

Doing Fieldwork in Development Geography: Research Culture and Research Spaces in Vietnam

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Abstract

Rapid socioeconomic and institutional changes in Vietnam since the early 1990s have opened up new geographical spaces for field research. Reflecting on the experiences of three doctoral student researchers engaged in distinct development geography fieldwork projects in Vietnam, this paper profiles some of the conditions and procedures for carrying out fieldwork in order to serve as a basis for comparison of changing 'fieldwork possibilities' in Vietnam and other developing and transitional socialist countries.

KEY WORDS *transitional socialist countries; field research; research methods; reflexivity; postgraduate students*

Introduction

Fieldwork can be one of the most exciting parts of the process of social research, by generating new knowledge and offering insights that may force a researcher to think about things in new ways. Fieldwork also involves the negotiation of complex relations, interests, situations and logistics. In an unfamiliar cross-cultural or transitional socialist context, these challenges range from the application for research visas, to requests for official data, and the negotiation of relationships with local host institutions and 'gatekeepers'. This paper reflects on our experiences, as three female doctoral students, engaging in distinct research topics on development geography in Vietnam. As researchers with limited experience in Vietnam at the time, we had to substantially adjust our expectations and research practices. Our discussion argues for better appreciation, especially among student researchers, of how the research process is shaped by institutional cultures, researcher and interpreter positionality, the negotiation of ethical and practical dilemmas in research relationships and research on sensitive topics, the increasing commodification of research in Vietnam, and a positivist research culture. Through concrete

examples, we interpret the cultures of governmental and research institutions in Vietnam in the midst of economic and political transition.

As researchers focussing on development, political economy and political ecology issues, our individual projects involved research with and about multiple actors and processes in order to analyse changes in land policy (Scott, 2001), government responses to new cultural industries (Lloyd, 2002) and water management in rural development (Miller, 2003). Steffanie Scott conducted research between 1997 and 1998 on agricultural decollectivisation and livelihood vulnerability. She interviewed farmers, researchers, NGO staff, and government officials at various levels. Her main field site was Thai Nguyen province, in the northern midlands, about 100 km north of Hanoi (Figure 1). Kate Lloyd's project focussed on the management of new cultural industries such as international tourism and government responses to the burgeoning private (domestic and foreign) tourism sector. Her research, conducted between 1997 and 2000 in the urban centres of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, comprised interviews with government officials at central and provincial levels, private



Figure 1 Author's field sites.

entrepreneurs, tourism officials, tourists, and foreign investors. Fiona Miller undertook research between 1998 and 2001 on society-water relations in the Mekong Delta in the context of broader scale development in the Mekong Basin. Through fieldwork and interviews with officials at local, central and regional levels she investigated the implications of, and responses to, environmental change through an exploration of water resources management, and the social construction and distribution of risk.

Few publications exist specifically on fieldwork and the politics and production of knowledge in Vietnam during the rapid economic transition since the late 1980s. However, several writers have acknowledged, in passing, the difficulties and limitations related to the general lack of information and reliability of published materials, and the constraints faced by researchers in accessing information from government institutions (Marr, 1993; 1996; Fahey, 1994; Kerkvliet, 1995; 1997; Fforde, 1996; Forbes, 1996; Soucy, 2000; Connell, 2006: this issue)¹. A few publications examine the specific challenges of fieldwork practice in other post-socialist countries, including issues of entry, access and commodification (Kurti, 1999; De Soto and Dudwick, 2000; Ried-Henry, 2003). Yet, with the fast pace of change in Vietnam, conditions and procedures for carrying out fieldwork have also undergone significant changes. The documentation of the fieldwork processes provided here might serve as a basis for comparison of these changing 'fieldwork possibilities' in the country.

A growing body of literature on field research in international development explores power relations, research ethics, and challenges of cross-cultural research (Mosse, 1994; Rocheleau, 1995; Mullings, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Kesby, 2000; Scheyvens and Leslie, 2000; Scheyvens and Storey, 2003; Howitt and Stevens, 2005). Moving away from the conventional perception of researchers reporting on objectively derived observations in the field, recent trends in social research seek to reveal the mutual constitution of knowledge between researcher and research subjects through the practice of fieldwork (Reid-Henry, 2003). Filling the void in literature specific to Vietnam in its era of reform of the past 20 years, we seek to make more transparent the negotiation of relationships at various scales (cf. England, 1994; Katz, 1994; Nast, 1994; Rose, 1997; Dowling, 2000). Our discussion highlights our subjects' involvement 'in the production of knowledge, in the practice

of science, in the politics of knowing and doing' (Moss, 1995, 445; Butz and Besio, 2004) in the context of market transition in Vietnam. We expect this article to be of particular interest to students embarking on fieldwork in developing countries and in 'post-socialist' contexts.

The paper is organised in five sections. The first section explores the transition in research cultures in Vietnam as it shifts from a centrally planned to market economy, and as more plural approaches to research are accepted in Vietnamese social science fields. The second section describes the influence of the market economy and the demand for 'relevant research' for the framing of our research objectives and approaches. We also discuss the constraints on developing partnerships for participatory research given the circumstances of Vietnamese research traditions and limited civil society development, as well as the time and rapport needed with community members. The third section discusses the challenges of researching the gap between law or policy and on-the-ground practice in Vietnam. The fourth section deals with the commodification of research. The final section depicts the nature of researcher-interpreter relations in Vietnamese fieldwork. The conclusion reflects on the strategies we adopted in our research approach to negotiate a series of methodological and logistical constraints. It also offers suggestions for students planning fieldwork in similar contexts.

Throughout the paper, we have incorporated anecdotes and personal reflections on our fieldwork, noted in italics. These are not (usually) passages directly from our field notes or theses, but are adapted field note 'vignettes' that we recounted to each other in putting together the paper.

Research culture in transition

Independent, foreign social science researchers are a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam. New geographical spaces have opened up to foreign researchers through the gradual lifting of restrictions on their movement throughout most of the country, allowing them (as well as Vietnamese researchers) the opportunity to work in remote areas or areas that were previously 'off limits' (Marr, 1993; Forbes, 1996)². Thurston (1983) and Kurti (1999), among others, have written of the importance of official seals of approval for conducting fieldwork in socialist countries. Writing about Hungary, Kurti (1999, 174) noted that 'Just like the socialist state

bureaucracy itself, interviews had to progress hierarchically from the top down'. In Vietnam, the formalities and bureaucracy of authorising field research were linked to getting the 'red stamp' (the official seal) as proof that we had passed through the proper channels, from the top down. Typically, foreign researchers in Vietnam must have pre-established contacts with a host institution, such as the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, or a Vietnamese university. The institution provides the necessary documents for obtaining a research visa, and arranges authorisations for data access, interviews, and field visits.

The socialist education system continues to exert its influence on Vietnamese research culture, especially through the older generation of researchers. Many senior scholars in research institutions in Vietnam were trained in the USSR and Eastern Europe during the 1960s and 1970s, with a second wave gaining qualifications after 1975 (Marr, 1993). Since the early 1990s, however, a younger generation has pursued studies in Western Europe, North America, Australia, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Nevertheless, upon returning to work in Vietnam, this younger generation still faces constraints associated with the practice of social research in their home country. Therefore, this paper is not necessarily only about the concerns and constraints faced by foreign researchers in Vietnam, but also those faced by a new generation of Vietnamese researchers trained abroad.

The social sciences are still developing in universities and colleges throughout Vietnam. As in the former Soviet Union (Mazurkiewicz, 1992; Clark and Michailova, 2004), there is a tendency in Vietnam for the positivist paradigm to dominate empirical research design and practice, as reflected in the bias towards 'apolitical' quantitative methods (Chuan and Poh, 2000). This means that questionnaires, surveys, and mapping are often preferred over semi-structured interviews, oral histories, participant observation and participatory research methods. Associated with this, and compounded by the high value given to formal education, is the disregard often shown for 'non-expert' or local knowledge in the research process. This neglect of diverse perspectives and knowledges potentially ignores many important dimensions of social change. Nonetheless, the use of ethnography to reflect people's everyday practices and perceptions is slowly growing among a limited number of Vietnamese social researchers³.

Researcher roles and the ideal of collaboration for participatory research

The past decade and a half has seen the emergence of spaces for engagement between Vietnamese and foreign social researchers, and between researchers, government and local communities. New opportunities have often accompanied the feasibility studies and monitoring and evaluation of development projects implemented by development agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank, NGOs and bilateral agencies. These projects have exposed Vietnamese researchers and officials to new ways of doing research on the social impacts of development.

Research partnerships ideally should include mutually beneficial opportunities for shared learning, exchange of ideas and the advancement of knowledge. While host/partner institutions in developing countries also share such expectations, their immediate incentives may also include more concrete benefits, such as remuneration for research assistance services. The priority for many institutions and participating communities is also, understandably, some measurable contribution to economic development. While foreign researchers often share these aspirations, they may not be as immediate a priority for their home institutions that are primarily counting on completed theses and peer reviewed publications. Moreover, the potential for an independent, doctoral research product to contribute to tangible benefits is often beyond the capacity of individual researchers. This expectation for tangible outcomes in the process of fieldwork can be a source of tension between the researcher, the host institution and the participating community.

All three of us wished to undertake in-depth, open-ended, qualitative research approaches for our fieldwork. Despite our intentions, restrictions on time and the nature of our research activities in communities meant that our original research strategy and methods had to be adapted. As Miller noted of her fieldwork:

Provincial authorities strictly determined the number of weeks I could spend in the commune conducting household interviews. They refused to grant me permission to stay in the village overnight, and determined that the reduced number of weeks I had in the commune was 'enough time' for me to get information about people's livelihoods and local environmental changes. They also required that I submit a list of all the questions I

planned to ask prior to permission being granted and required me not to deviate from this list. The agricultural cadre who accompanied me to most household interviews also kept a record of who I met with and presumably reported back to authorities on what I discussed. Faced with these constraints on my interview questions and time in the commune, my plans for relatively free flowing, semi-structured interviews and casual conversations had to be vastly revised. In response, I adopted a more structured approach, devising strategic encounters and maximising the limited time available. This compromised the quality and quantity of information I received and the nature of relationships with research participants. (Miller)

While some of us were keen to integrate participatory methods and participatory rural appraisal tools in our research (for example, Chambers, 1994; Rocheleau, 1995; IIRR and IDRC, 1998), we encountered a variety of factors that inhibited us from doing so. These factors hold true for student as well as faculty researchers. First, it requires a long time to cultivate relationships of trust and an institutional environment that is sympathetic, for example, towards working with ethnic minorities. Second, participatory research can imply a significant and ongoing time commitment from community residents and, in the process, can raise expectations about some investment that will follow from the research. We were all keenly aware of the burden implied in asking for people's time for an interview without being able to offer much specific benefit in return. Third, it would have been easier if our research had been linked to a project through which our research results could be directly channelled, such as translation into project modifications or policy formulation.

In writing this, we realise the irony that although participatory research is often used by activist researchers working with marginalised groups in other countries, in Vietnam its use is more likely facilitated by having the status and 'buy-in' of a large project (for example, linked to the World Bank). Researchers in other countries often work with pre-established 'grass-roots' community groups, whereas such groups are much rarer, or non-existent, in Vietnam. Autonomous civil society, in the form of independent social organisations, is weakly developed in Vietnam. This limits the use of participatory approaches to research. As a consequence,

researchers typically work through official channels. Local participation in development activities tends to be disproportionately dominated by the State and closely-affiliated elite village groups. To the extent that participatory learning and action or participatory rural appraisal tools are used in community-level research, such initiatives tend to be donor-driven and linked to development projects. Participatory research tools can be useful in providing some kind of snapshot of the development context of a village, and in promoting an attitude among outsiders of listening to and valuing local people's ideas. Yet, as they are used in Vietnam, such tools are typically driven by a demand for quick results, rather than being used to promote in-depth research and understanding of local dynamics, conditions, and trends. Moreover, a 'culture of harmony' inhibits the use of participatory tools to highlight conflicts between social groups in a community (Scott and Chuyen, 2003). Thus, more indirect approaches or ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews or participant observation can sometimes be helpful for gleaning information, although there are also challenges to using these methods in Vietnam, as discussed elsewhere in this paper.

The legacy of State-led everything (a hangover from the collective economy period) contributes to a 'dependency syndrome' and the perception amongst many State officials that poor people are not able or willing to do anything for themselves. Instilling ownership or initiative and removing dependency and passivity is challenging, not only due to the top-down and government-dominated structures, but also to a series of mental dispositions among many elites. Negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and a devaluing of indigenous knowledge persist. 'Unlearning' the cultural and symbolic capital associated with their status in society is a challenge for many senior researchers and officials. This reinforces the difficulties of adopting participatory research approaches with local research collaborators.

The 'official line' versus everyday practices

In interviews with Vietnamese officials or even researchers, it was quite challenging for all three authors to move from discussions of policies, norms or discourses, to actual practices. We were often given over-simplified portrayals which tended to brush over discontinuities or local specificities (for example, how a national policy

was locally received and implemented). While this is a fairly universal tendency, in the context of Vietnam such a tendency is rooted more in the portrayal of situations as how things *ought to be* rather than how they *actually were*.

Time and again, I read and heard references to the custom that women did not inherit land. Yet, in my fieldwork I came across numerous cases in which they did. To many people, it seemed odd that I wanted to engage them in discussions about processes (for example, land allocation). These types of ‘how’ questions were always the ones I found hardest to elicit responses to. (Scott)

This division between rules, on the one hand, and practices, on the other, is perhaps more cemented in Vietnam, where there is a legacy of unpopular policies combined with Confucian heritage that deters questioning of authority. Until recently, research by Vietnamese scholars generally sought to affirm policy decisions or document success stories, such as the mechanisation of agriculture in a model commune in the Red River Delta. People were reluctant to talk about everyday practices that may run counter to given policies or social norms. Of course, everyone knew that disputed practices existed, but to openly acknowledge these strategies of resistance and their incongruity with official discourses or norms was generally not viewed as appropriate in general, and certainly not as an appropriate topic for research. This echoes what Croll (1994, 292) described in China as the methodological challenge of:

breaking through collectively constructed representations, to differentiate social norms from social practice, [in terms of] a clearly defined ideology representing social structures and social processes as they ‘ought to be,’ how certain socio-political and economic institutions ought to function, and how political, social, and economic relations ought to be constructed.

The two of us who worked in rural areas were both discouraged from interviewing ‘unsuccessful’ farmers or the landless, as they were seen by university researchers as ‘unrepresentative’ or ‘atypical’.

A district-level agricultural extension officer who accompanied me on one commune visit was emphatic that a poor Hmong (ethnic minority) household I visited was atypical,

but when we came upon a particularly successful Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) household nearby he said nothing about it being exceptional. Vietnamese researchers and officials I interviewed tended to be more interested in discussing cases that were deemed ‘typical,’ even if these were in fact exceptional ‘model’ farmers or communes. (Scott)

The tendency to dismiss instances of marginality and difference as atypical can be attributed to different factors. One is the lack of understanding or appreciation of qualitative methods. The dangers of over-generalisation are captured by Christoplos’ (1995, 14) observation of dominant Vietnamese research practice: ‘The quantitative data regained dominance in presentations of research results. Diversity was shoved under the rug. ... Agency, and the creativity of the individual informants, was forgotten in the interest of constructing a generic “poor farmer”’. Another factor is that the conduct of researchers and State officials outlined above could be linked in part to a fear of losing face and admitting that policies did not work or were not followed. However, seen in a comparative light, perhaps the problems we encountered in Vietnam were not so exceptional. It is only quite recently that international planners and development analysts in other contexts have faced critiques for their over-simplified and inaccurate depictions of farmers (generically portrayed as male) or of harmonious communities of common interests (Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Guijt and Shah, 1998).

Having said this, we also found that local responses to our research differed considerably between regions and ethnic groups. While in the north people tend to be more reluctant to express their criticism of State policy, southerners are known to be more frank. While ethnic minority farmers felt less confident to talk openly, many Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) farmers in the South were openly critical of recent policies on collectivisation, government assistance programs and local corruption. Moreover, some people astutely saw the research interview as a chance to express their criticism (an expression of their resistance), even when (or because) on a number of occasions officials were present.

New political economy of research

One subjective and ethically challenging aspect of fieldwork in many countries involves determining how and when to appropriately

compensate certain individuals – for instance, local officials and poorly-paid State employees – for their time in arranging field visits, interviews or other forms of assistance. Despite relatively strong central funding of higher education, many universities and research institutes remain chronically under-funded. Salaries for Vietnamese researchers are very low; a typical university researcher earns less than US\$50 per month. To compensate for this, university faculty seek out a variety of opportunities for improving their financial situation. As Marr (1993, 343) observes, from the ‘mid-1980s, financial stringencies have forced Vietnamese researchers of all ages to spend much of their time improvising individual subsistence strategies’. This may take the form of private tutoring, research assistance and translation, consultancies or sideline businesses.

Croll (1994) noted that in China conducting rural research is complicated by the fact that there is much more competition for the time and attention of cadres and farmers than previously: time is money. Kurti (1999, 176) noted this reality for fieldworkers in Hungary and Romania: ‘informants’ time ... which had formerly been regulated by the party, trade union or communist youth league was now under the constraints of the market and money’. Kurti (1999) also reflected that getting to talk to people in the new market context required a degree of ‘selling’ himself such that participants would judge it as a worthwhile use of their time. In other contexts, ‘interview fatigue’ can set in as local people tire of being approached and asked a multitude of questions. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that local people may begin to strategise and ask for compensation for granting yet another interview. For this reason, one of us was advised to avoid conducting field research in some areas that were becoming known as ‘project districts.’

Vietnamese researchers often have experience with foreign projects that offer remuneration at levels far beyond local salaries. This makes it difficult for overseas students with modest budgets to carry out research in areas touched by this monetarised ‘project syndrome’. Morally, we often found it very confronting to be faced with the relative and absolute poverty of our respondents. We were able to offer little more than the promise of our research contributing to a general understanding of their situation. In quite different contexts we were directly asked for an ‘envelope’ of money in exchange for various services or information, including for interviews with

government officials, professors or museum researchers. Occasionally, we obliged. Perhaps under the impression that a researcher’s budget is infinite, State authorities asked some foreign researchers and Vietnamese doctoral students to pay US\$100 to US\$200 for a single map. A foreign researcher told one of us of his experience paying a lot of money for what he assumed was current data from government surveys, when in fact the data had been generated through projections from old figures. One of us was confronted with the situation where a government official offered to sell the only copies of a number of historical reports held in the office library after we had expressed interest in reading them. In such instances, the interpretation of a market economy and the user-pays principle has perhaps been taken too far.

Christoplos (1995, 13) discusses the related issue in Vietnam of being perceived as a *donor* instead of a researcher, such that when foreigners engage in rural field visits, statements by local officials or farmers are constrained to relate only to the ‘constructed needs’ that they anticipate the foreigner or development project might offer them (for example, credit, irrigation pumps or schoolbooks). People sometimes assumed we were conducting ‘market research’, and we had difficulty convincing officials that we were merely seeking to understand local conditions rather than planning to invest in the region.

While undertaking my fieldwork on the tourism industry, I found that both my host institution and the research participants had a preconceived idea of the outcomes of my research. There were constant enquiries into my so-called ‘market research’ and my host institution gently but continually made it known that they hoped my research would have tangible outcomes – whether it be advising on how to increase tourism arrivals or developing tourism training material. An interview by a local Vietnamese newspaper in response to a conference paper I delivered in Vietnam also cast me as a tourism ‘expert’ and requested recommendations for the industry. This misconception of what my research entailed continued into my interviews with tour operators and traveller café owners. Although I explained the purpose of my research and my ethics forms made it clear that I was a student affiliated with an Australian university, there was constant questioning of whether I would be publishing

my findings in tourist ‘bibles’ such as the Lonely Planet. On more than one occasion I was presented with brochures from the tourism company I was interviewing and asked to help establish ‘a business relationship’ with tour companies in Australia. Thus the perception that I was a potential business investor, or could assist in developing business links between Vietnam and Australia, was constant and difficult to shake. (Lloyd)

The business community, investors, foreign aid providers and project collaborators can sometimes face a warmer reception than social science researchers. Foreigners who may be able to offer know-how, services, products or investments may be more appreciated than critical development geographers and other academic researchers. The latter may emphasise the detailed analysis of problems over the more instrumental formulation of recommendations.

We had not anticipated the extent of sensitivity around certain research topics before we launched into our fieldwork. Because of this, we found the use of surveys and formal, structured interviews which directly broached sensitive topics to be ineffective. Instead, we gradually devised other more culturally and politically appropriate strategies for gleaning useful information. Scott and Miller obtained information about collectivisation and decollectivisation by using biographical methods of listening to people’s life histories and experiences under different policies and historical periods. These various anecdotes revealed important information about settlement history, old landlords, war experiences, administrative changes, and environmental changes. Lloyd also sought information about the development of tourist businesses through personal accounts of how various entrepreneurs established their businesses in the early 1990s and the variety of networks used to facilitate this. These stories were recounted several times over a three-year period enabling the story to be checked and more details obtained each time.

Useful insights were also drawn from popular jokes, which appeared to be an avenue for indirectly venting critiques of the economic and political system. Rather than referring to ‘problems,’ ‘conflicts’ or ‘disputes,’ we would sometimes use indirect questioning or observation, or choose less controversial language by asking about ‘difficulties’ and ‘challenges’ in policy implementation. We would discuss ‘resources’,

land use and well-being to avoid more sensitive topics like wealth, differentiation, land disputes and local politics. Cultural sensitivity is thus critical in understanding the subtle ways people communicate about sensitive topics, for example, through humour, by what people choose to emphasise, by the context of the subjects discussed, and by what is left unsaid.

These examples point to the challenge of researching issues that are politically sensitive or perceived as not relevant to instrumental development objectives. Other issues requiring special discretion ranged from ‘illegal’ migration, ethnic minorities, women’s rights, taxes, land markets and social class. Socio-economic differentiation is a delicate topic and people were sometimes reluctant to report their income, yields or size of land holding. In Vietnam, as in China in the past, ‘there was less cause for secrecy, given that taxes were paid by the collective and there were fewer differentials within villages, where “everybody knew everybody else’s affairs”’ (Croll, 1994, 295). In the current context, however, especially in richer regions, as ‘households are now much more complex, autonomous and diverse economic units, [they are] less inclined to reveal the details of their economic activities, incomes and savings’ (Croll, 1994, 295).

Land conflicts and land inheritance posed further difficulties in interviews and data collection:

Having gained permission, after a couple of months of negotiation, to interview a number of different provincial departments for my research on water resources development, I directed some questions on the local history of settlement, land tenure and land allocation to the provincial land department. On returning, after being asked to come back another time, I was told that because my topic concerned water resources that information on land resources and settlement was ‘not relevant’. (Miller)

The sensitivity of discussions about land also surfaced in relation to women’s rights:

I found the topic of gender issues hard to raise in many contexts in which men were present. It was simply not taken seriously and was often seen as a laughing matter. Amongst a mixed group, men often disappeared when I asked questions of or about women, suggesting boredom or lack of respect for the issue

and for the person responding. But responses were also indicative of the common view among state officials that land allocation could not be a gender issue. Responding to a question about the implications of land inheritance for women, a Women's Union representative insisted, 'It's not very important'. This perhaps reflects how such officials, male and female, fail to recognise any divergence between policy or law (of equal inheritance) and practice, and how they see little value in studying the implementation of a policy, as distinct from the law or policy itself. (Scott)

Positionality and reception of the researcher and interpreter

Notions of research being objective and value-free have been radically challenged by feminist theorists (Hartsock, 1987; di Stephano, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Code, 1996; Rose, 1997) who have 'sought to explore how relationships of power between researchers and their informants influence how knowledge is interpreted and represented' (Mullings, 1999, 337). As Haraway (1999) has argued, we all embark upon research with 'maps of consciousness' which are influenced by our positionality and perspectives shaped by our own unique mix of class, gender, nationality and other identities. The ambiguous nature of our status as foreign researchers, but also as young and female, meant that we were often treated in quite different ways. We all experienced different manifestations of this:

My status as a young female student was often a barrier, although on a number of occasions I found it allowed me to build up rapport with female office staff who were an important part of my research network. They were invaluable in organising introductions and interviews and in debriefing after time in the field. This is an experience which my male research colleagues admitted to not sharing, although they had plenty of other 'bonding' opportunities not open to me. (Lloyd)

Our gender and foreignness opened up certain spaces, yet closed off others:

The research spaces I engaged in varied considerably, encompassing a range of social actors and arenas of power. The settings included impromptu discussions with farmers conducted in the shade of coconut trees and bamboo overlooking paddy fields while

drinking fresh coconut juice, to the more formal, by-appointment, interviews with local and provincial officials carried out under the whirr of ceiling fans (sipping bitter green tea poured from the seemingly bottomless Chinese teapot and thermos ensemble), to the air-conditioned 'comfort' of the restricted-access offices of development professionals drinking Nescafe instant coffee. As a woman I was less likely to be invited to drink alcohol with (predominantly) male government officials than a male researcher would be, but my foreignness meant that occasionally I would be invited to such sessions. However, for various reasons I often chose not to participate in these sessions as I was afraid they were perceived by poorer members of communities as an abuse of privilege by those in power and a waste of public monies. This choice meant the associated bonding that goes along with these sessions, and the sharing of valuable insights on the workings of government and policy, were closed off to me. On the other hand, as a woman, I was more easily able to engage with female informants than a male researcher would be (Miller).

All three of us spoke at least some Vietnamese, and through our engagement in Vietnamese culture, language and society, we became critically aware of not only our positionality in various senses, but also the effect this had on our research. Various elements of Vietnam's cultural heritage and Confucian traditions have reinforced social hierarchies. This is embedded linguistically within personal pronouns and terms of address which mean people must constantly situate themselves in terms of age, gender and status in relation to others.

The significance of positionality and status is sharply revealed in the researcher-interpreter relationship. The literature on ethnographic fieldwork has become increasingly sensitive in recent years to issues of the researcher's positionality. Yet, to the extent that an interpreter is used – and each of us worked with a number of interpreters for varying lengths of time – most accounts of researchers working in cross-cultural contexts brush aside the positionality of the field assistant or interpreter. This is a serious omission, since factors such as age, gender, regional and class background, and prejudices such as attitudes towards women, the poor or ethnic minorities, can play a huge role in shaping interactions between the researcher, inter-

preter and research subjects, and the nature of the data obtained. Lowland Vietnamese were sometimes concerned about the frightening spirits in the highlands. Moreover, rural areas were widely perceived by interpreters as dirty and uncomfortable and too much of a hardship for many researchers.

When working in rural areas or with disadvantaged communities we realised the importance of having interpreters who have some understanding of, or empathy for, research participants:

Part of my research was concerned with the impacts of water resources development on the poor. So as well as interviewing a range of landholders, I also wished to interview labourers and landless farmers. While walking through the village one day my interpreter and I met one older female labourer. After chatting with her and introducing myself, my project, and asking her permission to interview her, we sat down in the shade beside the road to talk. My interpreter, who had earlier suggested we 'had enough' interviews with landless people, continued to stand, literally standing over the woman and myself. After he refused to sit, I had to politely terminate the interview as his body language was unbearably offensive, yet not before she imparted valuable information about impacts of irrigation expansion on labourers' salaries. It was an awkward situation which illustrated to me the problems associated with working with interpreters lacking sensitivity and who undervalue the knowledge of informants. (Miller)

Related to this is the problem of representation and 'othering,' particularly with respect to ethnic minority peoples in Vietnam. Attitudes of Kinh towards ethnic minorities (in our cases the Hmong and the Khmer), were frequently condescending, patronising and fraught with misunderstanding. Such prejudices were also exhibited by ethnic Tay and Nung people (who are more assimilated in Kinh culture) towards the Hmong:

In a rural market, when I initiated a conversation with a group of Hmong women, the surrounding crowd of Nung on-lookers began to jeer at the women in an insulting tone. When I later expressed an interest in interviewing a Hmong person to one Nung commune official, he sent me off with his assistant to a nearby hamlet where the assist-

ant proudly presented me to a man, exclaiming, 'here's a *nguai Meo* (Meo person)', as if he were showing off a museum exhibit or some kind of merchandise (Meo is an old and somewhat derogatory name for Hmong people). In another instance, after visiting a Hmong household, my Kinh interpreter joked with a district-level agricultural extension officer about the poor condition of the house, the Hmong woman's illiteracy, her inability to specify how much land she had, and her son's incompetence in obtaining a good price for selling a bird that he had trapped. The interpreter further criticised Hmong people for their constant dependence on State programs, always asking for project hand-outs. Arriving afterwards at a relatively new house of a clearly well-off family, the interpreter exclaimed, 'This must be the home of a Kinh or Tay. What a nice house this is'. (Scott)

Similar forms of prejudice were expressed towards Khmer people in the Mekong Delta. The appropriateness of an interpreter is thus determined not only by their language and communication skills but also the degree to which they can engage with people of different backgrounds, and be conscious of their own positionality.

Female Vietnamese researchers or interpreters were often reluctant to join research teams going to rural areas. They may be afraid to sleep in a room alone. They may have young children and be unable to spend extended periods away from family. Or their husbands and family may be reluctant to allow them to go. But this did not hold true in all cases:

One of my longer-term interpreters was a female instructor at a regional university. She had the advantage of being well-known and respected by many officials in the district-level Departments of Agriculture, since she had been the instructor for many of them during their university studies. Her children were already in university so she had few family responsibilities and thus more time available to work with me. My other interpreter was a young woman from Hanoi who was completing a degree in English. Although willing to work hard, she was rather inexperienced, had never been away from her parents before, and became intimidated during some interviews with district officials. (Scott)

We also experienced particular challenges in working with some male interpreters:

On one occasion an interpreter invited his buddies from the Department of Agriculture to a lunch I was to pay for, ordered large quantities of beer, and after lunch began drinking rice wine with a group of men at the next table in the restaurant – encouraging the driver to do the same, against his will. The interpreter was then, not surprisingly, reluctant to start work punctually after lunch and later cracked jokes about ‘the women’s movement’ while I was interviewing the leader of a local women’s association. (Scott)

In other situations, young male interpreters who were keen to work diligently would often find it difficult to refuse to join in invitations to drink, particularly if they wanted to continue to work in the area and needed to build good relations with local officials and community leaders.

Interpreters’ previous experience, skills, knowledge, and perceptions of the field situation are often undervalued by researchers. Our interpreters’ engagement with our research topics was sometimes helpful in understanding complex field situations, particularly when they had prior research or field experience, and local networks of contacts. Highly motivated interpreters would even undertake their own discrete ‘fact-finding’ inquiries to gather extra or sensitive information relevant to our research interests. Yet, other interpreters seemed to misunderstand their role on some occasions when they tried to answer our questions themselves rather than asking the person being interviewed. Often having no social science background, interpreters may not appreciate the rationale for asking the same question to different people in subsequent interviews. This underscored the importance of training interpreters to appreciate research rigour and triangulation, and the rationale for particular methods and questioning strategies. In addition, an understanding of intermediate-level Vietnamese (as some of us had) was useful in allowing us to check the quality of interpretation: making clarifications, identifying omissions, asking questions directly, and making personal introductions to build rapport with informants.

Conclusions

This paper has drawn on the diverse fieldwork experiences of three non-Vietnamese doctoral students in rural and urban contexts, with communities and central, provincial and local-level government agencies. Faced with a series of methodological and logistical constraints, we

developed certain strategies to negotiate relationships with government officials, host institutions and interpreters. Our paper fills an important gap in illustrating the emerging geographical and institutional spaces we experienced as early-career field researchers conducting development geography research in a cross-cultural and transitional socialist setting. It also offers suggestions for students planning fieldwork in similar contexts. We highlight the need for a negotiated, adaptive, and flexible approach, and one that is sensitive to the changing research context. Since the late 1980s, Vietnam has been moving from a centrally planned to a market economy. This process of transition, referred to as *doi moi* (renovation), has produced a complex mix of State-controlled economic and political institutions, and market-orientated policy and processes.

From our research sites in local villages and businesses as well as offices and archives in regional centres and cities, our analysis highlights a number of aspects of the changing academic cultures within the broader reshaping of economic and political relationships in Vietnam. First, research approaches are gradually becoming more pluralist. There is a slowly growing appreciation of a range of participatory and qualitative methods, as opposed to the conventional and quantitative survey method. Second, academic and official cultures (and prevailing epistemologies in research and planning) in Vietnam affect the ability to achieve inclusive research relationships and conduct participatory research. The opportunities for foreign scholars (and doctoral students) to collaborate with Vietnamese researchers to conduct participatory research are limited by a variety of institutional, epistemological and professional constraints to developing new habits and attitudes. As a result we found that adopting a more structured approach to interviews was often necessary because of time limitations and restrictions over our presence in certain locations. Third, officials may be reticent to acknowledge gaps between policy and practice. This makes the use of multiple methods to uncover this gap extremely valuable. Fourth, and relatedly, using official channels (via a host institution) as a key means of accessing communities and information is invaluable, and in many cases unavoidable, in Vietnam. However, field research is subject to constant negotiation with host agencies and research informants, and as such, official channels cannot substitute for alternative sources of information.

Fifth, there is also a strong interest in Vietnam in research that is relevant to the demands of the market economy. As a result, research relationships are becoming increasingly commodified. One of the more challenging and awkward aspects of fieldwork in developing countries is the financial expectations placed on a researcher. This can be particularly difficult for postgraduate researchers with limited budgets. It may deter them from undertaking research in areas which are perceived to be 'project districts' or on topics in which expectations of high remuneration are becoming the norm. Researchers need to take into account these expectations, and offering compensation for informants' time and the purchase of data should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. As an alternative, invitations to meals or providing small gifts of food are often appreciated and are culturally appropriate.

Sixth, the paper also shows how fieldwork is strongly shaped by the role of the interpreter and his or her power relationship with the researcher. We found that a lack of sensitivity and pressures placed on the interpreter to conform to various social norms often made the researcher/interpreter relationship challenging. We found that taking the time to clearly explain the purpose of the research often helped alleviate different expectations, although in many cases these problems were unavoidable. Taking time to also respond to interpreters' own interests and professional development needs, by valuing their insights and allowing them the opportunity to provide input into the research process in other ways, can contribute to a fruitful interpreter-researcher relationship.

Despite the challenges detailed above, we do not wish by any means to paint a 'totalitarian' portrait of Vietnam. In any country, research on what are perceived to be sensitive issues can be cause for concern among government or other officials, and subject to restricted access. For all the obstacles recounted here, there were at least as many exceptions. We recognise that our host institutions did go out of their way to cater to our needs as we established relationships of trust and friendship with them. All of us recognise that we had relatively privileged institutional affiliations that provided us with letters of introduction and arranged for important interviews and access to other channels of information. Without such 'social capital' it would have been even more challenging to obtain authorisations and accomplish what we did during fieldwork.

A good understanding of, and sensitivity to, cross-cultural issues sustained (and *sustains*) our relationships with research partner institutions. As we move on in our academic careers, each of us has sought ways to maintain our connections in Vietnam and give something back, either directly to our affiliated institutions in Vietnam, or more indirectly through sharing resources, teaching about our research findings, maintaining research collaborations, involving postgraduate students in fieldwork, setting up student exchanges and field schools, sharing research findings with development agencies, actively participating in forums of debate, and, finally, reflecting on our fieldwork experience in papers such as this.

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NOTES

1. Ambler (1998) and Christoplos (1995) have written reflexive papers as development practitioners affiliated with international development agencies, rather than as academic researchers.
2. While this is true for much of the country, there are still some areas where foreign researchers are not authorised to work, notably the Central Highlands – where there have been ongoing ethnic tensions – and certain border areas.
3. The World Bank, in its publications such as *Voices of the Poor* (Narayan, 2000), has gone a long way toward mainstreaming participatory research techniques.

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