to quit drinking, the effect on the family is often very beneficial, not least because alcoholism is associated with domestic violence:

215 Focus group 6 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
The people I know about, who beat their wives, do not believe in God. Non-Christians often drink alcohol and beat their wives and children. Christians, those who believe with their heart, they don’t beat their wives, they’re very virtuous.\textsuperscript{216}

Their everyday lives, those non-Christians, for instance, when they get drunk then they argue with the wife and children, fight each other, swear at the children, even beat their wives, don’t listen to their wives, then the wife fights back, then they beat their wife... I listen to my wife, most of the time, but sometimes I don’t listen. Many times, when I drink alcohol and come home, I don’t listen to her. But if I don’t drink, I always listen to what she has to say. When I drink alcohol, it’s like something in my body is eating into my heart.\textsuperscript{217}

Of course, there are reasons to maintain healthy scepticism when evangelistic Hmong Christians are eager to paint a positive picture of their religious community and not mention anything that might contradict this. Equally, there are non-Christian interviewees who were very hostile to the influence of Christianity and spoke very critically about believers, but it is widely accepted that Hmong Christians drink far less alcohol. In such a divisive environment, this gender analysis attempts to give a balanced account of the most prevalent narratives, whilst giving priority to women’s voices and comparing interview data with participant observation. For example, the first quote above is given by a Christian woman married to a non-Christian man, while the second is from a ‘backsliding’ Christian man who has failed to give up alcohol. These marginal positionalities enable the interviewees to witness the lives of people both sides of the faith divide, unlike most Christians or non-Christians who have very little interaction with (and many misconceptions about) the religious ‘other’. This adds credibility to their comparison of lifestyle and gender dynamics, although the themes are repeated in many other interviews with ‘non-marginal’ research participants.

Another commonly cited benefit for women is that without alcohol, Hmong men have less excuses to shirk their part of the burden of earning a living. For this reason, I met one woman who had no desire to convert but was nevertheless seeking a hardworking Christian husband, although in fact inter-religious marriages are quite rare:

For those who don’t believe in God, the husband drinks alcohol… When drunk the wife works but he doesn’t. When they don’t drink alcohol then they both go, sometimes they get on, other times they fight each other. But a Christian married couple, don’t drink alcohol, don’t argue much, like when we do something, we tell each other, “Let’s go do it”, then we both go to work and help each other.\textsuperscript{218}

\textsuperscript{216} Interview with Re; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\textsuperscript{217} Interview with Mo; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\textsuperscript{218} Interview with Der; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Instead of spending money on ‘sinful’ things like alcohol, cigarettes and gambling, Christian men are encouraged to invest in the benefit of their family, for example in their children’s education. In addition, church teaching about behaviour in marriage emphasises mutual love and forgiveness while discouraging adultery and laziness. This creates communal standards which men are expected to adhere to as much as women, and those who do not comply – for example, men who continue beating their wives – may be expelled from the church as punishment.\footnote{Interview with Mi; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.} This echoes other studies in the Global South about the ‘domestication’ of Pentecostal men who are discouraged from alcohol, smoking and adultery as immoral and instead invest energy and resources towards their family (van Dijk 2002, Freston 1998, Maxwell 2005). It also points to the disciplining role of Christianity in fashioning productive subjects who may be better prepared to integrate into the capitalist market economy (see Chapter 7). So far, then, a gendered political economy perspective suggests that Christianisation has had the overall effect of diminishing the unequal division of labour, reducing household expenses which were enjoyed only by men, and decreasing domestic violence. Even local cadres, who are generally suspicious of Hmong Christian activity, recognise that alcoholism and violence against women appear to have decreased dramatically in church communities.\footnote{Interview with Long; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.}

Children and weddings

Concerning attitudes toward children, in recent times both Christians and non-Christians have been investing more in their education for both sons and daughters, thanks in part to government initiatives and also an increasing awareness of the utility of education in the modern economy. The sometimes subtle but pervasive preferential treatment of boys (see above) was also reflected in both Christian and non-Christian households across the Case Study Sites, although it is worth bearing in mind that Christianity is a relatively new social phenomenon and some of its effects will not be seen until the younger generation start having children. The few households I met who only had daughters (and were not planning for more children) were indeed Christian households. When I asked one such father, Nhia, whether he was satisfied with his two daughters, he replied:

Yes. Because I think that now, there are some people with sons and they’re still hard off. They have many sons and are still miserable. And others have many daughters but are successful, their lives are more stable. Because sons destroy too much! …So I thought, if I have 2 daughters then it’s enough. I have a responsibility to do this… And sons and daughters are alike. But now only because I follow God and studied the Bible so much, could I understand this. In the past I absolutely had to have a son. If I didn’t follow God, I would have to have a son, before I was satisfied.\footnote{Interview with Nhia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.}

So Nhia associated this attitude of gender equality with studying the Bible, although other Christians have apparently not yet reached the same conclusion. Pastor Phu, who features in
Chapter 5, has two daughters; when I asked the same question, Phu said yes, he was content with two daughters because the purpose for our lives is to improve society, not to continue our line of descendants. This is noteworthy because Phu gives an explicit rationale which undermines the traditional Hmong patriarchal lineage structure. And because he is quite an influential pastor who teaches theology to Hmong students, other Christians will pay attention to his family’s choices and be influenced by his teaching. There was also one candid non-Christian lady from Village A who declared that she disliked the traditional Hmong customs and instead intended to give a portion of her land as inheritance to her daughter as well as her sons, but this was the only case I recorded.

A final site of Christian transformation on gender relations concerns wedding customs. Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm (2016) notes that arranged marriages are discouraged within Hmong Christian communities, and certainly ‘marriage by capture’ is banned. Also, Christians are more likely to register their marriages and procure a wedding certificate which would in theory safeguard the woman’s legal rights in case of marital breakdown: “The relationship between husband and wife is one of equality and steadfastness, and the woman’s rights are ensured” (2016: 74). Other authors have also noted the austere nature of Hmong Christian weddings which are much cheaper than traditional weddings since they are shorter and involve no alcohol; this is considered by Kinh observers (state or academic) to be ‘progressive’ and more suitable for poor Hmong society than ‘wasteful’ backwards customs (cf. Nguyễn 2009, Nguyễn, K. Đ. 2015), although ironically most Kinh weddings are in fact very lavish and expensive.

Regarding the bride price, which was identified earlier as a key perpetuator of Hmong patriarchy, most Christian communities have put an upper limit on the amount that can be paid to the bride’s family, which is well below the ‘going rate’ in non-Christian circles. For example, in Case Study Site 1 the highest Christian bride price is 10 million VND ($500), as opposed to 30-60 million VND ($1500-3000) for non-Christians, meaning poorer Christian men can afford to marry more easily. Even non-Christians in Case Study Site 1 agreed that Christian bride prices were more sensible, although at one Christian wedding I attended, the father of the bride still remembered traditional customs and appeared to be discontented that the bride price did not cover much of the wedding cost.

In Village D, Pastor Ban (who was introduced in Chapter 5) has taken things one step further. When his second daughter was proposed to by the son of another Christian in the village, Ban took a very counter-cultural decision by refusing to accept any bride price from the groom’s family and, furthermore, contributing half of the costs of the wedding (which traditionally the groom must pay for). Although Ban’s household is the richest in the village and could afford to do so, it was still seen as very shocking. The groom’s father describes how his relatives were offended and urged

222 Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
223 Interview with May; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
224 Interview with Gau; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Ban to at least accept a token gesture, but Ban did not accept a penny. Later, when interviewing pastor Ban about the incident, he had a lot to say:

Yes, in general this culture still exists, people still really prioritise and prefer sons; both ethnic Kinh and ethnic Hmong... But in my opinion, I think differently. In my opinion, now sons and daughters are just as important. Both are my children. For example, if I have a son, when he grows up and marries, then they will live separately. And my daughter, when she marries, they should also be living separately. So they’re just the same. So when I’m ill, however much my daughter helps me then my son should do the same. So both son and daughter are the same... As for when I die, then everyone just returns to heaven. So as for the Hmong culture, in many circumstances they have the outlook that I must have a son so that, after I die, I have a son to worship me. But the daughters get married, don’t have the authority to worship me, that’s the first thing. Secondly, sons retain their clan line but not daughters - if they don’t have a son then their clan line is lost. So their outlook is that sons are more important than daughters. But in my opinion, whether you have a clan line or not, afterwards when we die, we return to God, so it’s not important. We use clan names down here on earth. Once they’re gone, it’s neither good nor bad.

Here some interesting reasoning can be observed: firstly, contrary to traditional culture, Ban does not want his children living with the groom’s family when they marry, but rather to move out – which means there is no special need for a son to stay home and look after him, as he expects his children to share this burden even after married. Secondly, there is a theological argument which Ban uses to undermine traditional Hmong patriarchy: clan names are for here on earth, but once you die, so you go to heaven and it doesn’t matter what your clan name is anymore. Consequently, the task of perpetuating one’s lineage is rather unimportant, as was also claimed by Phu with his two daughters (see above). This kind of discourse has led some to accuse Christianity of erasing the entire clan structure (Vương 2016: 213), although in fact Hmong Christians in Vietnam still follow the custom of clan exogamy and do not marry someone from the same clan.

At the time of fieldwork, Ban’s daughter was still living with her husband’s family until they could save enough to build their own house. However, I observed that the daughter and son-in-law both regularly visited Ban’s house, staying to wash up after meals together. Pastor Ban’s refusal of the dowry and contribution to the wedding has effectively created an ongoing relationship of obligation between the bride’s parents and new couple, which was previously unheard of in Hmong society. In turn, this means that Ban’s daughter will not be cut off from her birth family and become isolated, so that if she experienced any future marital abuse or hardship then she would be much better protected than traditional Hmong brides.

Pastor Ban has not imposed this highly unorthodox decision as a compulsory rule for his congregation, but expressed a desire to serve as a role model for others to follow. As he is the

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225 Interview with So; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
226 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
denominational leader for his province, there is no doubt that his actions will have been heard and talked about across wider Hmong Christian circles. Indeed, Ban’s influence can already be seen by another young couple from Village D who recently got married without any bride price. According to the new wife, “if the parents want to, then we pay. If not, then we don’t. Many parents say that, in the future, we will rely on our daughter’s help more, so we shouldn’t take from our daughters too much or take from the groom’s side much”.227

Competing patriarchies and contestations

Christianity may be seen as an opportunity for empowerment compared to traditional patriarchal structures, however there are limits. Mai Na Lee critiques (2018) Tâm Ngô’s argument “that Christianity has eroded traditional forms of gender inequality, but she does not interrogate how Christian patriarchy has bound women in new ways” (2018: 427), a criticism which could be extended to other Vietnamese-language studies. Most obviously, most Hmong church leaders are male, and those who have been officially ordained as pastors are, to my knowledge, all men. Moreover, as Chapter 5 shows, these men are not only religious elites but also powerful influencers and brokers of local political economies. The largest denominations who operate among Hmong-inhabited areas generally have male-only leadership policies, although there are other unregistered Christian networks operating among the Hmong who endorse female leadership. While the male pastors I interviewed often highlighted the benefits of Christianity for women in everyday life, participant observation revealed some symptoms of enduring patriarchal attitudes.

On one occasion, I accompanied Pastor Seng (see Chapter 5) as he visited the different households of his congregation over the New Year period, enjoying people’s hospitality and drinking plenty of fizzy drink (instead of the traditional alcoholic option, corn wine). In one household which had provided a feast for all the neighbours, the jovial pastor raised a toast and said to the hostess, “may you always bear sons!” On another occasion, a different pastor was giving a sermon on marriage, he gave a ‘humorous’ anecdote during which a couple were expecting the baby, and when it was a girl the father was not very happy, but then afterwards the mother eventually bore a son, at which point the father was so happy he slaughtered a pig to celebrate! Now the audience laughed at the anecdote because of the father’s extravagance, but the pastor continued to perpetuate sexist attitudes which were still present in this community.

Therefore, in practice, new Christian gender structures maintain some traditional patriarchal norms whilst also creating new dimensions of disparity. This is encapsulated in Hmong Christian teaching on marriage which, as noted above, has had a ‘domesticating’ effect on husbands’ lifestyle and consumption habits in particular. On the other hand, at another wedding I attended, the pastor preached that God created the man first and then the woman; that husbands should love their wives

227 Interview with Mai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
as Jesus loves the Church, and that wives should ‘listen to’ (nghe lời) their husbands as believers listen to Jesus. There was also some evidence of Christian leaders encouraging a nuclear family model for raising children – like Ban’s expectation for married couples to move out as opposed to conventional norms of living with grandparents, or pastor Sai’s concern that parents were migrating for work and leaving their children alone with the grandparents (see Chapter 3). However, there were no signs of a concurrent trend towards ‘housewifization’ (Mies 1987) since women’s non-domestic labour is generally considered to be a crucial contribution to the household income.

In turn, new and continuing patriarchal practices are being both internalised and contested by Hmong Christian women, especially among the younger generation. Regarding teaching on marriage roles, a focus group with female Hmong students revealed both an acceptance of the orthodox stance as well as a challenge in the same breath:

Of course, the Bible says that the husband will be the head, the wife will... must lower herself a bit, but it’s not always like that. In many families, the women will be stronger, other cases the men will be stronger - depends on the family. But of course the wife must lower herself a bit must respect the husband a bit more, but that’s the same with all ethnic groups, not just my ethnic group; often the women will be stronger, will say something to disrespect the husband, and the husband will lack love for his wife, but nowadays the relationship is equal; you just have to respect each other.  

These days more and more female Hmong Christians are studying theology in Bible schools and gaining the tools to take more prominent religious leadership positions. In Ho Chi Minh City one unofficial Bible school was led by a female Kinh pastor, exposing the predominantly male Hmong students to different a gendered theology and church leadership model. What happens when female Bible students graduate and return to the provinces, unable to use their skills in official pastor roles? This is a recently emerging issue which will require further future research to answer fully, but I interviewed one such lady, who contests the prevailing gender norms:

Sometimes women, although they’re not men, but they have a heart for evangelism or a heart for mercy for those who do not yet know God, those who are currently in sin, in the hands of Satan and evil spirits. If a person has that heart - regardless of whether they are a woman or man - I think God will choose those kind of people. He won’t just choose men. So now in general there are also many women who are clergy, and even female pastors.  

**Concluding remarks**

This chapter has explored a range of gendered socio-cultural dynamics present within Hmong communities in Vietnam’s highlands, as well as the varied impacts of Christianisation on gender relations. I have argued that gender inequality is still very much present in Hmong society, as it is

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228 Focus group 8 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
229 Interview with La; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
in wider Vietnamese society (albeit in different manifestations). State initiatives have gone some way towards ameliorating gender inequality, especially in promoting education of Hmong girls, but have not successfully challenged the underlying cultural attitudes and customs which perpetuate Hmong patriarchy. Some of the social structures which perpetuate gender inequality include patrilineal marriage, the bride price and associated power relations which lead to an unequal gendered division of labour, domestic violence and a preference for sons over daughters.

Conversely, an everyday political economy perspective recognises the agency of marginalised actors through mundane, day-to-day actions which can manage or subvert patriarchal structures. This chapter focuses on Christian conversion as a form of patriarchal bargaining which is often initiated and driven forward by women, who display considerable capacity to influence other family members with new ethical norms and ideas. Many Hmong women are embracing a new religious field which affords them more opportunities and positions of power than previously. What’s more, Christian behavioural reform places a much greater burden of change on Hmong men, forcing them to quit drinking alcohol and contribute more to household productivity. This alters the balance of household expenditure and income, as well as reducing the risk of domestic violence. Not only that, but Christian teaching and practices have the potential to profoundly undermine the more oppressive aspects of traditional marriage relationships, as seen in pastor Ban’s case.

This potential is not always realised: male pastors may also perpetuate existing patriarchal discourse and practices, while the limits to female leadership in church are a major restriction to Hmong women increasing their authority and voice in Christian communities. In his broader study of Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity across Vietnam, Vince Le claims that “women are often effective in using family discipline and communal church pressure to assert their will and influence in domestic affairs, even to the point of compelling husbands to put the collective needs of the household unit above the men’s own freedom. But these same women seldom question the legitimacy of patriarchy as an institution” (Le 2018: 59) – although some female Hmong students are indeed contesting persistent or new patriarchal structures. Whilst it is true that “Christian patriarchy has bound women in new ways” (Lee 2018: 427), this does not mean that the new ways are equally oppressive as the old ways. Collier (1994) notes that an epistemic relativism which acknowledges that “our beliefs and research are socially produced, transient and fallible… does not commit us to judgement relativism, i.e. the idea that ‘all beliefs are equally valid in the sense that there are no rational grounds for preferring one to another’” (1994: 90). This chapter has provided evidence why many Hmong women in Vietnam are preferring Christian activity to traditional socio-religious practices.

Returning to Mahmood’s question as to why so many women would support a movement that seems inimical to ‘their own interests and agendas,’ the assumption that women have more
emancipatory options available is not always valid in more isolated, less globalised and less educated settings – such as late 20th century upland Vietnam. Arguably the secular feminist option is represented by Vietnam’s Women’s Union which has had considerable difficulty influencing upland Hmong communities and, being dominated by ethnic Kinh as with every other state body, is tied up in antagonistic majority-minority politics (see Chapter 2). During the 1980s and 1990s it is probable that most Hmong women in Vietnam had no direct contact with Women’s Unions due to their remote location and inability to speak Vietnamese. Therefore, from a ‘patriarchal bargaining’ perspective, it is not surprising that Christianity was perceived to be the most (or only) realistic option of gender empowerment at the time. These days increased education opportunities, integration into state gender policies and access to the online transnational Hmong-speaking community provide alternative ways to question gender norms and consider alternative ideas, both for Christians and non-Christians.

Whilst I agree with Mahmood’s emphasis on the need to understand women’s own reasons for their actions and not pre-categorise them in terms of subordination or resistance to a patriarchal hegemony, in my particular fieldwork Hmong women were well aware of their subjugated position and many expressed a desire to change it. When I asked why women converted, it was rare for research participants to articulate their motives explicitly in terms of gender dynamics or a struggle to improve their social position. However, Christianity was well-known to be popular among other Hmong women, as were the observations that the women did not have to work on Sundays and the men did not drink alcohol. Like Frisk (2009) does with Islamic piety among women in Malaysia, I see Hmong women’s support for Christianity as a ‘creative or productive aspect’ of agency (McNay 1996) by which individuals catalyse social change which has undermined some traditional patriarchal structures, even though it cannot necessarily be understood as direct resistance to dominant norms.

The significant growth of new and old religious movements in Vietnam has been acknowledged for some time now (Taylor 2007), but its wider implications on gender relations require further attention. A postsecular feminist perspective proves useful for conceptualising women’s agency within Vietnam’s ‘re-enchantment’, where the apparent paradox of high female religious participation is contrasted with the secular Communist rhetoric of gender empowerment. However, because – unlike in Western Europe – Vietnamese secularism does not share historical ties with Christianity, the explosion of the latter has led to competing (and sometimes cooperating) projects of modernity among Hmong Christian communities whereby “the modern… becomes envisionable without the secular” (Bracke 2008: 59).
50 year-old Cua was one of the few Hmong from Village B to enjoy a career in the local authorities, earning a regular salary whilst slowly moving up the ranks to reach committee president by the time he retired last year.\(^{230}\) This early retirement was due to his conversion to Christianity, after which he was no longer offered a new post when his term ended. Cua’s wife Ni had been suffering from chronic body aches and neck pains and, after attending a relative’s funeral, recurrent nightmares.\(^{231}\) After a series of unsuccessful doctor appointments and shaman rituals, Ni went to the nearby church in Village A to pray and converted to Christianity; a month later, she had recovered from her ailments and persuaded her husband and children to become Christians (see previous chapter). Despite being a relatively new believer, Cua’s social prestige, education and connections with local authorities means he now holds a respected position as elder in pastor Seng’s church (see Chapter 4), while his daughter has attended Bible School and also plays an active role leading worship and teaching in church services.\(^{232}\)

During an unrecorded conversation, Cua gave some revealing insights about the political economy of Hmong Christianisation. He said that richer, well-connected Hmong (like himself, although he claimed he was ‘only average’) have plenty of opportunities to ‘engage with society’ (va châm xã hội), to learn from others and change their lives – regardless of their faith. Poor Hmong, on the other hand, very rarely go out into wider society and have few chances to socialise; therefore, they don’t know how to or don’t accept change. Nevertheless, according to Cua, poor Hmong Christians are able to change, because they listen to the word of God preached by the pastor, so they don’t need to ‘engage with society’ as much. From his perspective, poor Hmong households are generally stuck in a cycle – they just do hired labour and then spend their hard-earned (but meagre) salary on alcohol. For Cua, then, Christianity is a ‘way out’ of poverty which is of more use to poor Hmong than the rich.

Tâm Ngô (2016) highlights the significance of the Hmong-language term for Christianity as the ‘new way’ or ‘new road’ (kevcai tshiab), which implies a means to an end. For Ngô it is, among other things, “clearly a project of modernizing oneself and one’s world” (2016: 58). This chapter seeks to analyse both Cua’s explicit claims and the assumptions behind them about progress, assimilation and prosperity, in order to fully appreciate local conceptualisations of poverty and development. In doing so we uncover the wider socio-economic forces at play, as well as tensions between national, religious and international visions of progress, which have crucial implications with regard to the thesis’ central research questions about intersections between religious, political and economic transformations – and to what degree they can be considered empowering. As well

\(^{230}\) Interview with Cua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{231}\) Interview with Ni; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{232}\) Interview with La; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
as presenting fresh data, this final empirical chapter also draws together and reflects on broader themes stemming from previous chapters in order to bring this thesis towards its conclusion.

This chapter focuses on the ‘agency-centric’ component of the everyday political economy analytical lens introduced in Chapter 1, which builds upon Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and ‘technologies of the self’ to explore how norms of everyday life are constructed, replicated, transformed and contested. While governmentality, or the ‘art of government’, includes a range of mentalities, rationalities and techniques, the everyday is an important site to observe how logics of discipline are cultivated through daily routines and economic practices (Elias et al. 2016). At the same time, these processes are never entirely successful and can be resisted or reinterpreted by local actors, often leading to contradictory, messy, and refractory effects (Ferguson 1990).

By analysing some of the prominent themes to emerge from fieldwork data about people’s ideas, aspirations and practices regarding ‘the good life’, this chapter paints a picture of the varied ways Hmong Christians and non-Christians grapple with wider socio-economic forces at play. The three intertwining elements of this picture are (1) local aspirations for modernity, (2) perceptions about the means to development, and (3) religious self-fashioning of economic behaviour, which are addressed in this chapter. An analysis of these elements allows us to address the thesis sub-questions: To what extent is Christianisation preparing Hmong communities for integration into a capitalist economy, and what role does neoliberalism play in socio-economic transformations in upland Vietnam?

Chapter outline

Neoliberalism, in its various guises, has become of late an increasingly prominent paradigm to explain social transformations across the globe, although researchers of Vietnam have been somewhat hesitant to ascribe it with an omnipresent status (Gainsborough 2010b). A central theme of this chapter is in what ways state and Christian governmentalities do and do not cultivate neoliberal subjectivities among Hmong communities in Vietnam’s highlands, given the wider context of ongoing state territorialisation, neoliberal international development and American and Korean religious influences. The next section defines three distinct (though overlapping) conceptualisations of neoliberalism as political economy, imperialism and governmentality, the last of which will be most useful for interpreting evidence of ‘actually existing neoliberalisms’ (Peck et al. 2018) in everyday life.

Local aspirations for modernity are the focus of the first two chapter sections, with the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007) identified as a key paradigm which pervades everyday life in Vietnam’s highlands as a fully internalised desire. Unlike other failed state attempts to transform Hmong
subjectivities, the ‘will to improve’ was particularly successful because state and Christianity
governmentalities overlap in their disparagement of traditional culture and promotion of
progressive visions of the future. Nevertheless, these visions sit uneasily alongside the increasing
awareness of economic inequalities and embroilment in the cash economy which characterises
‘these modern times’. A related concern is the desire to be civilised – which Hmong Christians
have associated with cleanliness and hygiene – while retaining a sense of ethnic distinctiveness in
the face of Kinh assimilation.

Based on these aspirations for modernity as a common end goal, the next section explores four key
factors which Hmong people consider to be means to development: material assets, work diligence,
connections to wider society and ‘intellectual assets’. This final factor highlights the importance of
self-interested ‘calculation’ as both an ability to be learned and as a way of thinking which the
Hmong traditionally lack. A notable omission from these means to development is group
cooperation, even though this was a crucial factor in the improving fortunes of Village D. A closer
inspection of the ambivalent tension between communalism and increasing market competitiveness
within this village points to a hybrid form of Christian subjectivity which cannot be wholly
attributed to a neoliberal logic. The following section addresses the claim some outside observers
have made that Christian prescriptions on work and consumption are leading to a rationalising self-
fashioning of economic behaviour; the contested nature of this claim is epitomised around the
discussion of changing expenditures and attitudes towards traditional Hmong rituals and church
 tithing.

The following two sections address the growing influence of Pentecostalism in Vietnam’s
highlands, which proposes another unorthodox means to development in the belief that God will
darce devout believers materially – although the more extreme versions of Prosperity theology are
presently at the fringes of Hmong Christianity. One important dynamic of subjectification is the
translation of religious faith into confidence in the economic realm, cultivating a spirit of
entrepreneurialism which, in some cases, leads to Christians to be more willing to embark on
business ventures than risk-averse non-Christians. However, those unable to fulfil Christianity’s
technologies of the self are looked down upon by the faithful as ‘backsliders’, pointing to a
disempowering potential of Christianisation. Based on these variegated themes, the conclusion
argues that the neoliberal logic is not monolithic in upland Vietnam but intersects with other
cultural logics of communalism as well as state territorialisation projects to produce distinctive
local subjectivities, which nevertheless probably assist Hmong Christians in their incorporation into
the expanding market economy.
Neoliberalism: political economy, imperialism, governmentality

Scattered across previous empirical chapters are glimpses of policies and social behaviour which, in other contexts, have been associated with various formulations of neoliberalism. To recap, Chapter 3’s overview of Hmong livelihoods highlighted the increasing salience of the market economy in place of traditional subsistence livelihoods, as well as the privatisation of land following the collapse of a socialist planned economy. More recently, there was evidence of welfare benefits being scaled back and a change in state development strategies from ‘handouts’ to low-interest loans, with an accompanying discourse of self-improvement. Moreover, attitudes towards especially poor Hmong as ‘workshy’ and over-reliant on state benefits were widespread among both Christian and non-Christian Hmong communities, akin to Nguyen and Chen’s ‘failing subjects’ (2017). In Chapter 5, ministers and state-owned media praised Village D’s economic achievements and promoted it as a model of community-led development for others to follow without “waiting for the state”, shifting the responsibility of economic development away from the state and onto the citizens.

Neoliberalism means different things to different academics (Ward and England 2007), although they are of course related. Commonly it describes a set of macroeconomic policies and programmes guided by the ‘less state, more market’ maxim whereby “individual liberty is conceived in economic terms, and the ‘market’—the mechanism of price—is to play a central role in all aspects of social regulation” (Gauthier et al. 2013: 13). I refer to this understanding as neoliberal political economy, which Gainsborough (2010b) claimed was ‘present but not powerful’ in the Vietnamese state, in spite of supposed ‘reform’ and sustained engagement with various neoliberal actors—which the state has responded to with ‘mock compliance’ and other creative ways of maintaining market intervention capacity (Beeson and Pham 2012). Masina (2012) agrees that while đổi mới reforms dismantled central planning and released the ‘animal spirits’ of capitalism, “Vietnam could hardly be considered a showcase for neoliberalism” (2012: 204) due to the state’s limited and ambiguous adherence to neoliberal prescriptions. Yet the above recent policies encountered during fieldwork suggest that the situation is changing rapidly, and neoliberal political economy may be becoming increasingly influential in Vietnamese state policy.

Another line of argument is about neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project used to enable recent waves of primitive accumulation and capitalist expansion through the ‘new imperialism’ (Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism as imperialism tends to focus on the elite actors, groups and transnational class-based alliances who “project and circulate a coherent program of interpretations and images of the world onto others” (Springer 2012: 136), with international development bodies such as the World Bank and IMF complicit in the neoliberal project (Harvey 2004). Given the historical context of US intervention in Cold War Asia and the importance of Christianity as an anti-communist ally for American regional hegemony in South Korea (Kim, D.-C. 2007), it is
interesting to consider the role of contemporary Korean missionaries to South East Asia in promoting neoliberal values (Kim 2018) and anti-communist rhetoric (see below), especially given that Vietnamese state texts initially accused Hmong Christianity of being agents of American imperialism – albeit under a different rationale (see Chapters 2 and 4).

Meanwhile, scholars following a Foucauldian tradition conceptualise neoliberalism as a modern form of governmentality whereby social realities are reconstructed to facilitate ‘governance at a distance’, so that “political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy” (Foucault 2008: 131). *Neoliberal governmentality* intervenes not on the market but on social actors by instilling technologies of the self which promote “the models and ideas of ‘entrepreneur’, ‘investition’ and ‘risk’ at the level of day to day life” (Cotoi 2011: 115). This conceptualisation of neoliberalism is seen to be extremely malleable, utilised in different ways by democratic, authoritarian and communist regimes (Ong 2006) by emphasising the economic imperative above the political (Brown 2015). In addition, it is increasingly used as a strategy of international development to promote values of ‘resilience’ (Joseph 2013), personal responsibility (e.g. microfinance) and the nuclear family (Cooper 2017) – often at the expense of traditional forms of cooperation. Governmentality is not just a state project but is rather achieved through the participation of

- various institutions related to global capitalism, the development complex, and its associated institutions; the state and its institutions and its associated micro-political forms, such as schools, the military, hospitals; ethnicity and forms of ‘traditional’ authority and its associated imaginaries; family and kinship; various forms of religious institutions and forms” (Marshall 2009: 94).

An instructive example of the ‘neoliberalisation of religion’ is found in Rudnyckyj’s (2010) study of Islamic business training in Indonesia, whereby “[e]nhanced religious practice was seen as conducive to greater profitability” (2010: 21). Here spiritual reformers designed a motivational course which teaches “an ethics of accountability, personal responsibility, and self-discipline that they see as conducive to corporate business” (2010: 19) by “reconfiguring work as a form of worship and religious duty” and “objectifying spirituality as a site of management and intervention” (2010: 131–2). Rudnyckyj focuses on “the process of rationalization inherent in capitalism” (2010: 133) and shows “how religion and neoliberalism are combined to enlist subjects in governing themselves” (2010: 154).

For the purposes of this chapter, I consider all three perspectives of neoliberalism to be relevant for understanding religious, political and economic transformations in upland Vietnam, and will refer to them where applicable. Nevertheless, with regards to the role of Hmong Christianisation in cultivating economic values and practices everyday life, neoliberal governmentality is the most instructive. Along these lines, Schwenkel and Leshkowich (2012) argue for a more nuanced analysis of how neoliberal and socialist regimes interact and overlap in Vietnam, seeing “not so
much a decline in state power but a diversification of forms of governmentality” (2012: 385). So far, researchers have been hesitant to attribute upland transformations in Vietnam to a singular neoliberal logic, instead emphasising the distinctive historical, geographical and ethnopolitical contingencies at play (Turner et al. 2015, cf. Salemink 2015a, Sikor et al. 2011). The following empirical sections offer evidence of the ways Christianity may contribute to a version of neoliberal subjectivity among Hmong communities, but this is complicated by state territorialisation, ethnic politics and other competing logics of governance and discipline.

The will to improve and its discontents

Implicit in Cua’s opening vignette is the need for change, that the Hmong should not stay as they are – a widely held concern of both Christian and non-Christian interviewees. Cua did not define what this change should look like, but in the context, it seems to involve becoming richer. An extremely common expression given was the desire of research participants to ‘vươn lên’ – literally to ‘rise up’ or to ‘better oneself’, which could also be translated as ‘social upward mobility’. This is evidence of an almost completely internalised ‘will to improve’, a phrase which Tania Murray Li (2007) coined to refer to the mentality of external NGOs and state actors who claim progress as a goal and seek to impose ‘development’ on a group of people whose conditions must be improved. In this section I argue that Christian and state governmentalities overlapped in cultivating this ‘will to improve’, before mentioning the counter-narratives which highlight the emerging socio-economic problems associated with development.

The ‘will to improve’ is a form of governmentality which stretches back to colonial logics of governance (Ludden 2005) and therefore clearly predates the current era neoliberalism. Nevertheless, there are clear overlaps including the ‘rendering technical’ and concurrent depoliticisation of capitalist development (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Whyte 2019) as the government attempts to improve its population. While there is some debate as to what extent Vietnam can be considered a developmental, neoliberal or predatory state (Gainsborough 2017), it is undoubtedly a ‘development regime’ (Ludden 2005) with its self-declared goals to eradicate poverty and ‘backwardness’ (Ngô 2016), its claim to have the skills and knowledge to do so and, not least, the legitimacy it derives from claiming to improve the people’s standards of living (Thayer 2009). This developmentalist stance also evident in official literature’s assessment of the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ impacts of Protestantism in terms of its ability to deter ‘backward customs’ and encourage “a progressive religious direction, which is closely knit to the nation, conforming to [the Party’s] ‘wealthy people, strong nation, just and civilised society’ objective” (Anonymous 2008).233

233 Email communication with author Vince Le, October 2017.
Nevertheless, the striking fact which emerged from fieldwork was the extent to which this will to improve was articulated by ordinary Hmong citizens with no reference to state agendas – almost every interviewee talked about it, often expressing frustration or concern about their lack of progress compared to their desires. Li discusses the tools of governance that state and non-state actors use, “artificially so arranging things so that people, following their own self-interest, will do as they ought” (Scott 1995: 202), but she contends that under contradictory capitalist forces, these external interventions are only ever partially successful and may inadvertently stimulate political backlash (Li 2007: 26). However, in Vietnam’s highlands it is clear that the project to instil a will to improve among the Hmong has become so successful that it would not be an exaggeration to call ‘progress’ or ‘development’ a hegemonic desire (Beard 2007).

As outlined in Chapter 2, over the past 60 years the Vietnamese state has embarked on several long-term territorialisation projects to bring the highlands, its inhabitants and its resources under its jurisdiction – with varying degrees of success. While ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ (Scott 2009) such as infrastructure, telecommunications, the presence of army, police and local authorities has rooted out military resistance and brought a degree of control in the Northern highlands, illegal activities such as undocumented border crossings and drug trafficking still loom large.²³⁴ Often heavy-handed attempts to instil a sense of civic duty, patriotism and loyalty to the Communist Party have been largely unsuccessful among the Hmong, as evidenced by both a lack of engagement with state mobilisation campaigns (Bonnin and Turner 2014) and the widespread cynicism or disillusionment with government propaganda and articulated in (private) interviews. This makes the success of the ‘will to improve’ as a governance project all the more remarkable. Why has this desire for progress been so deeply internalised while other state governance agendas have failed among the Hmong?

Tâm Ngô (2016) argues that while Vietnamese state campaigns to ‘modernise’ its upland ethnic minorities came up against resistance as Hmong people interpreted it as assimilation attempts, they did have the effect of making ethnic minorities aware of their ‘backwardness’ and socio-economic inferiority to the ethnic Kinh. Indeed, Ngô attributes the state derision of traditional Hmong culture as one of the factors that prepared the way for mass Protestant conversion (2016: 40), with the subsequent reversal of state policies which attempted to ‘encourage’ new converts to renounce Christianity and return to their traditions (2016: 130) causing confusion and undermining the state’s legitimacy in the eyes of Hmong Christians. Ngô also notes that the need to change has been a constant and shared feature of state socialist campaigns, post-reform development projects and also Christian conversion initiatives: “In the most practical terms, missionaries and the Communist authorities compete as agents of change” (2016: 6–7). Many Hmong have become disillusioned with the state rhetoric which has not had much tangible developmental impact in their communities, and instead decided that Christianity is a more effective ‘route’ out of their perceived

²³⁴ Interview with Cang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
backwardness, with the following interview quotes again exemplifying the interconnectedness between religious and economic spheres:

Nothing changes, only by following Protestantism can you change, otherwise you just follow the old way. You keep living your life like before.235

[Only] a few people who follow Christianity are rich and developed, but thank God, that is a path to movement [chuyển động]; there is no other way to move.236

But now, from 1993 we believed in God, so gradually we were able to change until now, it’s totally different. In the past it was so miserable.237

Previously, there was a church over there so I went there, then I returned and tried to understand, then I thought, I do not yet have the ability to move up [di lên] so I will follow Protestantism.238

In the life of the church if there are any difficulties, we must help the families to always move up, not go down, but every year to rise a bit. The purpose of us believing in God, is to get a bit closer to God every year. And for working and economy, each year we must improve a bit. That’s my hopes.239

As Li (2005) points out, “the state’ has seldom had a monopoly on improvement: it shares this function with social reformers, scientists, missionaries, the so-called nongovernmental agencies, and, in the global south, donor agencies with their teams of expert consultants.” (2005: 384) Here is a likely answer to our earlier question about the efficacy of the ‘will to improve’ among the Hmong of Vietnam compared to other governance agendas; it was not just a state project, but was compounded by the efforts of Christian improvers – albeit resulting in “a different model of what it means to be modern than that offered by the Vietnamese Party-State and its Kinh officials” (Ngô 2016: 40). It is worth stating that levels of extreme poverty have decreased over the past two decades across all three case study sites, in both Christian and non-Christian villages, with state poverty reduction projects and welfare benefits clearly playing a role. (Chaudhry 2016). However, many Christian interviewees were inclined to attribute the ultimate source of living standard improvements to the fact that so many Hmong people had embraced Christianity, playing down the role of the state in economic transformation.

Li (2007) also observes that the very “interventions that set the conditions for growth simultaneously set the conditions for some sections of the population to be dispossessed.” (2007: 20) While the will to improve was almost universal, Hmong interviewees also articulated

235 Interview with Ly; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
236 Focus group 4 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
237 Interview with Chu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
238 Interview with Be; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
239 Interview with So; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
some of the negative effects of ‘progress’ in their communities. Improved infrastructure has brought new livelihoods opportunities but has also led to a more competitive local environment and reluctance to share knowledge among neighbours, with the notable exception of Village D (see Chapter 5). The fact that some households and communities had ‘risen’ up the social ladder faster than others leads to more problematic causal relationships between religious behaviour and economic success, as will be seen below. Moreover, increased connectivity to the wider national economy has made Hmong people more aware of their economic and ethnic disadvantages in entering a professional non-agricultural career, even if they have the opportunity to pursue further study; in the words of one lady, “nowadays the world is very crowded”. This also relates to another common complaint about land scarcity and lack of grazing pasture for livestock, due to a combination of sedenterisation policies and rapid population growth – one retired teacher from a village in Case Study Site 1 claimed that during the 27 years of his work, the number of households had risen from just 100 to over 600.

According to one local cadre, “if you’re not willing study, then you cannot fulfil the demands and requirements of modernity, and it will be harder to earn money, and even production and farming will be difficult”. Although he did not specify what these ‘requirements of modernity’ were, one implication was the need for what Long, another local official, called ‘intellectual labour’ as opposed to the manual labour which characterised Hmong livelihoods in the past. Long reflected on how, for those who only had to worry about the latter, “when they eat, it tastes better for them; they just eat until they’re full, drink until they’re drunk and go to sleep” whereas ‘intellectual labour’ brought with it more headaches and less sweet sleep from worrying about the future.

Although perhaps presenting a somewhat nostalgic view of the past – and ultimately no-one went as far as to say that things are worse now than the former years of destitution – Long articulates something of the stresses which many Hmong felt facing the uncertainties and challenges of integration into a volatile market economy which was quite bewildering compared to what they had grown up with.

An additional widespread concern was the rising price of goods, as the Hmong shift away from subsistence livelihoods and become embroiled in the cash economy (see Chapter 3). In a perpetuating cycle, the increased dependence on purchasing goods makes Hmong people more keenly affected by inflation, which in turn forces them to devote more time and energy on wage labour. One student wryly remarked that “nowadays earning money is easy, but spending money is also very easy!” This was not just because of inflation but that now in ‘these modern times’ the Hmong – especially young people – acquire new ‘needs’ by being exposed to the lifestyles of

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240 Interview with Phong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
241 Interview with May; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
242 Interview with Mao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
243 Interview with Dung; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
244 Interview with Long; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
245 Interview with Hai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
246 Focus group 7 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
wealthier ethnic Kinh citizens and want to follow them, but can’t always afford it. This important connection between modernity and consumerism is explored later in the chapter.

**Assimilation and Civility**

It has been established for some time now that the Vietnamese state ‘civilising project’ (Mcleod 1999), which envisioned ethnic minorities abandoning ‘backward’ practices and ‘becoming socialist’, looked suspiciously similar to ‘becoming Kinh’ in practice (McElwee 2004). Hmong interviewees spoke of the tension between the pressures to conform to ethnic Kinh lifestyles and attitudes in order to ‘modernise’, and the consequent severing with cultural roots. Not only the older generation, but also younger Hmong were quite critical of others who had assimilated and subsequently abandoned traditional norms of hospitality and mutual respect regardless of economic status, instead looking down on their fellow poorer Hmong comrades: “it seems that their money has ‘developed’ them into different people”. Despite this, the relative vibrancy of ethnic solidarity and concern for cultural heritage shown by a wide spectrum of Hmong in Vietnam, combined with the relative political clout of a Western diaspora, indicates that Hmong ethnic identity is far less likely to disappear than many smaller minorities (Baulch et al. 2007).

Given the contention that conversion is “a process involving the removal of difference and distinction [and the] assimilat[ion] into the moral economy of civilized man” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 244), an interesting question is how Hmong Christianity intersects with and complexifies local dynamics of assimilation and civility. Harms notes that the concept of ‘civility’ (văn minh) been core to legitimising Kinh denigration of Vietnam’s ethnic minorities (Harms 2016: 62). An internal Party paper states that ethnic minority Protestants are “introduced to a new, civilised culture”, evidenced by the abandonment of ‘backward customs’ such as slaughtering buffalo at weddings and funerals (Anonymous 2008) – a custom not observed by Kinh either. On the one hand, several Hmong Christians attributed their people’s remarkable receptivity to Christianity to the idea that the Hmong are ‘not very civilised’, so that God had special favour on them and chose them. On the other hand, they do not want to remain ‘uncivilised’ and expect God’s blessing to change them for the better.

One prominent relevant theme discussed by Hmong Christians which differentiated them from non-Christians was the focus on ‘cleanliness’ as a sign of civility and morality (Huang 2014: 74), with official researchers also noting the relative tidiness of Christian houses and villages (Trần 2014). Echoing the English proverb that ‘cleanliness is next to godliness’, the first thing most Christians stated as an obvious distinguishing feature between themselves and non-Christians was that “those who believe in God know how to be hygienic”. Pastor Ban claimed that Christian households were “cleaner, hygienic and more civilised” in the same breathe, signifying their

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247 Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
248 Interview with Sun; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
interconnectedness. Meanwhile, on a Sunday service I observed, pastor Seng devoted time to lecture his congregation about the importance of building and using modern toilets, replicating previous (rather unsuccessful) government hygiene campaigns. Moreover, Hmong Christians have now adopted the same pejorative attitudes as Kinh outsiders hold towards non-Christian Hmong as ‘backwards’, dirty and smelly. Tilley et al (2019) also identify ‘unhygienic’ as a denigrating trope linked to ‘improper’ behaviour among Jakarta’s urban poor, and focus on the gendered aspects of subsequent attempts to civilise and ‘rationalise’ housing through the regulation of hygiene routines.

While the above data could be interpreted as evidence that Christianisation is encouraging Hmong assimilation to the ethnic majority in Vietnam, other effects of conversion have quite the opposite effect. Nguyen Van Chinh claims the Hmong have “found in the Protestant faith the future of their ethnicity” (2017: 187), like other ethnic groups in the Central Highlands for whom Christianity has bolstered ethnic identity. Perhaps most importantly, Hmong Christians’ promotion of learning the international Hmong script connects them to the transnational Hmong community – many older Hmong cannot read or even speak fluent Vietnamese, but receive new ideas and values from Hmong language radio and, increasingly, websites (Nguyễn 2009: 173). This has the potential to hinder national integration and is seen as threatening to Vietnamese local and central authorities, who cannot understand Hmong language and therefore find it difficult to govern or censor.

Furthermore, Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm notes how church leaders change their clothing to imitate ‘Western pastors’ rather than Kinh fashion norms (Nguyễn 2016: 67) – although Hmong Christians I observed tended to wear traditional clothing as their ‘Sunday best’ to church services. Therefore, it could be argued that Christianisation is actually promoting assimilation to an international Hmong Christian identity – or “transnational avenues to escape marginality” (Ngô 2016: 169) – which may support, bypass or run counter to a Kinh-centric national Vietnamese identity.

Becoming ‘civilised’ is clearly linked to the narrative of progress propagated by missionaries (Bornstein 2003), nation states and international development discourse (Bowden and Seabrooke 2006). Schwenkel and Leshkowich (2012) detect a neoliberal element to Vietnamese governmentality as logics of efficiency, quality and accountability become “models for correct, modern, or civilized personhood” (2012: 382). Mainstream international development has also been critiqued as both a cultural and economic project, “as much about ‘civilizing’ and spreading ‘Western values’ as [capitalist] economic growth” (Biebuyck and Meltzer 2010: 13), while neoliberal thinkers also conceived of the competitive world market as a ‘civilising’ force (Whyte 2019). These distinctive trajectories of modernity sometimes put Hmong Christians at odds with the Vietnamese nation-building project but, as we will see below, they appear to converge in key

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249 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
250 Interview with Sang; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
251 Interview with Phu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
aspects of cultivating an economic subjectivity ready to engage with the expanding capitalist market in Vietnam’s highlands.

**Assets, diligence, connection and calculativity**

Any measurement of empowerment must take into account local perceptions of their own situations and future prospects (Kabeer 1999); at the same time, such perceptions can be revealing with regards to the degree to which external influences and discourses have shaped their thinking. As discussed already, the *ends* of capitalist development, ‘progress’ and civilisation had been accepted by the large majority of Hmong interviewees as fundamentally desirable, in spite of the concomitant competitiveness, stress and inequalities. In this section I draw out the prominent ideas which Christian and non-Christian Hmong interviewees held about the *means* by which they could improve their lot in life, which can be categorised as assets, diligence, connection and ‘calculativity’ – the latter of which is an externally instilled value derived from market rationality.

Notwithstanding the inevitable variety and differences of opinion found in interviewing hundreds of people across multiple villages (see Appendix 2), common ideas of how to move up in the world can be grouped into four broad categories, which were articulated by the Hmong community. Firstly, and most obviously, it was widely agreed that having existing *material assets* in the form of land, cash, livestock, motorbike etc. was a distinct advantage, whereas the ‘have-nots’ would struggle to catch up with the ‘haves’. Conversely, having too many children was in a sense considered as a burden, not only due to the cost of raising them but also because in the future the household land would have to be divided up so that each son would receive less ‘assets’ (see Chapter 6). These assets were often referred to as ‘điềukiện’ which can be translated as ‘means’ or ‘conditions’, as in ‘you need money or land [as a condition] to make money’:

> Any family which has much means [điềukiện] can do more, be richer; it’s harder if you have few paddy fields... Means just depends on the person; it’s from the person, from the family... If they’re too poor, then they cannot be richer. Many people have little land, many people are workshy – they have rice, so just eat at home all day, don’t work extra. That’s how it is.

This quote segues into the second widespread idea that one’s economic success was at least partly determined by one’s *diligence* to work. The Biblical principle “you reap what you sow” was quoted to me in multiple interviews to both explain the wisdom of Christian principles and to justify hard work while criticising laziness. Both Christians and non-Christians spoke disparagingly of those who were ‘workshy’ or, literally, ‘couldn’t handle hardship’ (*không chịu khó*) and did not seek further livelihood opportunities beyond growing rice and corn for subsistence, thus staying trapped in poverty. This was also associated with a pejorative narrative of relying on state benefits (see Chapter 3), although it seems unlikely that this narrative is a recent phenomenon owing to

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252 Interview with Nha; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
neoliberal cultivations of self-responsibility and ‘failing subjects’ (Nguyen and Chen 2017). Nor should the salience of this idea be overstated, since other Hmong interviewees took a more deterministic view of poverty:

Poverty or wealth is down to your fate. Some men work a lot but don’t make any wealth. It’s not that they don’t work; they do work all day - but I see they’re still poor. It depends on their destiny. And there are also some who don’t work very hard, and they work little but they move up year after year, they get rich. I also don’t understand why it’s like that. Some people it’s just their fate.253

Thirdly, there was a common perception that those Hmong who had significantly improved their conditions had managed to do so through having the right connections with wider society. These connections took the form of both human relationships (mồng quan hệ) with people – government officials, lowland Christians from the city, members of the transnational Hmong diaspora etc. – as well as economic agreements with middlemen to sell cash crops. As discussed in previous chapters, the right connections (as well as significant assets) were the only way of securing coveted civil service employment, while transnational religious networks afforded Christian elites the status and resources to become political brokers in their communities. On the other hand, the wrong connections – such as entering into informal manual labour for low wages in Vietnam’s cities or in China – could lead to drudgery, exploitation and even being trafficked (see Chapter 3). In spite of such horror stories being circulated around Hmong communities, taking one’s chances within these unequal power relations were still seen by many as having more potential for upward social mobility than having no connections at all, invoking Joan Robinson’s famous quote that “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all” (Robinson 1962: 46).

The need to ‘socialise’ or ‘have social interaction’ (va chăm xã hội) was seen as key to cultivating the coveted connections and relationships, however Hmong people faced significant barriers in achieving this. Many older people couldn’t even speak Vietnamese language fluently, which seriously restricts their potential pool of connections. Living in remote areas makes it more difficult to forge economically useful relationships, which is why the opportunity for church leaders to travel for denominational conferences is invaluable for their networking abilities (see Chapter 5). These factors, combined with the ethnic discrimination faced, make many Hmong people understandably apprehensive and afraid to ‘go into society’ and build connections: for example, 60-year-old Say from Village B, who couldn’t speak Vietnamese, hadn’t spoken with the Kinh traders who had set up a petty goods shop in the village for several years now; she wasn’t even sure what ethnicity they were.254 In contrast, when I accompanied the charismatic pastor Seng for breakfast at the commune centre, he confidently chatted to the Kinh cook and other customers, affording him opportunities to network which Say would never have. Moreover, as Cua notes at the start of this

253 Interview with Pheng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
254 Interview with Say; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
chapter, assets and connections tend to be mutually reinforcing as wealth affords the opportunity of travelling and investing in gifts or bribes to build relationships.

Fourthly, various forms of ‘intellectual assets’ were seen as another potential means of development. This obviously includes formal education and literacy, but also ‘information’ (thông tin) about upcoming business opportunities, ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’ (hiểu biết) about how to grow cash crops, ‘awareness’ (nhiễm thức) or ‘wisdom’ (khôn ngoan) to be business savvy, and so on. These elements can be summed up by the oft-repeated tính toán, a term that literally means calculation, but with connotations of self-interest. This was used to refer to someone’s intellectual ability to succeed and make a profit in the marketplace, whereas those who couldn’t calculate would get stuck in poverty spending their efforts on unprofitable ventures, as one of my research assistants Sy exemplifies as she tried to explain it to a poorer household during an interview:

I asked her how much land they have, she said they have a bit of paddy fields, but over there there’s no water… and the ground is very dry, so they harvest very little. Some years they can reap 20 bags, other years only 2 to 6 bags. So like that, they can only sell for 4-5 million VND, so when you work [on the paddy] you lose 1.5 million to buy the seeds already, and in the meantime they must buy food and staff, rent a machine so lose another 6-7 million. So if you reap the rice and only sell for 5-6 million, there is no profit, and you’ve spent so much labour. So [I told them] if you want to make a living, you must calculate, think about whether it will make a profit and only then do it. But if that land can’t grow rice, you could change to plant something else and then sell for money to buy rice to eat.\(^{255}\)

This sort of rational calculating logic points to the fundamental social transformations accompanying the expansion of market exchange which involves “anonymization, the cutting of social ties, and rational, calculative and efficient post-social coordination”. (Berndt and Boeckler 2012: 199). It is also arguably a hallmark of the historical Protestant work ethic during the rise of capitalism in Europe (Tawney 1990). Furthermore, governmentality scholars point to neoliberal finance policies, practices, discourses and instruments which frame, expect and then compel people to act as rational and calculative subjects who should to take control of, and assume individual responsibility for, their financial affairs (Langley 2008).

In Vietnam, calculativity is not simply extra knowledge but described by Hmong interviewees as a transformation of thinking which enables the ‘enlightened’ to see economic opportunities that others don’t: “I have a wider perspective, I think about things which others find very complicated, but I find them simple”\(^{256}\). It can be learnt at school and especially higher education, since Hmong students who move to urban areas become exposed to and familiar with the livelihoods of the Kinh, who have a reputation for being highly calculating (and self-interested). Because significant

\(^{255}\) Interview with Thang & Le; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.

\(^{256}\) Interview with Ho; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
material assets or the right connections are required to pay for further education, secure a scholarship or find cheap accommodation, it would again appear that the different means of development are mutually reinforcing.

Rigg (2016b: 41) notes how market reforms in Vietnam deepened inequalities that had previously been ameliorated under the socialist policies, with the losers suffering from (1) living in remote locations (especially highland minorities), (2) lacking the necessary connections to public-private networks (Beresford 2008) to access information, investment or employment opportunities, and (3) not having a formal education to help them adapt to the new economic environment. What is striking is how closely this maps onto the above local perceptions on the means to development. This shows that Hmong communities understood the political economic realities they were up against, as well as highlighting the importance of marketisation in people’s understanding of upward social mobility.

**Cooperation and competitiveness**

One notable omission from this understanding of the fourfold means to development is a communal or collective aspect. This is not to say that Hmong communities do not have communal ways of pooling resources and redistributing resources through clan or religious networks, however they are not generally considered as means of development. This may well reflect the widespread association of matters regarding ‘development’ with state measures of poverty and welfare benefits allocation, both at a household level. Additionally it resonates with neoliberal values of competitive individualism, which are considered to have been reinforced through Christian (and especially) Pentecostal subjectivities (see Chapter 1). However, as this section shows, fieldwork data points to a more nuanced picture whereby Hmong Christianisation is cultivating mixed values which cannot be simply reduced to neoliberal governmentalities.

For example, the exception to this lack of emphasis on cooperation was Village D, where a communal approach to development was a key factor in the biggest development success story across all three Case Study Sites (see Chapters 3 and 5). In this instance, church leadership and structures played a key role in persuading and mobilising villagers for collective labour tasks, coordinating tourism and market activities, ensuring discipline and warding off external state attempts to muscle in and take over the profitable tourist industry. Consequently, several villagers articulated the necessity of unity and benefits of working together – including across the religious divide – for the sake of development:

Because we villagers are very constructive, share ideas for example, we understand each other; when we gather together, one person just says, “Today we will do this,” for example, one person says it but everyone must contribute and focus on doing it, then you can build a road… Here one person will say this, and ten others will accept it, but in other villages, ten people say this and that,
ten more people will say something else, they will compete to talk then and they cannot do it, they don’t unite.²⁵⁷

I feel here we respect each other; whatever they do we all contribute labour together. On your own, you cannot achieve it, you need people to contribute together to do it… In other places there is [religious division], but in this village both non-Christians and Christians get along together. But the only difference is the [religious] ways they practice; as for working and helping each other, we both respect and value each other, we look upon each other as the same.²⁵⁸

Now this latter quote might be a bit optimistic about inter-religious relations, as Christian prejudices towards traditional Hmong culture were also present in Village D. Pastor Ban claims that before Christianisation, villagers used to be more individualistic and self-interested;²⁵⁹ nevertheless there was an unresolved tension between the dynamics of village cooperation and competitiveness, as highlighted in Chapter 5. While regular informal ‘development meetings’ provided an important space to share and learn livelihoods advice, tourism expansion has opened up new arenas of competition between different market stallholders and homestays over customers. This awkward combination possibly led to a denial of competition, as market stallholders maintained that relations with other sellers were purely friendly and there were no feelings of rivalry.²⁶⁰ Even more conspicuously, Ban’s claim that the six families with homestays shared tourist customers on a roughly equal basis was contradicted by Nhia, another homestay owner who asserted that Pastor Ban and village elder Chu receive more homestay guests than the other four – before reiterating that “we don’t compete, because wherever the guests want to go, it’s up to the guests to choose”.²⁶¹ Since Village D had only opened up to tourism in the past five years, it remains to be seen how these contradictions associated with market expansion unfold.

Pastor Ban did accept the principle of competition on a macro level between, rather than within, communities, when exhorting other villages to consider their unique features which could be exploited as a ‘comparative advantage’ in the tourism industry.²⁶² Of course, other church leaders who see the achievements of Village D long to replicate this in their own communities but are less successful, lacking the natural resources, networks, village unity and bargaining power with local officials. Interestingly, the state’s promotion of ‘community-led development’ entrepreneurialism instead of ‘waiting on the state’ was pitched at a communal, rather than individual, level (see Chapter 5). This grates somewhat with many definitions of neoliberal political philosophy which include a possessive, competitive form of individualism that underpins claims of economic efficiency and ethical self-responsibility (Ong 2006: 11). However, in this case neither state programmes nor Hmong Christian activity are framed in an overtly individualistic fashion. This

²⁵⁷ Interview with Sach & Hien; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
²⁵⁸ Interview with Pheng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
²⁵⁹ Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
²⁶⁰ Interviews with Bau, Ku, Na; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
²⁶¹ Interview with Nhia; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
²⁶² Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
claim is supported by church programmes across all three Case Study Sites which subscribe to a cooperative economic logic – from livestock redistribution and husbandry mentoring schemes at Sang’s church to collective hiring of a lorry to transport the village’s banana harvest directly to China, to cut out the middle-man (Chapter 5).

Citing studies from the world of Islam in South and South East Asia, Hefner (2017) highlights the importance of spatial and cultural contingencies of different “interaction[s] of capitalist or neoliberal rationalizations with religious revitalization” which do “not always result in the hyperindividualized subjectivity highlighted in so much recent scholarship” (2017: 272). Some recent post-Foucauldian scholarship has argued that neoliberalism is less about individualism per se than about forms of moralising that are orientated towards imposition of family form of responsibility and particular kinds of moral subjectivity (cf Cooper 2017), with Pentecostalism being seen to “loosen ties with the extended family and focus on the nuclear family as the central unit of production and consumption” (Freeman 2012b: 13). This is probably also relevant for Hmong Christianisation, given the anecdotal evidence of Western nuclear family values being promoted by Hmong pastors (see Chapter 3).

However, while neoliberal policies and practices are arguably becoming increasingly pertinent to everyday highlands life, my fieldwork results do not endow it with a ‘monolithic’ status but rather treat it as one of several influences which often overlap but are not all part of the same all-encompassing logic; rather, they combine to produce unique social outcomes and localised forms of governmentality (Cotoi 2011: 122). With regards to the extent of communality present in Village D, pastor Ban asserted that the economic model he wished to teach to his community was from the Biblical description of the early church having “all things in common”, which has been interpreted as a form of ‘proto-communism’ and practised to differing degrees by various local Christian communities (Montero 2017).

On a different level, the co-operative/competitive relationship between state and church welfare initiatives is relevant to the question of neoliberal political economy. A common claim is that born-again Christian faiths help ‘prepare the ground’ for neoliberal reforms by both “reinforce[ing] dominant capitalist values” (Freston 1998: 353) as well as acting as ‘surrogates of the state’ (Jennings 2008) by providing social services to shore up state welfare cuts. In Vietnam, educated Hmong Christian pastors are indeed propagating the value of diligence and entrepreneurial faith as they act as informal business consultants to their congregations, and Prosperity theology looks set to increase its influence (see below). Furthermore, Hmong Christians may consider their various outreach initiatives – including food distribution, visiting the sick, paying for medical costs, communal labour, and so on – to be necessary because of the weakness or absence of state development aid.

263 Interview with Trong; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
Yet it would be misleading to call them ‘surrogates of the state’, because in fact local authorities tend to consider Christian social initiatives as a threat to the state’s monopoly on being the bearers of development (Chung 2017). In fact, arguably one of the goals of government poverty reduction support is to keep marginalised people like the Hmong engaged with the state and deter them from mobilising around religion instead (Chaudhry 2016: 230). Therefore, while some academics and officials from Hanoi observed Hmong Christianity to have a positive overall social impact which conformed to the state’s development objectives, at the local authority level the narrative was more geared toward church-state competition and challenges to state loyalty (see Chapter 4). Moreover, there are also cases of church leaders and communities expecting and demanding infrastructure and development aid from their local authorities, as seen in pastor Seng’s criticisms in Chapter 5. This attitude of holding authorities to account is rooted in the Party’s socialist rhetoric whereby ‘the people’ should expect the state to work for them (Kerkvliet 2014), and does not sound like a neoliberal endorsement of decentralised civil society that would prepare the way for radical market reforms.

**Rationalising work and consumption**

This next section addresses another theme from both official literature and fieldwork data: the idea of rationalisation in work and consumption as key elements of transition towards capitalism. Đoàn Đức Phương claims that the majority of Hmong believers in the Central Highlands “saw that following religion had economic benefits (diminished burden of backward customs, no fighting, no adultery, no alcohol)” (Doàn 2015: 173), with multiple authors noting the mutual solidarity and material support shown within Protestant communities, often as a replacement to the severing of traditional clan-based support networks. Pointing to the fact that most Hmong faced extreme hardship before turning to religion, Lê Đình Nghĩa concludes that the government should concentrate on reducing poverty among the Hmong, because “in order to eliminate the need for illusions, we must eliminate the roots of those illusions; in order to push back the idea of a paradise in the next world, we must build a paradise on this existing world” (Lê 2001: 66–7).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a neo-Weberian influence is evident in more recent literature. Nguyễn Văn Thắng writes that American Protestantism “reflects the capitalist spirit and ethic: pragmatism, rational economising, success in business by expanding production, promoting individualism in religious activity… while building the ‘3 Cs’ doctrine: Christ, Commerce and Civilisation”. (Nguyễn 2009: 86–7). Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm takes this ‘elective affinity’ a step further by claiming that Protestantism has led to a more economical life as well as “fostering their willingness to work and learn hard, and desire to be rich” (Nguyễn 2016: 117). She also raises the Weberian idea of ‘vocation’ in a positive light, asserting that “in a traditional society where few think about their work… Protestant doctrine has enhanced everyday social life with religious meaning… an idea which contributes towards change to a modern society” (2016: 114).
Of course, the socio-economic context of Weber’s early-modern European urban middle-class heralds of capitalism couldn’t be further away from the marginalised Hmong of contemporary upland Vietnam. E.P. Thompson’s more class-conscious account of how a capitalist work ethic was drilled into the English working class to make them “more disciplined, more subject to the productive tempo of ‘the clock’, more reserved and methodical” (1991: 451) is perhaps more relevant and has been compared to economic transformations among a recently Christianised ethnic minority group in upland Cambodia (Scheer 2017: 71; see also Conclusion). Whereas Weber considered the motivation for such ‘rationalisation’ of work to be a self-fashioned ‘salvation anxiety’ and Thompson attributed it to a violent imposition of industrial discipline, pastor Sai from the relatively poor Village F gave an alternative rationale for Hmong Christians’ desire to ‘move up’ the social ladder:

If you believe in God but your life continues to be difficult, and you cannot escape poverty, you remain backwards, then you cannot speak about God to richer, more developed people. If you tell them, they won’t listen. Maybe we will display passionate love, but if our lives don’t change, if our material lives don’t change, then the non-Christians will only look on the outside. To the point that we must be better than them on everything: about education, understanding and also material life. If you have all of that, then you can go evangelising, even speak to the authorities and they’ll also pay attention.  

Here we see an evangelistic impetus combining with the inferiority complex associated with Kinh chauvinist ethnic power relations to produce an economic subjectivity, which is of course reinforced by Hmong experiences of impoverishment and the will to improve (see above). McLeod notes that “any notion that highlander cultures are intrinsically valuable or that lowland Vietnamese might have something to learn from them cannot be found in the official literature” (1999: 370), a statement which can be expanded to apply across wider Kinh society in general. Therefore, Hmong pastors like Sai, who want to propagate Christianity across ethnic lines but are all too aware of this attitude, find a reason why it would be God’s will for the Hmong to work hard at improving their economic situation. It also implies an association with material wealth and social influence as signs of God’s favour, which will be addressed later in the chapter.

The majority of Hmong Christians declared that since conversion their standards of living had already improved, not primarily because of hard work but due to changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns. Apart from the prohibition of alcohol, drugs, gambling and prostitution – corresponding to what the state calls ‘social evils’ (tê nan xã hội) – a prominent theme was the benefit of not ‘wasting’ resources on traditional ceremonies and shaman healing rituals. For example, Cua claimed that before he had converted, he had on one occasion had to sacrifice a pig, two chickens and a duck, pay 500,000 VND ($25) for ritual paraphernalia and pay the shaman 1 million VND ($50) over the course of a few healing rituals for the same bout of his wife’s illness –

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264 Interview with Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
and it didn’t even work. These apparently exorbitant costs were repeated by many Hmong converts and corroborate with Chindarsi’s (1976) research among the Hmong in Thailand, whereby unpredictable shaman expenses “can reduce Hmong to poverty level” (1976: 143), especially for poor households who need to borrow to cover the costs. This is probably a factor explaining why those who embraced Christianity often came from the poorest sectors of Hmong society, a pattern found by Cooper (1984) among the Hmong in Thailand.

On the other hand, Salemink (Salemink 2011) points to the communal nature of traditional rituals in Central Vietnam, whereby the richer members of society organised more extravagant feasts in return for prestige, with meat from sacrificed animals being redistributed across the community (cf. Leach 1954: 172). The subsequent demonisation of such rituals (by both state and church) can be seen as facilitating individual accumulation by not sharing, a finding shared in Freeman’s (2012a) research into Pentecostal entrepreneurship in rural Ethiopia with a similar traditional moral economy of using wealth to build relationships and buy status based on ‘production for connectedness’ (Hamer 2002: 613). However, when villagers converted to Pentecostalism they were freed from the ritual ‘burden’ of redistributing surplus profits, enabling them to accumulate wealth to a previously unprecedented degree, apparently encouraging others to join the Pentecostal church (Freeman 2012a: 173). With regard to the Hmong in Vietnam, this ‘feasting moral economy’ would be more applicable to weddings and funerals, both of which are traditionally extravagant affairs, than shaman healing rituals. Either way, as seen in Chapter 6 these events are overwhelmingly dominated by male guests, thus inscribing a gender inequality on the redistributive potential of feasting.

The claim made by Christians that shaman rituals are unaffordable for the poor is contested: one former shaman (who has now converted) stated that her fees used to be flexible and she would expect bigger donations from richer households than poorer ones. One practising shaman charged a ‘base rate’ of only 100-200,000 VND ($5-10) for conducting a healing ritual, as well as the household providing the animal to be sacrificed (which is prescribed by the shaman); if the client recovered, then the shaman expected an extra 100-200,000 VND and a chicken as a further payment. Non-Christians also argued that the Christian practice of church tithing was an equivalent financial burden to traditional offering requirements, claiming that “if you don’t contribute, they don’t care about you.” This claim was in turn refuted by Christians. While I do not have the data to compare whether regular tithing over a year adds up to more or less than the shaman’s healing fees, tithing is more predictable and perhaps easier to incorporate into a ‘modern’ household budgeting plan than shaman healing expenses, which might spring up at any time and the total costs are not entirely foreseeable.

265 Interview with Cua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
266 Interview with Sua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
267 Interview with Kue & Ya; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
268 Interview with Tra & Phinh; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
While Salemink’s research on the ‘conversion to modernity’ in the Central Highlands draws many helpful comparisons, his claim that Protestant devotion involves ‘frugality’ (2015a: 401) is not entirely accurate for the Hmong. Beyond the avoidance of ‘social evils’, there is no sign of a neo-Weberian ‘asceticism’ as financially successful Hmong Christians and non-Christians make no secret of spending money on new houses, vehicles and tourism travel, common markers of prestige in Vietnamese society. This evokes a Pentecostal influence (which will be explored in more detail below) whereby “inner-worldly asceticism has been replaced with the concern for pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire” (Kramer 1999: 35). In upland Vietnam, however, this consumerism is equally visible in Christian and non-Christian communities alike, and is most likely driven by wider national modernising agendas and TV advertising, both of which effectively advocate capitalist consumption and equate civility with luxury (Harms 2016) – and which Christian teaching does not challenge. It does emphasise the importance of saving for and investing in their children’s education, but again this is not limited to the Christian community.

**Prosperity theology**

Another source of promoting consumerism among Hmong Christian communities is the recent rise of ‘Prosperity gospel’ teaching, which is the focus of the next section. From its outset in the 1980s (see Chapter 2), Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam has been heavily influenced by conservative American evangelicalism which took a rather austere approach to money, emphasising the value of simplicity, savings and tithing. At around the same time, Pentecostalism has been gaining popularity among Christians across Vietnam (Le 2018), however this did not reach the Northern highlands until perhaps the early 2000s. The Pentecostal movement is an extremely broad church incorporating hundreds of decentralised denominations and networks with a wide variety of theologies and practices; furthermore, in Vietnam many explicitly non-Pentecostal denominations are being ‘Pentecostalised’ (Kim, S. G. 2007) as individuals or groups within these churches become influenced by Pentecostal teaching. Pentecostalism has a pan-regional appeal, and Aythal (2015: 178) estimates 43% of Asian Protestants to be Pentecostal.

Some prominent themes associated with Pentecostalism include a radical ‘break with the past’ (Meyer 1998), an emphasis on miraculous divine intervention and the direct experience of the presence of God through the Holy Spirit (Robbins 2004), the affirmation of an ‘enchanted worldview’ (Miller 2007) whereby believers engage with both heavenly and demonic forces, and the promise of “mastery in an uncertain world” (Marshall 2009: 9). The most controversial associated teaching is Prosperity theology, which holds that religious devotion in general and faithful church tithing in particular will result in the miraculous blessing of all aspects of life, including one’s finances (Yong 2012). The Comaroffs see an ‘elective affinity’ between the divine intervention mechanism of Prosperity theology, whereby financial success is attributed to

269 Interview with Tan & Nhu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
materially unrelated behaviour, and the increasingly confusing and obscured sources of wealth generation in a globalised, neoliberal economic system (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000a; also see Chapter 2). However, the generalisability of this interpretation has been challenged (Marshall 2009), since local understandings and effects of such theologies and economic transformations may vary and need to be grounded in empirical fieldwork.

As noted in Chapter 5, traditional Hmong worldviews entail overlapping and interconnected material and spiritual dimensions. The majority of Hmong Christians agreed with the statement that God would not only bless his followers in a spiritual sense but also materially, often based on their own experiences of improving living standards since conversion. The prevailing wisdom is that this happened through more mundane causal mechanisms, e.g. reduced expenditure on cigarettes, alcohol and shamans enabled saving or investing in education. Some asserted that God would give them enough to eat and they should be content with not going hungry,\(^{270}\) while others worried that if Christians got too rich then they would lose their faith.\(^{271}\) Another common idea, which could be considered a mild version of Prosperity theology, was that God’s economic blessing was indirectly given through the ‘wisdom’ and ‘understanding’ they had gained since converting, and especially through learning to read and studying the Bible:

> All my material possessions have been given by God, only from God’s blessing do I have good health to work; God has given me everything… And God gives me understanding so that I can earn money or buy these things, so God blesses me through this - it’s not like I believe in God and pray for God to give me, and He’ll just drop it from the sky.\(^{272}\)

> Those who are [progressing] like that: it’s not through their strength at all. I think God is blessing them… Obviously [God blesses them], but it’s because they change their hearts; with regards to knowing how to save, that’s because God teaches them; it’s also God’s blessing. I also see God’s blessing in some ways, but it’s God who teaches their hearts how to save money.\(^{273}\)

In stark contrast, a more extreme version of Prosperity teaching was espoused by pastor Seng who was, perhaps not incidentally, a very wealthy pastor by Hmong standards, the reasons for which were of some debate (see Chapter 5). In a private conversation with other church leaders, Seng taught that if you offer little as a church donation, you will be blessed a little, if you offer much you will blessed much – but not if you’re doing it for the wrong motives (i.e. desire for financial gain).

For believers, everything they have belongs to God anyway, however those in debt should not tithe borrowed money but rather pay it back first. Seng then recounted several stories to demonstrate the validity of these principles, including his own personal testimony: from ostensibly humble beginnings, God blessed his livestock business to the extent that nowadays his tithing contribution

\(^{270}\) Interviews with La / No & Su / Sai; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{271}\) Focus group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
\(^{272}\) Interview with Tan & Nhu; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
\(^{273}\) Focus group 2 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
to the church is more than the rest of the congregation combined! Another Christian in Seng’s congregation received a bumper harvest after he started tithing, but then he ‘forgot God’ in his wealth and stopped donating 10% of his now much larger income. Apparently, this man got his comeuppance when he got addicted to alcohol, blew all his money and experienced family breakdown before eventually crawling back to church for help. These unverified stories had an almost parabolic quality to them with clear moral messages that God would bless tithing believers but opposed those who wanted to get rich by relying on their own strength, thereby romanticising Seng’s own accumulation of capital (cf. Cao 2010: 61).

Seng’s church denomination has a more informal, decentralised leadership structure than other official denominations,274 possibly allowing faster transmission of new Pentecostal ideas. Moreover, Seng was significantly influenced by missionaries from Korea, which is credited with the original popularisation of Prosperity teaching (Kim, S. G. 2007). During an informal interview Seng compared the economic histories of Vietnam and Korea, noting how they had both been very poor 40 years ago after their respective civil wars: however, the crucial difference was that Koreans had embraced Christianity.275 Ever since, according to Seng, God has been blessing South Korea with a wealthy economy while Vietnam chose communism and was still languishing in poverty as a result. This is an example of how Hmong Christians get exposed to foreign anti-communist ideologies, rooted in the very US imperialism which Vietnamese state officials initially accused Hmong Christianisation of being manipulated by. Despite their potential to undermine state authority, however, in practice Korean missionaries are afforded much more freedom to operate in upland Vietnam than Westerners, since Korean ‘soft power’ is not perceived to be as threatening as direct American influence:

Since the disillusionment with the international community caused by the IMF restructuring demands, and since South Korea is now a world leader in so many respects, its religious visions, values and achievements provide models for the countries which once sought to develop it. It is consciously exporting these. Korean Christianity… in its various expressions provides models for Christians in other parts of Asia especially (Kim, K. 2015: 262)

Seng’s rather extreme version of Prosperity theology was not explicitly articulated in other Case Study sites, and indeed such teaching has many critics, with a broad spectrum of global Christian voices denouncing it as ‘heresy’ (Adeleye 2014). Its potential to be exploited by pastors to increase their tithing revenue is surely relevant for this context, since many Hmong pastors complained to me that they could not afford to work for the church full-time since most of the congregation ‘tithe’ less than the recommended 10% of income. Marshall (2009: 184) describes a coercive format of Pentecostal exhortations to bring ‘seed offerings’ whereby pastors call out individuals to donate publicly, which becomes a tool for pastors to extract money from the laity. However, I observed

274 Interview with Ban; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
275 Interview with Seng; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
that in Hmong services the tithe was collected in a private manner with church members carefully using both hands to cover the money they put into the offering so others could not see the donation amount, a custom adopted from Western missionaries and widely practiced across Vietnam. Another logic expressed by Hmong pastors was the desire to train and equip their congregations to become better business entrepreneurs (see Chapter 5), at least partly so that they could increase their donations to the church and enable the pastor to minister full-time. Both logics can be seen as self-interested, however the latter leads to arguably a more empowering function of the church to input livelihood skills and ideas to members, instead of only extracting tithes.

In his study of Vietnamese Pentecostalism more broadly, Vince Le presents Prosperity teaching as “an embodiment of the desire of ordinary people in late-communist Vietnam” (2018: 113). Pentecostalism is especially popular among poorer and marginalised sector of society, and the teaching of ‘health, wealth and blessing’ is easily understandable without the need for education or religious language. Le claims that through the grassroots nature and loose leadership structure of Pentecostal groups, “groups enacting prosperity teaching offer more opportunities for the groups’ members to acquire the skills necessary to succeed in modern-day society” (2018: 116) such as time management, planning, coordination and leadership – so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts. Although Le has an unusually positive view of Prosperity teaching, he concedes that it lacks the resources to address socio-structural problems or “the ability to motivate solidarity with the poor who have not yet experienced upward mobility” (2018: 121), since poverty becomes judged as a result of insufficient faith. Thus, for the likes of Sang (see Introduction) whose village is mired in poverty in comparison to Ban’s wealthy neighbouring Village D, Prosperity theology becomes disempowering when spiritual explanations of the economic inequality may serve to obscure the education, networks, external patrons, communal discipline and geographical factors which contributed to Village D’s success (see Chapter 5).

**Faith, fear and failure**

Marshall (2009) links the Prosperity model of tithing – whereby believers are encouraged to ‘bet’ on God’s faithfulness to reward bigger offerings – as cultivating an attitude of risk-taking which converges with participation in a risky global economy. This translation of religious faith into the economic realm is a key theme emerging from fieldwork data; self-confidence may result from gaining practical skills (Thompson 1991), feeling part of a supportive community (Heslam 2014: 365) or indeed develop from new assurances of salvation and/or divine blessing (Nguyễn 2016: 76). According to Freeman (2012b), the key element in the Pentecostal transformation of subjectivity is “a shift from seeing oneself as a victim to seeing oneself as a victor.” (Freeman 2012b: 12)

This is particularly pertinent in contexts such as Vietnam’s highlands where, due to Kinh chauvinism, economic inequality and assimilatory policies undermining traditional culture,
minority groups are characterised by low self-confidence and self-respect (Jamieson et al. 1998). This emerged most clearly in focus groups with Hmong students in Hanoi, where the ‘low intellectual standards’ (dân trí) of the Hmong – in comparison to the Kinh majority or even other ethnic minorities – was a commonly accepted notion. Furthermore, Tapp notes that the traditional Hmong worldview is “rooted in a deep pessimism about the human condition in which the inevitability of death and the prevalence of sickness figure prominently” (1989b: 92). Conversion testimonies often emphasised how believing in God had given them a sense of peace in contrast with their former fear of malevolent spirits, illness, future uncertainties, crop failure, abduction, human trafficking, and so on:

At that time, sometimes when I went out, I would always feel unsafe, and many times I’d feel afraid and worried about my family, my mum – about the illnesses of my family, I only knew how to cry. But after knowing God and believing in God, when those things happen, in God’s word it says to hand over every worry, the things that cause – that are too burdensome – then God will bear them for me.

At the end of each interview, I would ask about people’s hopes and plans for the future (see Appendix 2 for full list of interview questions). Both Christians and non-Christians expressed common concerns about their extremely disadvantaged socio-economic position and doubts about the prospects of their children to ‘move up’ in the world. In addition, those more exposed to Kinh culture and life outside the village would criticise their fellow Hmong comrades for being too risk-averse regarding business and investment. For instance Dua, a Hmong research assistant who married a Kinh man, compared her fiancé’s mindset – “if you want to earn money, you must borrow money to invest in this thing” – in stark contrast to the pessimistic Hmong who are afraid of business failure, “so they don’t dare investing to develop”. Of course, this fear can be partly explained by the discrimination Hmong people face doing business in a Kinh-dominated marketplace, and the negative experiences many had with debt after taking out state loans (see Chapter 3).

However, Christians in Village D asserted that their faith empowered them to be more entrepreneurial and take risks in livelihood decisions. This was highlighted during an interview with non-Christian Thang & Le, one of the poorest households of the village, when it emerged that they had infertile land which didn’t receive enough water to grow rice or corn. Upon hearing this, my local (Christian) research assistant Sy interrupted the interview to urge them to calculate first and consider growing ginger on the land instead, explaining the investments required and encouraging them not to be afraid of trying something new (see page 195 above). Later, Sy informed me that if Thang & Le were Christians they would have been advised about this long ago

276 Focus groups 2, 3, 4 and 5 with Hmong students; see Appendix 1 Figure 22.
277 Interview with La; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
278 Interview with Dua; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
279 Interview with Thang & Le; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
at the Saturday ‘development’ meetings (Chapter 5), and went on to claim that Christians took more risks in business because they have God to put their faith in. Another villager spoke of the confidence he has to experiment with different livelihood models:

But now I follow God, when I start a model, I think, I’ll just give it a go and I’m not sure whether it will work. But at the end of the year, when I harvest, I had a really big harvest for my family, so when I think about it, I feel within me that certainly God blessed me; I worked a little, but earned a lot. But in the past, I worked a lot, and earned little!

This spirit of entrepreneurialism resonates with Nanlai Cao’s ethnography of Christian businessmen in Weizhou who were enthusiastic about “applying Bible principles to enterprise management” and “transforming faith to productivity” (2010: 66). At a more practical level, not just pastors but church laity gain experience organising and leading religious meetings, which can increase confidence and self-esteem (Le 2018). For Christians in Village D who have reaped the rewards of their collective communal development projects and the subsequent tourism boom, it makes a lot of sense to associate spirituality with economy. Conversely, the flip side of this logic is that while “True Christianity necessarily means wealth… poverty indicates personal sin, or at least a deficient faith or inadequate understanding” (Gifford 1990: 375). This uncomfortable corollary has created tensions between Village D and neighbouring, poorer villages and threatens religious unity (see Chapter 5). However, the most common indicator of moral success or failure which Hmong Christians use is not wealth but rather association with traditional customs, especially communal alcohol consumption:

I felt that Jesus would help me improve myself [vươn lên], that my life would be brighter. But I cannot receive it, because I still drink alcohol, that must go against Jesus... I knew Jesus would be able to save those who drink and smoke too much, improve their lives. But after following Jesus, I still drink… I can’t change yet.

This quote comes from 30-year-old Mo who identified as Christian but continued to drink alcohol with his non-Christian relatives, feeling unable to refuse them when they visited. Mo felt the pressure of the wider Christian community (including his wife) to conform and expressed his regret that he could not stop drinking, blaming this for his lack of social upward mobility. During the course of fieldwork I met a handful of such people who were on the margins of both Christian and non-Christian societies: those who converted and subsequently gave up the faith, a Christian marrying a non-Christian or, like Mo, those who attempted to keep a foot in both camps. These people were often the most interesting people to interview and appeared to have less prejudiced opinions and insights about either side of the religious divide. Unfortunately, they were also the

280 Interview with Sy; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
281 Interview with Cao; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
282 Interview with Mo; see Appendix 1 Figure 21.
casualties of religious persecution towards Christians on the one hand and cultural intolerance towards Hmong traditions on the other, so tended to be doubly marginalised.

**Conclusion**

Everyday life is messy, full of ambiguities, surprises and inconsistencies (Guillaume and Huysmans 2018), and resists simple categorisations or clear cause-effect explanations. This chapter has documented the complicated and sometimes contradictory aspirations for modernity, perceived means to development and religious techniques of self-fashioning within Hmong Christianisation. Neoliberalism as political economy and imperialism are both relevant to upland Vietnam, given the context of economic reforms and US-Korean religious influence. Nevertheless, the lens of governmentality allows for a more intimate analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on everyday life and its implications for empowerment.

“The ends of development are rarely disputed by the subjects of development, however poor they might be” (Rigg 2016b: 225). Christianity does not challenge the ‘will to improve’ – on the contrary, it reinforces notions of progress and civility which ultimately derive from both Vietnamese state developmentalism and the capitalist growth paradigm. Given the reality that the Hmong communities sit at the bottom of Vietnam’s ethnic and economic hierarchies with little hope of ‘catching up’ with the majority, this endless ‘will to improve’ is arguably disempowering on a macro level, and Christianity provides no counter-narrative. However, transnational religious influences do enable Hmong Christians to resist Kinh assimilation and retain a level of ethnic distinctiveness which could be considered empowering on one level, even while being integrated into a marketised economy.

From their perspective at the bottom of the Vietnamese market economy, Hmong interviewees articulated a fourfold understanding of the means to development as material assets, diligence, connections and calculativity. At an individual or household level, local Hmong understandings of why some people can improve their lot while others do not are based around everyday commonsense observations: of course those with inherited assets can use them for profit, while hardworking people tend to be more successful – although there is a risk of demonising the ‘lazy poor’. The importance of personal connections in Vietnamese economy is similar to the concept of guanxi social networks of power in China (Gao and Fennell 2017), and those on the fringes have some understanding of what they are being excluded from. Similarly, those without the necessary knowledge and calculating skills find the prospect of competing in the market economy to be desirable but daunting, whereas those with more education are more aware of its benefits and limitations.
Ngô (2016) writes that the Hmong “were painfully and acutely aware of the socioeconomic and political forces that were beyond their control. And… conversion to Protestantism was their way of achieving some control, however slippery, over their own lives” (2016: 103). Recall Cua’s claim in the opening vignette that while poor Hmong have few chances for social interaction and thus don’t know how to change, poor Christians can listen to the word of God preached by the pastor instead, which will do them as much good. Here Cua is arguing that religious self-cultivation – learning to read, practical application of Biblical proverbs, gaining experience leading and organising religious activities, and advice from business-consultant-pastors – can improve diligence and calculativity, replacing mainstream education or social connections as means to development. This is somewhat similar to Wong’s (2013) examination of the potential for ‘religious capital’ to help Chinese migrants in Hong Kong to escape poverty, but he concludes that such religious capital is not evenly distributed and only enables the poor to ‘get by’ rather than ‘get on’, since “the fundamental reasons for poverty are not addressed” (2013: 176).

Common everyday Christian cultivation of economic attitudes and behaviour include the avoidance of so-called ‘social evils’, rejection of traditional custom expenses, sanctioning of other worldly consumption, expectation to tithe and endorsement of entrepreneurialism and calculative self-interest. Prosperity theology appears to be a rather flexible subjectivity, equally capable of thriving under the turmoil and uncertainty of economic crises and structural reform (Comaroff 2009) as well as, in this case, offering explanations for a trend of sustained poverty reduction following religious conversion. Perhaps the clearest example of Christian neoliberal subjectification was the translation of religious faith into a willingness to engage in risky business ventures, although this was also seen as becoming more like the Kinh, so it must be viewed in light of ethnic hierarchy and politics of assimilation. On the other hand, the uneasy dynamics of ‘competitive communalism’ found in the Village D lend credence to the claim that “the capitalist transformations that have reshaped our world do not always end in a narrowed, ‘neoliberal’ self-interest” (Hefner 2017: 282).

According to Freeman (2012b), Weber’s key point was that “in order for a new economic system… to be taken up by people, there had to be shift in their values and subjectivity in order to motivate new behaviours and to make the new economic system seem moral” (Freeman 2012b: 20), and Pentecostalism may be doing just that for neoliberalism in the developing world. The majority of Christians I interviewed attested that such self-fashioning has contributed positively towards their aspirations for progress, and indeed it appears to equip Hmong people for succeeding in the capitalist market economy. Of course, incorporation into the bottom of an unequal capitalist economy opens up communities to new forms of exploitation and oppression, as seen in Chapter 3. Furthermore, strict Christian subjectivities breeds an intolerance towards those unable or unwilling to follow work and consumption prescriptions, which is disempowering for those on the margins of Christian and non-Christian worlds.
These observations (and those of previous chapters) about the complex, simultaneously empowering and disempowering intersections of religious transformation, market expansion and state territorialisation will be brought together and encapsulated in the Conclusion, in order to answer the central research questions and demonstrate this thesis’ contributions to knowledge production.
This thesis has analysed the everyday political economy of religious transformation in upland Vietnam in order to answer the central research questions: how does Christianisation interact with processes of ‘development’, state territorialisation and market expansion among the Hmong in Vietnam, and to what extent can these interactions be considered empowering or disempowering? Doing so has involved drawing on an interdisciplinary range of literature, exploring a wide variety of interrelated fieldwork themes and thus enables me to make a number of original contributions to various academic debates. In this conclusion I synthesise the key arguments made across the empirical chapters before elaborating the thesis contributions towards understanding the relationship between religion and development, South East Asia’s ethnopoli[tical landscape, and the agency of marginalised religious actors. Finally, I critically reflect on the limitations of this study and point to future research agendas which could further develop the contributions made in this thesis.

I have answered the central research questions by arguing that Hmong Christianisation is seen by locals and state officials as both a challenge to government authority in Vietnam’s highlands as well as an alternative pathway to progress and modernity. Therefore, religious interactions with processes of development, state territorialisation and market expansion have both empowering and disempowering effects as Christianity puts Hmong communities onto a trajectory of resistance to state-ethnic assimilation while simultaneously promoting integration into the market economy. At a grassroots level, conversion has led to conflict between Christian and non-Christian communities and the rise of powerful new religious elites, but many who have embraced and benefited from religious change came from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society. In the sections that follow, I expand on this by reflecting on the key empirical findings which support this central argument, before demonstrating the utility of these findings for a broader understanding of the political economy of religious change.

Key findings

*Political economy of livelihoods:* a foundational thesis result concerns how Hmong livelihoods are changing with the expansion of the market economy into Vietnam’s highlands, intertwining with state territorialisation and ‘development’ agendas. My empirical findings challenged some assumptions about the reluctance of semi-subsistence Hmong farmers to embrace hybrid rice seeds (Turner and Bonnin 2012) and the empowering potential for such technologies. At the same time, new livelihood opportunities in the cash economy are becoming increasingly pertinent and provide both opportunities and risks, which many Hmong are eager to embrace even while inequalities are exacerbated by marketisation. In addition to confirming other research about the uneven impact of state welfare benefits, tourism and cash crops, I provided new data about informal seasonal labour
migration to China which large numbers of Hmong engage in, despite risks of exploitation or even trafficking. Market integration and commoditisation of labour has given rise to a new ‘non-subsistence’ class formation who are best placed to take advantage of changing livelihoods – typically Hmong government officials or church leaders. These findings contributed to the central argument by showing the empowering and disempowering dynamics of marketisation and state development initiatives that Hmong Christians (and non-Christians) are engaged with.

*Everyday politics of church-state relations:* another key element of the thesis was the impact of Vietnamese state attempts to govern, control or co-opt Hmong Christianity, and the everyday tactics employed in response. Historical factors of Vietnamese Confucian governing ideology, religious leadership of early modern Hmong rebellions, French colonialism, Cold War conflict and state territorialisation – the expansion of state influence up to the edge of its borders (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995) – must all be considered in order to understand the relatively recent mass Christian conversions in Vietnam since the late 1980s. Analyses of Vietnamese-language state and academic documents, most of which have not previously been translated into English, revealed both consistencies and diversity of thought on ‘official’ perspectives on Hmong Christianisation. While my fieldwork data confirms other accounts of both the brutality of state-sponsored religious persecution and the multifarious contestations within the Vietnamese state, I uncovered new evidence about the impacts of different Hmong everyday political decisions to comply with, evade or resist state authority. In particular, Christian migration within Vietnam and abroad to Laos and Thailand in order to seek asylum is seen by the state as both an ideological and practical threat to stability, with unforeseen political ramifications as Hmong asylum seekers in Bangkok make contact with human rights organisations, who in turn criticise Vietnamese religious freedom on an international level. This provides evidence for the central argument that Christianisation is seen as a challenge to government authority, leading to significant social conflict.

*Local elite contestations:* one significant original contribution of this thesis is the role of pastors and church leaders as ‘everyday elites’ who mediate dominant-weak relationships as nodes within broader webs of power relations, often with feet in different camps. Applying the concepts of ‘political broker’ (Lee 2015) and ‘development broker’ (Lewis and Mosse 2006) within Hmong conceptualisations of religio-political power, I demonstrated why Hmong cadres were the most hostile of all state actors to Christianisation, since it undermined their legitimacy to represent the community. Combining spiritual authority with economic success, younger male pastors act as business consultants, challenge local authorities and mimic some of the state’s technologies of governance in their attempts to expand Protestant influence, resulting in wealth accumulation for church leaders and varying degrees of redistribution to their communities. Moreover, I showed how international religious networks can function as alternative (and sometimes competing) patrons to the state, for well-placed Hmong Christian elites to engage with. These findings support the central argument’s claim that the rise of new religious elites can have both empowering and
disempowering impacts, while pointing to the ways such elites help prepare their communities for integration into the market economy.

**Gender relations and patriarchal bargaining:** I took a postsecular feminist approach to exploring the impact of religious change on Hmong gender relations, especially given the prevalence of female-led Christian conversion. Through a detailed inspection of traditional clan structures, marriage practices and inheritance norms and their subsequent religious transformations (or lack thereof), I interpreted conversion as a form of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ (Kandiyoti 1988) by which Hmong women display their agency to secure a more favourable position in society. Hmong men become ‘domesticated’ in family life but retain dominance in religious leadership and political elite status, showing how Christianity undermines some existing patriarchal structures and inequalities but also inscribes new ones on top. Therefore, religious women’s agency should be understood along the multi-directional paths towards ‘alternative modernities’ which are simultaneously entangled in broader political economy transformations of upland Vietnam. This approach gives weight to the central argument that many who have embraced and benefited from religious change came from the most marginalised sectors of Hmong society, within the constraints of competing patriarchies at play. At the same time, Christianised gender relations, changing division of labour and consumption habits are intimately tied to upland marketisation and state governmentalities.

**Christian, market and state subjectivities:** finally, I examined what local aspirations for modernity, local perceptions about the means to development, and religious self-fashioning of economic behaviour revealed about the presence and nature of neoliberalism in upland Vietnam. I argued that the almost complete subjectification of the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007) can be explained due to its overlap with ethnocentric state discourses on civility and Christian visions of progress. Other aspects of neoliberal governmentality combine and conflict with other influences to produce messy and ambiguous results. This was exemplified in the uneasy combination of increasing cultivation of market competitiveness with communal economic rationalities present in both state and church activities, as opposed to the commonplace association of neoliberalism with radical individualism. Further debate on the rationalisation of work and consumption, the influence of Pentecostalism and especially Prosperity theology portrayed a complex picture in which Hmong Christian cultivation of discipline and entrepreneurialism may prepare them to succeed in their incorporation into globalising capital markets but might undercut, or override, their relation to the Vietnamese nation state. These findings contribute to the central argument that Hmong Christianisation is seen as an alternative pathway to progress and modernity which sets believers on a trajectory of resistance to state-ethnic assimilation while simultaneously integrating them into the market economy.
Academic contributions

This thesis primarily contributes to two academic fields: firstly, it demonstrates the value of an everyday political economy (EPE) as a conceptual lens for critical religion and development research which can capture both the everyday politics of religious actors with the development-as-governmentality approaches. Secondly, it provides empirical contributions of import to regional (Hmong, Vietnamese and South East Asian) studies grappling with the dynamics of religious conversion, ethnic politics, gender and empowerment.

Faith-based organisations have been involved in the development project since its outset, including some relatively influential players like the World Council of Churches, so long as they accepted the sharp secular divide between ‘development work’ and proselytisation – in theory, at least. In reality, many religious NGOs and actors who did not tow the party line have been marginalised as the secular development industry tended to ignore or find them problematic to work with (Ver Beek 2000). Since the turn of the century, however, the façade of secularisation has been shattered as the role of religion has gradually attracted the attention of both development practitioners and also academics: in 2015 alone, Swart and Neil (2016) identified over 50 articles and book chapters on the topic of religion and development. Unfortunately, much of this literature can be critiqued as ‘instrumental, narrow and normative’ (Jones and Petersen 2011) by essentialising religion into something static that can be ‘tapped into’ (Fountain 2013), reducing the analysis into a list of ‘positives’ and ‘negatives’ and rejecting proselytisation as ‘illegitimate, coercive, and dangerous’ (Fountain 2015). Moreover, the values and meanings used to justify ‘development’ interventions often remain unquestioned (Salemink 2004), falling into the trap of the ‘anti-politics machine’ (Ferguson 1990).

Within this broad body of literature, there are also more critical voices which avoid these pitfalls and draw attention to “the political leverage that religious actors can exert… [and] the political factors underpinning how and why development actors interact in the ways that they do with different religions and religious leaders/communities” (Fountain et al. 2015: 18). In addition, there is a growing subsection of religion and development literature which draws attention to the apparent new ‘elective affinity’ (Comaroff 2009) between Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity and the advance of neoliberalism in the developing world, with the former contributing to “the conversion to capitalism that the neoliberal agenda requires” (Freeman 2012a: 160). What’s more, the post-secular shift from religious actors being service providers only towards the promotion of faith as a legitimate part of development (Cooper 2015) could even be seen as a return to the dynamic of colonial imperialism, whereby the role of the missionary was seen as integral to the civilisation agenda. Nevertheless, just as in the colonial era (Porter 2004) the relationships between different local Christian actors and neo-colonial structures varies significantly; this thesis
showcased a unique situation where Christianity was embraced and developed at a relatively remote distance from American/neoliberal hegemony (see Chapter 2).

My thesis defended a critical definition of development as grassroots empowerment based on a relational view of poverty (Mosse 2010), revealing some limitations of the religion and development field of literature. With a few exceptions, this field rarely provides nuanced accounts of the independent (though inevitably interlinked) relations between local religious actors and multiple external forces – state, market, wider religious networks, etc. Analysing these intersections along with associated gender and class relations reveals the more complex, sometimes contradictory developmental impacts of religious behaviour which can be empowering on some levels and for some sectors of society, without addressing root causes of poverty and inequality.

I proposed everyday political economy (Elias and Rethel 2016) as a conceptual lens able to provide such an account by combining insights from everyday politics, feminist political economy and governmentality studies to broaden the scope of enquiry into the political and economic dynamics of religious activity in contexts of poverty and inequality. EPE amalgamates the ‘actor-centric’ logic of an everyday politics analysis with the ‘agency-centric’ logic of discipline and governmentality to construct a realistic understanding of how economic behaviours are produced in everyday life. This enables me to disassociate the multiple forces including state, market forces and transnational actors that have distinct agendas and impacts – sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting – on local religious communities. As this thesis has demonstrated, state and market forces do not always follow the same logic or exert the same pressures on impoverished people, resulting in complex responses and outcomes. Furthermore, local religious actors are not only recipients or resisters of external influences, but also have the agency to influence external forces to varying degrees. I suggest that this constitutes a methodological strategy that could inform other research on religion and development, perhaps especially regarding Christianity given its unique links to liberal governmentality.

In Chapter 1, I created a basic EPE model of religion and development which can now be modified in light of empirical chapters (see Figure 19). In general, the ‘actor-centric’ element of EPE is useful for understanding the conflicting, co-operating and competitive relations between various religious and state actors (Chapters 4 and 5), as well as between different groups within local religious communities (Chapter 6). Meanwhile, an ‘agency-centric’ analysis helps identify the more abstract – but equally important – connections between religious practices and disciplines with market trends and economic rationalities (Chapters 3 and 7). Of course, state and market forces are also interconnected so there is plenty of crossover, and “it is in the agency of the mundane that everyday life meets everyday politics” (Elias et al. 2016: 245). Moreover, local religious actors are not homogenous, and it is crucial to consider how church elites channel in power and wealth from transnational religious networks (Chapter 5), while dynamic gender
contestations and negotiations within Hmong Christianisation (Chapter 6) add a layer of complexity to interactions with external forces.

My second set of contributions consists of important empirical insights on the nature of Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam which matter for various debates within Hmong studies, Vietnamese studies and South East Asian studies. To date Hmong studies has focused overwhelmingly on the Hmong populations in the US diaspora, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, China and Laos. Within existing literature, there has been some research on the impact of missionary Christian conversion outside of Vietnam (Tapp 1989c, Moua 1995, Borja 2014) which generally corroborates my findings, however I provide a novel account of Christianity as a site of resistance in the context of a hostile, authoritarian state highlighting the political impact of religious actors. In addition, Chapter 6 contributes to the ongoing discussion of the agency of Hmong women and religious patriarchy (Vang et al. 2017, Vang 2015, Lemoine 2012) by applying the insights of postsecular feminism to the gendered dynamics of Christianisation. My findings interpret conversion as ‘patriarchal bargaining’, highlighting the remarkable influence Hmong women in Vietnam have had in changing household economic practices and division of labour through religious teaching and discipline.

This thesis has engaged with and built upon core themes of Vietnamese studies including the efficacy of ‘everyday politics’ (Kerkvliet 2005) and the fragmented nature of power within the Vietnamese state (Painter 2005, Gainsborough 2010a, Fforde and Homutova 2017). Between these bottom-up and top-down political analyses, there is a relevant debate on what ‘civil society’ looks like in Vietnam, given the immense reach of state or party political and financial ties to organised social activity. Salemin’s claim that “there is no domestic civil society sector that is independent or at least autonomous from the direct control of the state” (2006: 105) seems inflated or outdated.
in light of increasing informal civil society activity in urban areas (Wells-Dang 2014), but this thesis emphasises the overlooked fact that Hmong churches are practically the only non-governmental organisations – financially independent and often unregistered – in Vietnam’s Northern highlands. As this thesis shows, Wells-Dang (2012b: 26) is incorrect to exclude religious groups from civil society on the erroneous presumption that they do not engage in advocacy. On the contrary, the presence and role of Hmong church networks spread across thousands of marginalised rural villages can, and should, inform our understanding of the nature of Vietnamese civil society away from the cities.

Another increasingly pertinent question in both Vietnam studies and South East Asian studies is the influence of neoliberalism on different states and societies (Schwenkel and Leshkowich 2012, Nguyen and Chen 2017, Springer 2017). My findings in Chapter 7 confirmed the reluctance of others (Gainsborough 2010a) to attribute a monolithic status to neoliberalism in Vietnam, emphasising instead its flexibility in combining with other ideologies and with agendas from non-state actors to produce localised hybrid governmentalities. More broadly, the debates surrounding religion and politics in South East Asia (Willford and George 2004, Hamayotsu 2008) have recently shifted from themes of religious democratisation and ‘emancipation’ (Sidel 2009) towards more instrumentalist accounts of elite manipulation of religion in political mobilisation (Hadiz 2018). My thesis provides a balanced contribution by showing how Hmong Christianisation can simultaneously be exploited by local elites as well as being a meaningful, and empowering, way for poor and marginalised people to engage in politics and power structures (Frahm-arp and Bompani 2010: 6). Finally, while the debate concerning the historical merits of James Scott’s Art of Not Being Governed (2009) is rather saturated, I build on Scott’s cursory insights on the religious realm to identify ‘weapons of the weak’ which may not be able to keep the state at arm’s length but at least afford some room for negotiation.

Critical reflections and future research

Given the convergence of multiple political sensitivities (ethnic politics, borderlands security, religious convergence) for this topic and practical challenge in securing access and conducting in-depth qualitative research in Vietnam’s borderlands (Turner 2013a; see also Appendix 2), I consider this thesis to be a significant empirical achievement. Nevertheless, during fieldwork I encountered challenges which limited my design and ambitions for this study. Firstly, I wanted to conduct detailed fieldwork in the Central Highlands as one Case Study Site, due to the different socio-economic dynamic of Hmong communities having recently migrated there (see Chapter 4). This would have no doubt enriched the thesis, but it proved impossible for me to secure official permission in the Central Highlands, or indeed other provinces where Christianity was associated with migration or ‘instability’. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in only three Case Study Sites limits the ability to make generalisable claims about Hmong Christianisation across the whole of
Vietnam’s highlands – although I was able to conduct interviews with 75 additional Hmong from across 11 provinces (See Appendix 1). On the other hand, spending longer periods of time at fewer fieldwork sites enabled me to delve deeper into the ‘richness, texture and detail’ (Ortner 1995) of everyday life.

While I critique macro-quantitative analyses of global datasets (Barro and McCleary 2003, McCleary 2008, Woodberry 2012) as having very little insights on the complex interactions between religious, political and social factors driving economic change, this does not mean that quantitative research has nothing to contribute to religion and development. Wang and Lin (2014) attempt to investigate the correlations between religious beliefs and economic growth using provincial panel data in China, which avoids some of the pitfalls of the class-national analyses I critique, although ultimately their causal claim that “Christianity has the most significant effect on economic growth” (2014: 286) cannot be verified by quantitative data alone. Carefully combining qualitative methods with bounded, meaningful quantitative datasets has been shown to give greater triangulation ability of results in studies of poverty and development (Dawson 2015, Copestake and Remnant 2015, Tincani and Poole 2015). A potential agenda for future research would be to convert aspects of this thesis into a mixed methods project using an ‘exploratory design’ in order to test the emerging findings about Christianisation and/or generalise results to the wider Hmong population (Creswell 2015).

Such a project might involve generating some basic hypotheses about the relationship between Hmong religious and economic behaviour from this thesis, such as: (a) Hmong villages with high Christian conversion rates were, at the time of conversion, poorer than those with low rates, (b) Hmong villages with high percentages of Christians have experienced faster reduction in poverty than those with low percentages, and so on. These could then be tested by an analysis of the Vietnam Household Living Standards Surveys, national census data (the latest 2019 census is now available), and supplementary data about numbers of Hmong Christians from major denominations. There are problems about the representativeness and reliability of official datasets (Hansen and Le 2013), and church data may prove difficult to attain, nevertheless it would be interesting to see whether any correlations hold up on a national scale. Another way of incorporating quantitative methods would be to return to collect my own data on a smaller scale in order to further substantiate some thesis findings, for example testing the gendered division of labour by recording the number of hours Hmong Christian men and women spend at religious ceremonies, at work, etc. Of course, other aspects of the thesis arguments cannot easily be reduced to straightforward quantitative comparisons, hence the value of mixed methods.

Alternatively, there is a strong case for a comparative (and ideally collaborative) future research agenda on the political economy of Protestant Christianities in upland South East Asia. Oscar Salemink (2015a) and Catherine Scheer (2017) have studied Christianisation among the ethnic
groups of Vietnam’s Central Highlands and Cambodia’s Northeast Highlands, containing striking parallels with my own fieldwork site such as a radical break from traditions, subsequent rapid socio-economic transformations and market economy expansion. There may be a case for viewing Scheer’s account of the Bunong as approximately 10 or 20 years further down the line than the Hmong of Vietnam, in spite of significant political differences – not least the Vietnamese state’s heavy-handed interference in religious affairs and Hmong responses in contrast with the relative religious freedom afforded to Cambodian Bunong (Scheer 2017, 68). Meanwhile, in Myanmar a number of minority groups who were Christianised from colonial-era missionaries are currently, or have been, in armed conflict with the Burmese state (Taylor 1982), with Christian-educated local elites playing instrumental roles in creating ethno-nationalist organisations (Thawnghmung 2008, Sadan 2013, Mang 2018). Elaine Ho (2018) mentions Baptist pastors as important actors who attend transnational political meetings, preach sermons on resilience, distribute aid and support the Kachin Independence Organisation’s competition with central authorities for local legitimacy, in a bid to be ‘more caring than the state’.

These fascinating insights, however, are usually limited to their local or national contexts and there would be great value in taking a more regional approach, especially given the cultural, political and economic similarities shared across upland Southeast Asian Massif (Michaud 2010a), also known as ‘Zomia’ (van Schendel 2002). Like the themes addressed in this thesis, fruitful points of comparison would include: the importance of borders and transnational movements in transmitting or restricting religious, political and economic influence (Saxer et al. 2018); the role of church leaders as political and development brokers; the involvement of Korean, Singaporean or Filipino missionary networks and the crossover of ‘Asian Christianities’ (Phan 2018); the durability or transformations of ethnicity and gender as vectors of inequality; and the question of neoliberalism as political economy, imperialism and governmentality in everyday life.
This appendix is a reference point for further understanding the contexts, relationships and positionalities in which the research findings and quotes are embedded. As mentioned in the Introduction, the bulk of my fieldwork data was generated over the space of 3 months in my three Case Study Sites in Lào Cai and Lai Châu provinces (see Chapter 3 for in-depth description of these sites). Figure 20 gives more detail about the research assistants who accompanied me for the majority of interviews conducted. Across these Case Study Sites I interviewed over 200 people; Figure 21 gives preliminary information about the research participants who are directly quoted or referenced in this thesis, plus the thesis page numbers of where they are referenced. In addition, I conducted 15 focus groups as well as interviewing 15 non-Hmong government officials, pastors, missionaries, charity workers and tour guides – Figures 22 and 23 detail those directly quoted or referenced. Finally, Figure 24 shows the other provinces I visited during unofficial fieldwork (see Appendix 2) and the home provinces of Hmong research participants who I met in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City.

Figure 20: Hmong research assistant profiles and positionalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name 283</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home village</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Highest education</th>
<th>Government connections</th>
<th>Additional factors affecting positionality</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
<th>Interviews assisted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Brother is a cadre, Father was a cadre</td>
<td>Works part-time to collect interest on State Development Policy bank loans in Village A</td>
<td>Sometimes added his own opinion to other participants’ answers</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phong</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Occasionally does freelance work for Oxfam projects</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sy</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Daughter of pastor Ban (see Figure 3)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dua</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Temporary district civil service job</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Tended to summarise participants’ answers</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phu</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Tuyên Quang</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bible school</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Former pastor, now tour-guide</td>
<td>Assisted for informal research periods only</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

283 All names are pseudonyms.
Figure 21: Hmong interviewee profiles (including research assistants, most of whom were also interviewed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home village</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Highest education</th>
<th>Wealth 285</th>
<th>House Access 286</th>
<th>Govt links</th>
<th>Occupation (not farming/hired labour)</th>
<th>Relation to others</th>
<th>Interview format</th>
<th>Research assistant present</th>
<th>Page ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bai</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bible school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Pastor, homestay</td>
<td>Sy’s father</td>
<td>Multiple, recorded &amp; unrecorded</td>
<td></td>
<td>7, 90, 98, 145, 149, 151, 155, 181, 196, 201, 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bau</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Market vendor</td>
<td>Chu’s sister-in-law</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Sy</td>
<td>84, 146, 201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Uncle is cadre</td>
<td>Architect</td>
<td>Cai’s nephew</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ca</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Cadre</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Dua</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cadres in family</td>
<td>Debt collector</td>
<td>Cho’s brother</td>
<td>Multiple, recorded &amp; unrecorded</td>
<td>Cai is an assistant</td>
<td>66, 75, 83, 86, 98, 102, 155, 156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cau</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No formal education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Cai</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

284 Case Study Site is given for interviewees who live outside the six focus villages; province is given for those living outside the Case Study Sites.

285 This category is an author’s estimation of the participant’s economic wellbeing based on a combination of the participant’s income, assets, house quality and their own assessment of relative wealth vis-à-vis other villagers, with 1 being very well-off and 7 being extremely poor.

286 This category refers to ease of access to the participant’s house based on distance from main road and quality of road, with 1 being high access and 4 being difficult access; a “?” answer indicates that this information is unknown, usually because the interview took place at a different location and not in the participant’s house.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home village</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Highest education</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>House Access</th>
<th>Govt links</th>
<th>Occupation (not farming/hired labour)</th>
<th>Relation to others</th>
<th>Interview format</th>
<th>Research assistant present</th>
<th>Page ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cang</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Site 1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Unrecorded</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>91, 192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cao</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Livestock trader</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Sy</td>
<td>147, 150, 211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chang</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Secondary school</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Sy</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chau</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lai Châu</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chia &amp; San</td>
<td>38, 44</td>
<td>Both Female</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Primary School</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Cousins</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Dua</td>
<td>96, 98, 171, 175</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chien</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Cao Bằng (now in Bangkok)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Translator for BPSOS (Figure 23)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Unrecorded</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cho</td>
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<td>Thang &amp; Le</td>
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<td>?</td>
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<td>Married couple</td>
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<td>Sy</td>
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<td>Married couple</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>53</td>
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<td>E</td>
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<td>Unknown</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Dua</td>
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<td>Lâm Đồng</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Tra &amp; Phinh</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Tra was a teacher</td>
<td>Phinh was a soldier</td>
<td>Mother &amp; son</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>Son in police</td>
<td>Former shaman</td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>Recorded</td>
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<td>Tung</td>
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<td>Cai</td>
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<td>?</td>
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<td>Pastor</td>
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<td>Recorded</td>
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<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Sy</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Cadre</td>
<td>Youth Union</td>
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<td>Recorded</td>
<td>Dua</td>
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<td>Xong</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>No formal education</td>
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<td>Phong</td>
<td>167, 173</td>
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**Figure 22: Hmong focus group participants**

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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Christian</th>
<th>Participant Features</th>
<th>Focus group location</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
<th>Page ref.</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>Mid- to late 20s</td>
<td>3 Christians 1 not</td>
<td>Farmers from different villages in Site 1</td>
<td>Refreshments café in Village A</td>
<td>Non-Christian disagreed with some claims made by Christians</td>
<td>92, 99</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Nine</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>20-28</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Theology students from 5 different provinces</td>
<td>Bible school dormitory, Hanoi</td>
<td>Other students walked in and out or the room over the course of the discussion</td>
<td>94, 115, 117, 118, 207</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Three</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>23-28</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Theology students from 3 different provinces</td>
<td>Bible school classroom, Hanoi</td>
<td>All participants were in their 4th and final year of studying theology</td>
<td>119, 121</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Seven</td>
<td>6 male, 1 female</td>
<td>16-25</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Theology students from 4 different provinces</td>
<td>Bible school classroom, Hanoi</td>
<td>The 1 ‘secular’ student often had different views to theology students</td>
<td>47, 115, 120, 193</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Undergraduate students from 4 different provinces</td>
<td>Kim’s house (see Figure 4), Hanoi</td>
<td>Discussion took place after English lesson; missionary was not present</td>
<td>96, 131</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>19-24</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Undergraduate students from 4 different provinces</td>
<td>Kim’s house (see Figure 4), Hanoi</td>
<td>Discussion took place after English lesson; missionary was not present</td>
<td>141, 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>All male</td>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>All Christians</td>
<td>Theology students from 3 different provinces</td>
<td>Café, Ho Chi Minh City</td>
<td>Two Christian friends from other ethnic minorities joined the discussion halfway through</td>
<td>123, 144, 194</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Six</td>
<td>All female</td>
<td>18-28</td>
<td>Some but not all Christians</td>
<td>Undergraduate students from 4 different provinces (1 from Laos)</td>
<td>Kim’s house (see Figure 4), Hanoi</td>
<td>Discussion took place after English lesson; missionary was not present</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>All female</td>
<td>30-60</td>
<td>Some but not all Christians</td>
<td>Women from different villages in Case Study Site 2</td>
<td>Outdoors market space, Village D</td>
<td>Some could not speak Vietnamese so research assistant Sy interpreted; men occasionally came over and interrupted</td>
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## Figure 23: Non-Hmong interviewees

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<th>Name</th>
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<th>Profession</th>
<th>Interview location</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
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<td>Anh</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Pastor</td>
<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>Anh’s church in Hanoi has a Bible school where many Hmong students come to study theology</td>
<td>67, 117, 128</td>
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<td>Binh</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Dao</td>
<td>Tour guide</td>
<td>District town of Site 1</td>
<td>Multiple informal interviews</td>
<td>Interview primarily in English language; Binh made some derogatory remarks about Hmong hygiene</td>
<td>76, 79, 87, 155</td>
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<td>BPSOS</td>
<td>2 Male, 1 Female</td>
<td>Kinh, Ê-đê, &amp; Western</td>
<td>Civil society advocates</td>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>BPSOS staff work with Hmong asylum seekers in Bangkok; interview was conducted in English language</td>
<td>123, 125</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hieu</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>NGO worker</td>
<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>Hieu has conducted both NGO projects and independent research in Hmong-inhabited regions of Vietnam</td>
<td>122</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong (US)</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>Kim is a Hmong-speaking US citizen, offers free English lessons as well as teaching Christianity to students</td>
<td>118, 139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linh</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Former journalist</td>
<td>District town of Site 3</td>
<td>Multiple informal interviews</td>
<td>Linh has strong government connections, with husband and son in the police and army</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuong</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kinh (German)</td>
<td>Civil society advocate</td>
<td>Online (Skype)</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>Phuong is an overseas Vietnamese man who founded his own human rights advocacy organisation in Germany</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trang</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Missionary</td>
<td>Village A</td>
<td>Multiple informal interviews</td>
<td>Trang is from the lowlands and has lived in Case Study Site 1 for over a decade now, but does not speak Hmong</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Kinh</td>
<td>Former civil servant</td>
<td>Hanoi</td>
<td>Informal interview</td>
<td>Viet was a former ideological advisor to the Central Committee and is author of the Anonymous (2008) paper referenced in Chapter 5 (see Bibliography).</td>
<td>129, 130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Academic conference entitled: “Researching the religious lives and beliefs of the Hmong people and implementing religious/ethnic policy in the Northwest at present”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Interview location</th>
<th>Data collection method</th>
<th>Other notes</th>
<th>Page ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The 1-day conference was not publicly advertised; the 25-odd attendees (almost all men) included university researchers, central and provincial religious affairs ministers, etc. A few ethnic Hmong officials and one Hmong pastor, Seng (see Figure 2), was present.</td>
<td>122, 128, 130, 153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 24: Map of fieldwork locations

Home provinces of informal interview and focus group participants, excluding Case Study Sites:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>No. of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lào Cai</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lai Châu</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Điện Biên</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lâm Đồng</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hà Giang</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuyên Quang</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh Hoa</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Đắc Lắk</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cao Bằng</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bác Kạn</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thái Nguyên</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangkok</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>77</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **= Official Case Study Site provinces**
- **= Other provinces I visited during fieldwork**
- **= Home provinces of other participants who I met in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City**
Appendix 2 – Methodology

This supplementary appendix provides supplementary details about the research design, methods, fieldwork access and challenges which were briefly outlined in the thesis Introduction. Firstly, I discuss the influence of critical realism on my methodology and research design, combined with a healthy dose of pragmatism which is necessary for researching the dynamics of the ‘everyday’.

Secondly, I provide further information about the methods used: in-depth interviews, focus groups, ethnographic observation and secondary data analysis. Thirdly, I explain the practicalities of negotiating and securing fieldwork access in a challenging research environment. Fourthly, I outline some ethical issues and challenges emerging from fieldwork, and my attempts to resolve them. Finally, I include a list of interview questions used during fieldwork.

Research Design

This section introduces critical realism as a rationale for research design, which was of some use to my research. Offering an ‘third way’ between the problematic poles of positivistic rationalism and irrational idealism, critical realism combines “ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgement rationality” (Bhaskar 1998: xi). Ontologically, realism asserts that there is an objective reality which exists independent of people’s perceptions of the world. Reality is not limited to the ‘empirical world’ (that which can be measured); the domain of the real is much greater than the domain of the empirical, and encompasses not just experiences and events but also the structures and mechanisms which generate them. These real structures may be unseen, and may indeed be counter-phenomenal – they may contradict appearances (Collier 1994: 7). Additionally, reality is stratified, meaning that one kind of structure or mechanism may be grounded in, and emerges from, another – although the ‘higher-level’ stratum cannot necessarily be predicted by, and is not reducible to, the ‘lower-level’ one.

Epistemologically, Critical realism acknowledges that our alleged knowledge and beliefs about the nature of things are socially produced, transitive, easily biased and therefore fallible – hence the need for recurrent, rigorous scientific investigation. The social world is fundamentally like the natural world it is part of and should therefore be studied in a broadly similar way, although this is in practice extremely difficult. The impossibility of closed experiments in the social world means experiments must be replaced by the ‘power of abstraction’ – a less reliable tool, because it relies on the subjective, ‘hermeneutic moment’ (Collier 1994: 248). However, this ‘epistemological relativism’ does not lead to ‘judgement relativism’; not all beliefs are equally valid, and there are rational grounds for preferring one over another (Bhaskar 1986: 72). Although knowledge is historically and culturally situated, it is still “possible to be objective about subjectivity” (Potter and Lopez 2005: 14), and indeed human knowledge has expanded and progressed over time. Given that, all other things being equal, “it is better to believe what is true than what is false, it is also
better (other things being equal) that instruments that cause false beliefs should be replaced by, or transformed into, those that cause true ones” (Collier 1994: 172). Therefore, critical realism aspires to be emancipatory, by exposing and explaining distortions of knowledge or false belief.

The primary strength of critical realism for this thesis is its potential to grapple with complex issues and offer nuanced causal explanations through critically revealing mechanisms and structures on different levels or strata. Critical realism is interested in understanding the dynamic relationship between structure and agency, by which individuals are simultaneously being socialised by, and reproducing (or sometimes transforming), social structures (Collier 1994: 145) – very relevant for understanding the nature of empowerment, and it fits nicely with the everyday political economy model of religion and development I proposed in Chapter 1. Moreover, critical realism supports an in-depth qualitative methodological approach, since reaching satisfactory causal explanations of the social world requires “deep analysis of the minute particulars of some concrete conjuncture, rather than superficial knowledge of great statistical populations” (Collier 1994: 259). When applying critical realism to practical social science research, Price and Martin (2018) stipulate the need for:

- a commitment to ontology; the use of retroduction and judgemental rationality; the use of the critical realist approach to structure and agency… the application of interdisciplinarity, based on a laminated, scalar ontology; an engagement with hermeneutically based methodologies (such as grounded theory or qualitative interviews); a commitment to reflexivity; and the application of moral realism, leading to normative assertions and suggestions for action. (2018: 89–90)

While my research design fulfils most of these criteria, overdependence on critical realism as a ‘grand narrative’ can lead to the danger of applying theory in a deterministic fashion at the expense of empirical findings (Kemp 2005). Indeed, many authors who attach importance to ‘the everyday’ at site of investigation and analysis advocate for a ‘bottom-up’ approach to research instead of the overly rigid imposition of grand theories onto the empirical world (see Chapter 1). Therefore, I eschewed some of the technicalities of critical realism and have also allowed for a more pragmatic evolution of ideas throughout fieldwork and data analysis, in a manner similar to grounded theory (Kempster and Parry 2011).

**Methods**

Over the course of my fieldwork I interviewed over 200 people, mostly individually but also a significant number of couples. Semi-structured interviews contained a number of open-ended questions aimed at gathering information about specific issues (see Figure 25, end of appendix), while simultaneously allowing the researcher to shift the interview course based upon insights or questions that emerge (Magnusson and Marecek 2015). While some general questions were asked to all participants, other topics were reserved for specific demographics, for instance questions about conversion experiences and theological beliefs were, by and large, asked to Christians only.
My leading questions were predetermined, based on my prior literature review, but the format and content of interviews evolved and shifted over time as new themes arose. With interactions ranging from just a few minutes to over an hour, some interviews were obviously more in-depth than others depending on the time available, the participant’s interest in my research, the privacy of interview location and so on. Furthermore, I conducted multiple interviews with a few key actors – such as the prominent religious elites Phu, Ban and Seng in Chapter 5 – over longer periods of time, which enabled me to add a longitudinal element to my case studies.

In addition, I undertook around 15 focus groups with between 3 to 15 people, mainly with Hmong students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City – but also a few spontaneous focus groups conducted in villages at opportune moments. The rationale behind this was threefold. Firstly, focus groups were more efficient during times when I had access to a large group of participants but limited time, especially at student groups in Hanoi. Secondly, in other contexts some participants from marginalised groups (e.g. older, uneducated women) were more comfortable engaging with a potentially intimidating outsider such as myself in group discussion than individually. Thirdly, focus groups were more productive for discussing contested issues where there was room for debate (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 203), such as opinions about prosperity theology among Christian students. However, other issues were too controversial; it proved difficult to facilitate a fully participatory discussion about the impact of religious change among a focus group of both Christians and non-Christians. Sometimes what started as an interview attracted the attention of onlookers, who listened in and occasionally gave their own opinions, turning it into an informal focus group of sorts.

By ethnographic observation, I refer to site-intensive methods which aim at gaining a deeper understanding of people’s everyday experiences and behaviour through immersion in daily activities. While interviews are good for generating a structured discussion, ethnographic observation is useful in uncovering unspoken opinions, practices and contests among differently positioned actors, as well as highlighting “the interplay and mutual determination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors and relationships” (Long 2001: 13). Site-intensive methods are well-suited for revealing causal processes, since they “allow for active probing by the researcher rather than relying on the analysis of extant sources” (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 250). Mundane practices, informal conversation and popular jokes also give an invaluable insight into everyday politics of marginalised groups who may self-censor formal interviews to give the ‘correct’ answers in a context of heavy state monitoring (Scott et al. 2006: 35). For my research, this consisted of both participant observation (attending meals, weddings, funerals etc.) and non-participant observation (i.e. observing religious ceremonies, market transactions). It also involved sleeping at Hmong homestays in the village in order to maximise social interaction and chance encounters as well as familiarising myself with local inhabitants.
Finally, I undertook a textual analysis of various documents which I collected during my fieldwork, mainly. The sources included government-sanctioned and independent news websites, religious pamphlets, Vietnamese language academic newspapers, journal articles, papers and books, as well as letters written from Hmong Christians into the Far East Broadcasting Company (see Chapter 2). These secondary data helped me triangulate my primary data generation and compare results with, whilst also giving insights about the prominent discourses surrounding Hmong Christianity in Vietnam. The distinction between ‘literature review’ and ‘secondary data’ becomes blurred, given the extent to which much (but not all) Vietnamese-language academic literature exhibits similar biases and rhetoric to that of government policy documents (see Chapter 4). This underlines the importance of scrutinising the positionality and agendas of academic literature as rigorously as with other data.

Most interviews and focus groups were recorded on a Dictaphone, enabling me to focus my attention on listening and guiding the conversation. I could also devote my notebook to recording body language, the physical surroundings of the interview, who else was present in the room. On the other hand, using a Dictaphone carried the risk of making some participants uncomfortable and less willing to discuss politically sensitive topics. Oftentimes, key insights were made during informal conversations where there was no opportunity to record, and other comments were made off the record after an interview had finished and the Dictaphone turned off. Therefore, at the end of each day I would type up field notes about all discussions, observations and impressions. After transcribing the recordings, all this data was qualitatively analysed in NVivo using some predetermined codes as well as other themes with emerged from the results.

**Negotiating access**

[T]he head of district police…read a list of rules to which I must abide. Every month, I must submit a work plan to the village leader, district people’s committee and district police. On completion of every trip, I must report to the village leader before returning to Hanoi. His concluding remarks were: Do not interact with the Hmong and do not engage in any Christian activities. (Sowerwine 2013: 100)

This excerpt from Jennifer Sowerwine’s field notes while conducting fieldwork in the same region in 1999 gives an insight into my research context. Vietnam is a relatively complicated place to gain official research access in general, but upland areas are particularly restricted due to historical and ongoing tensions with ethnic minorities (Michaud 2013). In particular, Hmong politics and Christianity are considered to be extremely politically sensitive, and have proved impossible for foreigners to research in the past (Sowerwine 2013). Gaining access to research so a delicate subject required time, patience and, above all, cultivating trust with gatekeepers at various levels (Petit 2013). My host institution helped me secure official research permission and tailor my research proposal to make it ‘palatable’ for administrative purposes (c.f. Turner 2013:10).
Selecting the research site locations which form my three main case studies was far from straightforward. Initially, I wanted to research in the Central Highlands, but was informed by my host department that it would be impossible for me to gain access, since Hmong migration to the Central Highlands was a very contentious topic (see Chapter 4). Furthermore, I was strongly advised to work in Lào Cai province because they already had strong contacts with the local authorities there, whereas other provinces would apparently be much less willing to accept foreign researchers. I had initially wanted to avoid Lào Cai since almost all fieldwork research on the Hmong in Vietnam is undertaken in that province (c.f. Ngô 2016, Turner 2012b, Bonnin 2011), and now I understand why. In the end, I had to rely on my hosts and accept two communes in two different districts of Lào Cai, as well as managing to reach another site in neighbouring Lai Châu province. Helpfully, the three sites are quite different from each other regarding geography, livelihoods, political climate and religious dynamics, giving me plenty of variables to compare (see Chapter 3).

This thesis is a product of a decade’s worth of visiting Vietnam’s highlands, meeting Hmong people and cultivating networks of trust. My official research period was for 7 weeks from January to February 2017, during which I spent 2-3 weeks in each of my primary field sites and conducted the majority of my interviews, as well as conducting further interviews with Hmong refugees in Bangkok (see Chapter 4). I also made several unofficial research trips to Vietnam over the course of 2016, during which I started the official research application, built contacts, visited potential research locations, informally interviewed some government officials and church leaders, attended a relevant academic conference, and conducted focus groups in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. In addition, during a subsequent trip in December 2018 I was able to return to two case study sites and speak with some key informants, enabling a longitudinal analysis of those sites. Conducting the bulk of my fieldwork in January and February, over the Vietnamese New Year holiday periods, proved advantageous since it was after the harvest season but before the sowing season, meaning most Hmong farmers had much more free time to take part in interviews than at other times of the year. It is also a holiday period for civil servants, making it easier for me to conduct fieldwork without the interference of local officials.

In both official and unofficial research periods, there was a great need for flexibility and ‘going with the flow’ (Salemink 2015), taking advantage of potential avenues which opened up and being ready to conduct interviews off the cuff. Over the course of my fieldwork, I became more adept at maximising the time available, judging participant willingness and refining interview questions. Even after the rigmarole of securing official research permits, I experienced ‘access’ to be a rather vague and relative concept which constantly needed to be reassessed and renegotiated. For example, while the official papers stipulated that I only conduct interviews in specific communes, in one site my research assistant actively encouraged and arranged interviews for me in neighbouring communes outside the designated areas. On the other hand, in another site a different
research assistant prevented me from interviewing a certain local official about religious issues, as she deemed it would arouse suspicion and hinder our research – despite us having the correct papers. Above all, it was crucial to prove myself trustworthy to assistants, participants and authorities, for whom “official rules still remain a constraint; but with trust, ignoring or bending the rules that are tolerable to all parties almost magically becomes a distinct possibility” (Michaud 2010b: 224).

**Ethical issues and challenges**

The political sensitivity of my research, the extent to which the Vietnamese state attempts to control academic research, the marginalised status of my research group, and the social conflict which Christianity has caused in Vietnam all combined to make my research ethically hazardous. It is not unheard of for named people in academic literature about Vietnam’s ethnic minorities to be subsequently detained and questioned (Salemink 2013: 243). To avoid this nightmare scenario, I have ensured confidentiality for all participants by not only using pseudonyms but also anonymising the research locations so that they are as unrecognisable as possible. During fieldwork, I would sometimes avoid asking questions about certain topics – i.e. Christianity, domestic violence – when interviewing in a public place, just in case the conversation might be overheard and reported to local authorities. Moreover, when delivering preliminary training to research assistants and interpreters, I instructed them not to pass on information that they had heard from interview participants.

Reflecting on my positionality, my obvious outsider status did not necessarily limit my access since I was seen as quite a novelty – indeed, I was the first Westener that some people had ever spoken to. Furthermore, having an outsider identity could be useful to obtaining unspoken ‘insider’ meanings (Kapiszewski et al. 2015: 260), since it was often assumed that I knew absolutely nothing about Vietnam despite being fluent in Vietnamese! As a man, I was also required to drink alcohol with other (non-Christian) Hmong men as a bonding ritual, which presented opportunities for bonding that female researchers might not have encountered (Petit 2013). However, in the context of such religious division within Hmong villages (Ngô 2015), I found that attempting to cultivate trust and esteem with non-Christians through ‘participant intoxication’ (Fiskeşjö 2010) simultaneously risked alienating the Christian community – who quickly found out about my activities! In the end, my attempts to navigate among two antagonistic groups were only partially successful, and I remained in a liminal space on the margins of both sides of the community.

Finally, doing research among impoverished communities raised ethical concerns about how to honour the principle of reciprocity. While I had the budget to pay research assistants and hosts, the fact is that I benefitted immensely from the hospitality, openness and, sometimes, courage of many women and men who generously and freely contributed to my research in various ways. Turner
(2013a: 13) suggests avoiding visits around mealtimes so as not to burden the hosts, however this was simply unavoidable at New Year, when most households had slaughtered a pig and were keen to dish out the meat – on one day I was treated to six meals at different households and had difficulty refusing the seventh! After each interview, I would invite participants to ask me any questions; a few asked how my research was going to help them in particular, or the Hmong in general. This question continues to concern me, since critical social science research should also be empowering (Collier 1994: 260). Building relationships and friendships with people who experience poverty, discrimination and exploitation made this obligation to ‘give something back’ a matter of ethics, not just good practice. Consequently, I have been working with local partners in Thailand and Vietnam to co-found and fund a Hmong-language livelihoods information sharing network.287

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 25: List of possible interview questions (NB: not all questions were used in every interview)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What is your name? How old are you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where were you born? How many siblings do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where is your hometown? How long have you lived here for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you were a child, what was your life like? Are there any differences between your life then and that of your children now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If you look back at your childhood, what happy memories do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Were there any periods of hardship? How did your family handle them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are you married? (If so, for how long?) How did you meet your spouse?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How many children and grandchildren do you have? (Have any of your children passed away?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How many people live in your household currently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is anyone in your household ill or injured? If so, how long for?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Livelihoods</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who built this house? How long ago was this house built?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How much land do you have? How far away is it from your house?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What important possessions and property do you have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What does your household do for a living? Which jobs are most important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you grow rice on paddies/rice terraces? (how many kg/year?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you grow maize and/or other vegetables? (how many kg/year?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you rear livestock? (how many of each animal?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you weave and sell textiles? (how much VND/month?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you produce alcohol? (how much VND/month?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you plant cardamom? (how much VND/year?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Are you a tour guide? (how much VND/month?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you trade anything? (how much VND/month?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Do you do hired labour? (whereabouts, how much VND/month?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Who does what job in the family? What hours do you work in the day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Which periods of the year are the busiest? When is the work hardest?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Did you go to school? Until which grade? Can you read and write?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have your children gone to school? How far is the school from here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In your opinion, is education important? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you receive State welfare benefits? What assistance do you receive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How many people in the village have local authority positions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

287 More information can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6WJRDfvoAtpXadOJWgeHIA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6WJRDfvoAtpXadOJWgeHIA)
| Community, changes | • In your opinion, is poverty a big problem here? If so, in what ways?  
• Do you consider yourself to be poor? Do you always have enough to eat?  
• If you have/had surplus money, what will/would you do with it?  
• How many households are there in the village? Are they all Hmong?  
• Who are your friends in this village? Why are you close to them?  
• Do you play any special role in the community?  
• If you were in real hardship, would you receive financial or labour assistance from your neighbours or any other source?  
• In your opinion, what must one do or have to be considered successful or to have developed?  
• Compared to your neighbours, do you see yourself as relatively successful or developed? On a scale from 1 to 10, how wealthy are you?  
• Which households in this village are the most successful/developed? Why?  
• Compared to 10 years ago, how is your economic situation? Has anything changed? Is earning a living easier or harder than before? If so, how?  
• What new livelihood opportunities did you previously not engage in? |
| Culture, gender | • In your opinion, what are the characteristics of traditional Hmong culture? (Regarding everyday life, gender roles, special ceremonies, community standards, faith and beliefs)  
• How is Hmong culture different from Kinh culture?  
• Is there a shaman in this village? Do you visit the shaman?  
• These days, do Hmong people here still follow the traditional way or are there any changes? If so, why?  
• In your opinion, what things will change in the community in the future?  
• How will/would you like your children’s lives (to) be different to yours?  
• Some people say that Hmong women work harder than men. Do you agree? Why/why not?  
• Is alcoholism an issue here? What about domestic violence?  
• Do you know anyone who has been trafficked? |
| Religion: | • If you compare a Hmong Christian household with a non-Christian household, will there be any differences? If so, how?  
• In your opinion, why do so many Hmong people like Protestantism? (do you know any Christians?)  
• Do Hmong Christians still follow Hmong cultural customs? (e.g. marrying someone from outside their clan)  
• Are you a Christian? How long have you been a Christian?  
• Please can you share your faith story. (Why did you become a Christian?)  
• After believing in God, did your life have any changes? If so, how?  
• In your opinion, does God materially bless households or communities who follow him? If so, in what ways?  
• Do the economic situations of Hmong people change after they convert?  
• In church services, does the pastor teach about things like work, money, earning a living, etc.?  
• In your opinion, do Hmong Christians especially want to become rich?  
• Have you experience religious persecution? In your opinion, why do the authorities not want Hmong people to become Christians?  
• How has your relationship with the authorities changed since believing in God? If someone converts, will they still receive State benefits, medical fee exemptions, student bursary etc.? |
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