

**Changing Research Spaces:  
Doing human geography fieldwork in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

With the fast pace of socioeconomic and institutional changes in Vietnam, conditions and procedures for carrying out social science research and associated fieldwork are undergoing similar shifts. Such change has opened up geographical spaces allowing researchers the opportunity to work in remote areas or areas that were previously 'off limits'. Too frequently however, the documenting of the fieldwork process is neglected and the 'messiness' of fieldwork practice is smoothed over in the presentation of research. This paper attempts to address this lacuna and reflects on the experiences of three female human geographers doing research in Vietnam on three distinct research projects. The topics spanned geographic and urban-rural divides, with different collaborating institutions. Our discussion touches on the challenges experienced while conducting fieldwork in Vietnam—in relation to positionality, 'sensitive' topics, and access (information, research sites, subjects, resources)—and the ways we dealt with these challenges. By focusing on these three themes through the presentation of concrete examples we aim to raise broader issues

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associated with changing research spaces in Vietnam, namely research cultures, and economic and political transition. This discussion highlights how collaborative research relations between Vietnamese and foreign researchers have the potential to change spaces for research, and open up opportunities for debate on issues of social change in Vietnam. We hope that through the portrayal of these experiences this paper might serve as a basis for comparison of changing ‘fieldwork possibilities’ in Vietnam, and other transitional countries.

## **Introduction**

Fieldwork involves the negotiation of complex relations, interests, situations *and* logistics. It can be one of the most stimulating and enjoyable parts of the research process. However, it can also be extraordinarily challenging, particularly when conducted in an unfamiliar international or cross-cultural context. From the application for research visas to the request for official data and the negotiation of relationships with collaborative partners, the researcher is faced with difficult practical and ethical decisions. This paper reflects on our experience, as three female human geographers, doing research in Vietnam on three distinct research projects. Our research topics spanned geographic and urban-rural divides, and involved collaboration with different institutions. Our discussion touches on the challenges experienced whilst conducting fieldwork in Vietnam—in relation to positionality, ‘sensitive’ topics and access (information, research sites, subjects, resources)—and the ways we dealt with these challenges. We reflect on how our experiences of the research process and the more general social, political and economic issues associated with transition in Vietnam. It is assumed that through the presentation of concrete examples on the themes of positionality and gender, research partners and relationships, and access and expectations, broader issues associated with changing research spaces in Vietnam will be raised, namely research cultures, and economic and political transition.

Despite the challenges and complexity involved in doing fieldwork it is often not documented within research reports and theses, and gets even less mention in published journals or books. Too frequently, the writing process smoothes over and eliminates the many ambiguities of field research and field notes. One of the underlying aims of this paper is to break down the illusion of smooth progress during fieldwork and open up discussion on the ‘messiness’ of fieldwork practice. This paper responds to the “need to be more cognisant of the relationship between the practice of fieldwork and the production of knowledge in order to understand the terms under which field-based knowledge is produced” (Reid-Henry, 2003: 185). Discussions of fieldwork which represent the process as a straightforward movement that originates from precise research questions, passing through an easy data and information collection stage before being finalised in an empirically and conceptually neat article or thesis do not accurately portray the complexities and ambiguities associated with fieldwork. In this paper we

deconstruct this view and discuss the ‘messiness’ associated with fieldwork to not only help make sense of the problems we encountered whilst conducting our Human Geography PhD research but also as a way of understanding the progress and findings that we have written about (Lloyd, 2001; Scott, 2001; Miller, 2003). It is intended that this article be of particular interest to graduate students and researchers involved in fieldwork in developing countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, and in ‘post-socialist’ contexts.

### **Undertaking fieldwork in Vietnam**

Despite the increase in opportunities for collaborative social science research in Vietnam since the early 1990s, there are surprisingly few publications which examine the specific challenges associated with fieldwork practice in Vietnam (Ambler, 1998; Kerkvliet, 1997; Forbes, 1996; Christoplos, 1995; Marr, 1993) or other post-socialist countries (Kurti, 1999; De Soto and Dudwick, 2000; Henry-Ried, 2003). Yet, with the fast pace of change in Vietnam, conditions and procedures for carrying out fieldwork have also undergone significant changes, creating new opportunities but also new challenges. The documentation of the fieldwork process provided here might serve as a basis for comparison of these changing ‘fieldwork possibilities’ in the country, including issues of entry, access and commodification, as Kurti (1999) offers for Romania and Hungary (see also De Soto and Dudwick, 2000).

Given the rapidly changing environment in Vietnam during the 1990s each of our research experiences was influenced by fluctuating rules and procedures, and we each tested the limits of the ‘opening up’ of the country. Our different fieldwork locations (the Mekong River Delta, the northern midlands, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City), spanned rural-urban, north-south Vietnam and topics (tourism development, and changes in land and water management aspects of rural development) resulted in varied experiences involving particular but also common challenges. Despite freer access into the country, foreign social science research in Vietnam remains difficult and is constrained within strict guidelines and procedures, a situation that has likewise been observed by De Soto and Dudwick (2000) in other state-socialist countries (Ried-Henry, 2003).

Foreign social science researchers are a relatively new phenomenon in Vietnam, and consequently face numerous difficulties while conducting research in what can be described as a rather ambiguous, and often contradictory and challenging environment. While there is considerable literature on fieldwork practice, very few publications examine the Vietnamese context (but see Ambler, 1998; Christoplos, 1995). Many writers have, however, acknowledged that Vietnam poses significant difficulties and limitations related to the general lack of information and reliability of published materials, the lack of transparency in government institutions coupled with old traditions of socialist secrecy and suspicion of foreigners which constrain the sharing of information (Fahey, 1994; Fforde, 1996; Kerkvliet, 1995, 1997; Marr, 1996).

### Research Culture in Transition

Vietnam is one of only four countries that still describes itself as a communist state. Yet, for close to 20 years it has been in the process of moving from a command economy, with central planning and decision making, 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-oriented policy and processes. With *doi moi* socialist spaces, structures, and “agencies” are shifting and undergoing change which results in complex relations and interactions but also creates new spaces for western social science research, previously much constrained. In a concrete sense, new geographical spaces have opened up to foreign researchers through the gradual lifting of controls on the movement of foreigners throughout the country, allowing them (as well as Vietnamese researchers) the opportunity to work in remote areas or areas that were previously classified as off limits (Marr, 1993; Forbes, 1996).<sup>3</sup>

The opening up of other spaces, such as social and political spaces for debate and dialogue, has been much slower. This reflects the more general nature of transition in Vietnam, whereby the considerable economic liberalisation the country has experienced since the late 1980s has not been accompanied by significant political liberalisation. Whilst moves towards greater decentralisation of decision making, a loosening of state-controls over the various forms of media and information technology, and legal and electoral reforms are occurring there continues to be tight control over the media and civil society, with free and open debate still largely absent due to an ongoing intolerance of criticism of the state. Nonetheless, within Vietnam debate and criticism does occur but in rather subtle and nuanced ways, constantly pushing the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable.

Spaces for engagement and dialogue have emerged for social research, particularly in terms of the inter-relations amongst researchers, and between researchers and policy makers, government officials, and the communities they work with. New opportunities to do social research have accompanied the feasibility studies and monitoring work of development projects implemented by international NGOs and agencies such as the UNDP, World Bank and bilateral agencies. These development projects have exposed Vietnamese researchers and agencies to new ways of thinking and doing research on the social impacts of development and related social change. However, the exposure of Vietnamese researchers to these new ideas has taken place in a very applied development context. This is coupled with the continuing influence of the notion that Vietnam has to ‘catch-up’ and maintain its high growth rates, and results in very strong pressure on Vietnamese researchers and others to uncritically support the current model of economic development. As a result much social research in Vietnam is still framed in a way to support this particular model of development.

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst this is true for much of the country there are still some areas considered too sensitive for foreigners to work in, notable the Central Highlands (where there has been an ongoing tensions, often along ethnic lines, over land resources), the mountainous border regions with China, and near military establishments.

Despite the exposure to new ideas and ways of doing, the socialist legacy continues to strongly influence the Vietnamese research culture, particularly through an older generation of researchers. Research institutions in Vietnam are dominated by those who trained and achieved post-graduate degrees in the USSR, Eastern Europe and China during the 1950s and 1960s with a second wave gaining qualifications after 1975 (Marr, 1993). Since the early 1990s, however, a younger generation of Vietnamese have pursued studies in Western countries and Northeast Asia, being exposed to quite different research cultures and practices. For this younger generation who return to pursue research in Vietnam they often face a degree of dissonance between their exposure to new ways of doing social science and the ongoing constraints associated with the practice of social science back in Vietnam. There is often considerable tension within organisations between these generations of researchers due to this clash of ideas.

There is an ongoing suspicion of social science in Vietnam, due its concern with social issues and matters of politics, which continue to be largely regarded as the domain of the party. This is evidenced by the low number of social science departments in universities and colleges throughout the country. As a result of this suspicion of social science, whatever empirical social research is conducted by Vietnamese researchers is often framed in very ‘politically neutral’ ways. As such there is a tendency for the positivist paradigm to dominate quite strongly in research design and practice, as reflected in the bias towards so-called ‘apolitical’ quantitative methods. This means that questionnaires, surveys and mapping are often preferred over other social research methods such as interviews, oral histories and participatory research methods. Associated with this, and the high value given to formal education, is the disregard often shown for ‘non-expert’ or ‘traditional’ knowledge in the research process. The dominance of such methods and neglect of diverse perspectives and knowledges, which characterises many research cultures both Western and non-Western, means many important dimensions of social change are not adequately addressed in Vietnamese social research. Folklore studies aside, the use of ethnographic research that seeks to reflect people’s everyday practices and perceptions—including methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviews—does seem to be slowly growing in applied social science research.<sup>4</sup>

Vietnamese researchers are increasingly being exposed to new ways of doing research. This is occurring not just through development projects and studying abroad, but also through collaboration with international researchers. Vietnam has witnessed an influx of foreign researchers as both independent academic researchers and those attached to development projects. Key changes to the research culture include exposure to diverse qualitative

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<sup>4</sup> The World Bank, in its publications such as *Voice of the Poor*, have gone a long way toward ‘mainstreaming’ participatory research techniques.

approaches, critical social science and participatory research methods which value the knowledge of ‘non-experts’.

Other factors associated with transition have affected the research culture and research establishment in Vietnam. While the financial rewards for Vietnamese researchers are not substantial there is an awareness that one’s institute can open up opportunities for personal gain. As Marr observes, from the “mid-1980s, financial stringencies have forced Vietnamese researchers of all ages to spend much of their time improvising individual subsistence strategies” (1993: 343). This has meant in some cases researchers use their positions within public institutes for private financial gain, or operate private consultancies or businesses.

Coming out of this context there are two obvious challenges apparent to us based on our experience of conducting research in Vietnam during the late 1990s. First, amongst these are the different expectations the researcher, the partner/host institutions and research informants have in regards to research objectives, methodologies and outcomes.

For the researcher the immediate, practical expectations of the relationship with their host/partner institution relate to assistance with visas, access to research sites and data, as well as assistance with basic research logistics (work space, interpreters, web-access). Other expectations may include opportunities for the relationship to contribute to shared learning, cross-cultural understanding, exchange of ideas, the advancement of knowledge as well as perhaps the contribution to improved development of the country. Host/partner institutions may also share these latter expectations, yet their immediate expectations may be regarding more tangible (and practical!) concerns, such as professional advancement and fair remuneration for assistance with the practical aspects of researcher’s needs. More often than not host/partner institutions and informant communities are overwhelmingly concerned that the research contribute to tangible development benefits and financial rewards, whilst researchers often also share these aspirations they may not be a high priority for the researcher and their home institutions. Moreover, the potential of an independent, particularly postgraduate research project to contribute to tangible development outcomes is often beyond the capacity of individual researchers. This expectation for tangible development outcomes can grow to beyond reasonable levels and have varying (negative) impacts on the relationship between the researcher and the host institution and informant community.

A second challenge, related to the point above, is that the development imperative is strongly embedded within the approach to research taken by Vietnamese educational and research organisations. The exposure of government organisations and communities to social research has generally been within the context of official development projects. As such, there are high expectations held by Vietnamese partners and other official organisations the researcher comes into contact with that social science research produce economic development

outcomes. These may include the identification of development or business projects, technical or managerial interventions. Consequently, a significant portion of the time spent communicating with host institutions and research informants is spent explaining the purpose of the research, and ‘hosing down’ these expectations that the research will contribute to a ‘project’.

Throughout the research process we as researchers found ourselves constantly negotiating within the limitations associated with these two challenges. This process of negotiation had implications for our research objectives, methodology and outcomes and raises issues associated with positionality, ‘sensitive’ topics and access. For instance, how the research project is defined and communicated by the researcher to their partner organisation and other official agencies has implications for access to information, fieldsites etc. Also, the perception of the relevance of the researchers’ research project vis-à-vis economic development by the partner organisation and also the potential for more financially rewarding collaboration has implications in terms of the allocation of resources and support for researcher. Associated with this is the relative status, expertise and resources of the researcher and his/her institution. Positionality and gender affects the status of the researcher and their access to different research spaces. Furthermore, the diverse meanings of development held by researchers and research partners is not an insignificant issue within the research process. This becomes apparent when researchers come to communicate their research findings, as discussed in the final section of the paper on ‘giving back’.

### **Positionality and Gender**

Various factors from Vietnam’s cultural heritage, including its Confucian traditions, have contributed to producing a strongly hierarchical society. 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. Through our relational engagement with Vietnamese culture, language and society, we as researchers became critically aware of not only our positionality, but also the effect this has on our research. Mullings writes that “a number of feminist critics (Hartsock, 1987; di Stephano, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991; Code, 1996; Rose, 1997) have been instrumental in questioning claims to objective and value-free research and have sought to explore how relationships of power between researchers and their informants influence how knowledge is interpreted and represented” (1999:337). As Haraway (1999) has argued we all embark upon research with ‘maps of consciousness’ which are influenced by our positionality, perspectives shaped by our own unique mix of race, class, gender, nationality and other identities. These attributes also determine the way we are perceived as researchers and individuals within Vietnam. A researcher’s knowledge, according to Mullings, is therefore always partial, because his/her positionality (perspective shaped by his/her unique mix of

race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality and other identities), “as well as location in time and space will influence how the world is viewed and interpreted” (1999:337).

As young female researchers we would normally be seen to have ‘low’ status in Vietnamese society, however, our foreign-ness meant we sometimes would attain ‘higher’ status. The ambiguous nature of our status meant we were often treated in quite different ways by those with high status, for example senior officials. We all experienced different manifestations of this. For example as one of us experienced:

*My status as a young female student was often a barrier but on a number of occasions I found it allowed me to build up rapport with female office staff who became firm friends and an important part of my research network. They were invaluable in organising introductions and interviews and in debriefing. An experience which my male research colleagues admitted to not sharing, although they had plenty of other ‘bonding’ opportunities not open to me.*

Our gender and foreign-ness opened up spaces, yet also closed off other spaces. As the extract below outlines,

*The research spaces I engaged with varied considerably encompassing a diverse range of social actors and arenas of power. The diverse range of places included impromptu discussions with farmers conducted in the shade of coconut trees and bamboo overlooking rice paddy fields (whilst drinking fresh coconut juice), to the more formal, by-appointment, interviews with local and provincial officials carried out under the whirr of ceiling fans (politely 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 (of course, drinking that global beverage of choice: Nescafe instant coffee). As a woman I was less likely to be invited to drink alcohol with (predominantly) male government officials than say a male researcher would, but my foreign-ness meant occasionally I would be invited to such sessions. However, I chose for various reasons not to participate in these sessions in particular I felt such sessions were perceived by poorer members of communities as an abuse of privilege by those in power and a waste of (quite often) public monies. This choice meant the associated bonding that goes along with these sessions, and thus sharing of valuable insights on the workings of government and policy, was closed off to me. On the other hand, as a woman I was more likely to be able to engage with female informants than say a male researcher would.*

### **Positioning Interpreters in Research Relations**

The significance of positionality and status in Vietnam 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, most accounts of researchers working in cross-cultural contexts brush aside the positionality of the field assistant or interpreter—to the extent that one is necessary. 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 tremendous part in shaping interactions between the researcher, interpreter, and research subjects and the nature of the data obtained.

Each of us gained experience working with a number of interpreters, for varying lengths of time. Whilst not necessarily a problem, the potential challenges of working with male interpreters was a common experience, as captured in the passage below:

*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 later 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. He 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.*

One of us who worked in the south also found certain difficulties associated with working with male interpreters because of the strong drinking culture amongst local officials. Young male interpreters would often find it difficult to refuse to participate in drinking sessions, particularly if they aspire to continue to work in the area and wish to build relations with local officials and community leaders. This was often a point of tension between the researcher and interpreter.

Many people in Vietnam considered it hard to convince female Vietnamese researchers or interpreters to join research teams going to rural areas of the country. They may have young children at home and be unable to spend extended periods away from family, or their husbands may be reluctant to allow them to go. Moreover, working in dirty, ‘rough,’ and non-air-conditioned rural areas had a stigma in the eyes of many people, particularly for those who had attained the status of researcher or interpreter. I remember telling some Vietnamese friends in Hanoi about where I was carrying out my research only to be met with the response, “Why would you want to work *there*?” Nonetheless,

*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 in many cases she had been their instructor 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 family before, and became intimidated during some interviews with district officials. Despite the challenges, my relationship with both these interpreters was friendly and mutually supportive.*

The quality of interpretation and translation services in Vietnam was often not high, and interpreters rarely had formal training. In these circumstances, clearly explaining to interpreters the aims of the research and rationale behind particular methods and questioning strategies was important, as was an understanding of intermediate-level Vietnamese in order to check the quality of interpretation (make clarifications, identify omissions, and to ask questions directly and make personal introductions so as to build rapport with informants). This understanding was important as some interpreters are tempted to answer questions themselves rather than asking the person being interviewed. Interpreters may not have understood the rationale for asking the same question to

different people in subsequent interviews, so explaining the importance of rigour and triangulation was necessary. Interpreters may also have taken it on themselves to censor the researcher, for instance one interpreter discouraged one of us from asking questions about inheritance, land disputes, polygamy and would often (jokingly) sigh and roll her eyes at the detailed questions asked during interviews.

If working in rural areas or with disadvantaged communities it is important to select interpreters with some understanding or empathy for research informants. Whilst gender and age form important social cleavages in Vietnam, there are significant social divisions between rural and urban dwellers, with urban dwellers often feeling superior to their rural cousins.

*I worked with a young, male interpreter who resented his college appointing him to work with me, as I was considered 'small fry' compared to other foreign researchers cooperating with the college attached to large, well-funded research projects. I was interested in looking at social dimensions of water resources development, including the impacts of this on the poor and the landless. So as well as interviewing a range of landholders, I also wished to interview labourers and landless farmers. Whilst walking through the village one day we 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 politely terminated the interview as his body language was unbearably offensive, yet not before she imparted a valuable piece of information on the impact of intensification on labourers' salaries. It was an awkward situation which illustrated to me the dangers associated with working with interpreters who lack basic empathy and undervalue the knowledge of informants.*

Another limitation among interpreters or research assistants was their lack of social science training, in terms of both analytical and methodological skills. As mentioned above in regards to an interpreter's lack of appreciation or tolerance of a line of questioning on some occasions. Another challenge included the difficulty some interpreters have in being able to move beyond survey questions during interviews, in order to act naturally and make conversation before initiating an interview. The craft of a gently, guided conversation as a research method is something one can not assume researchers or interpreters in Vietnam are familiar with.

A final point to add to this discussion is the problem of representation and 'othering,' in relation to ethnic minority people in Vietnam. Attitudes of Kinh (Vietnamese ethnic majority) towards ethnic minorities, particularly the Hmong and the Khmer, were found to be frequently condescending, patronizing, and fraught with misunderstanding. Such prejudices were also exhibited by Tay and Nung people towards the Hmong, as captured in the account below.

*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 expressed my interest in interviewing a Hmong person to one Nung commune official, he sent me off with his assistant to a nearby hamlet where the assistant proudly presented me to a man, exclaiming, "here's a nguoi 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 extensionist 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. 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.” The interpreter further criticized Hmong people for their constant dependence on state programs, always asking for project hand-outs.*

Another of us experienced similar forms of prejudice towards minorities 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 and groups of different status, and be conscious of their own positionality. Whether one works with a male or female, young or old interpreter there will be different opportunities and challenges. Whilst older interpreters may have more status and be less intimidated by ‘high’ status informants, they may be less open to doing things in a different way, for example ‘structured conversations’.

### **‘Sensitive’ Topics**

Each of us encountered difficulties researching about certain sensitive topics, strategies, practices, ‘resistance,’ processes, differences and trade-offs. There were particular problems involved with researching case studies that focused precisely on marginal cases, and practices and processes of policy implementation. In such cases, the research strategy had to be rather indirect when information was not forthcoming, or where it was felt that it would be inappropriate to present the topics of policy implementation or marginality as the primary research focus.

There are considerable differences between research rural – urban, and north and south Vietnam. Whilst in the north it is our experience that people, particularly farmers, are reluctant to express their criticism of state policy, whereas in the south people were generally found to be more open. One of us was particularly surprised at this level of openness and criticism, with many Kinh farmers being openly critical of recent policies on cooperation, government assistance programs and the local corruption associated with decollectivisation. Some people astutely saw the research interview as a chance to express their criticism (an expression of their ‘resistance’), even when on a number of occasions a secret police officer was present in the room.

Despite these differences in level of openness, a common challenge related to getting beyond how things *ought to be* to how they *actually are*. In meeting with Vietnamese officials or even researchers, it was quite challenging to move from a discussion of policies, norms, or discourses, to actual practices. Even having people acknowledge the existence of this gap—the dissonance between the *de jure* and *de facto*—was difficult in some

contexts. 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 socialist policies combined with Confucian heritage.

### **The ‘Official Line’ and the ‘Everyday’**

It was generally our experience that people seemed conditioned to *not* talk about everyday practices that may run counter to given policies or social norms—at least not with anyone doing research, which until recently in Vietnam tended only to focus on the (*de jure*) ‘official line.’ Of course, everyone knew that disputed practices existed, but to openly acknowledge these strategies of coping or resistance and their incongruity with official discourses or norms was generally not viewed as an appropriate topic for social science research. Vietnamese ethnologists<sup>5</sup>, by contrast, seemed to focus not on legitimating (*de jure*) state policy but on documenting socio-cultural norms (with an emphasis on folklore or rituals, particularly among ethnic minorities). Here, too, we perceive a resistance to examining *de facto* circumstances, no matter how far apart this reality may have been from the circumscribed norms. From her experience in China, Croll (1994: 292) discussed this 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. It is thus more difficult to identify rapidly what actually is, as opposed to what ought to be.”

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

*A district-level agricultural extensionist 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. Most Vietnamese researchers and officials seemed only interested in discussing cases that were deemed ‘typical,’ even if these were in fact exceptional ‘model’ farmers or communes.*

The tendency to dismiss instances of marginality and difference as unrepresentative was compounded by a lack of understanding or appreciation of qualitative methods. Before *doi moi*, research by Vietnamese scholars generally aimed to confirm policy decisions or document success stories, such as the mechanization of agriculture in a model commune in the Red River Delta. The dangers of over-generalization are captured in Christoplos’ (1995: 14) characterization of 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’.”

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<sup>5</sup> The Soviet-influenced higher education system in Vietnam included training in ethnology rather than anthropology.

That said, it is worth realizing just how recently critiques of overlooking diversity and conflict have been levied on international planners and development analysts for their problematic depictions of farmers or communities (e.g., Scoones and Thompson, 1994; Guijt and Shah, 1998). Seen in this comparative light, perhaps our observations in Vietnam were not so exceptional. Moreover, the conduct of Vietnamese researchers and state officials outlined above could be linked in part to a fear of losing face and admitting mistakes. The perceived lack of critical thinking and/or expression of individual opinions can also be linked to the political sensitivities of speaking out against state policies

### **Communicating Our Topics**

The perception of our research topics by gatekeepers as potentially ‘political’ or ‘sensitive’ resulted in considerable delays, obstacles and interference. One commune official in an area where one of us wished to conduct a household survey repeated twice that interviews could proceed provided that no ‘political’ questions were asked. Similarly, another of us had to prove in great detail the topic was not ‘political’ and despite clear explanation of the topic as concerning water management authorities stated fieldwork could only proceed if no household interviews were conducted. We were also warned against working in areas where ethnic or religious minorities, or recent (‘illegal’) migrants, had had a history of poor relations with the government.

These examples all point to the challenge of researching topics that are politically sensitive or perceived as not ‘relevant’ to instrumental development objectives. Other issues requiring special discretion and sensitivity ranged from land disputes and land transfers to taxes, ‘illegal’ migration, ethnic minorities, social classes, and women’s rights. Socioeconomic differentiation is a delicate topic and people are sometimes reluctant to report their income, yields or land size. Croll (1994: 295) noted that 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.’” In the current context, however, especially in richer regions,

research on economic activities of individual households is a much more time-consuming exercise, given that peasant households are now much more complex, autonomous and diverse economic units, less inclined to reveal the details of their economic activities, incomes and savings (Croll, 1994: 295).

One of us quickly learnt that discussions of income and taxation were sensitive topics in urban areas.

*While conducting interviews with private tour operators, I found that it was very difficult to pinpoint the precise amount of income earned and tax paid from the business activities. This was not only due to the complex distribution of monies to various different parties eg. A \$5 tour to Cu Chi tunnels*

*would be distributed to over 10 different people, but also to avoid the numerous informal and formal taxes. Interestingly, a number of individuals took great pleasure however in explaining how they avoided paying taxes, albeit in vague terms.*

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. After being asked to come back another time, I was told because my topic concerned water resources that information on land resources and settlement was not relevant.*

Another of us also experienced problems related to the sensitivity of discussions on land,

*Responding to a question about the implications of land inheritance for women, a Women's Union representative insisted, "It's not very important." 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. A university researcher once went as far as to suggest that my research on the gendered implications of land allocation could be illegal, but I assured her it had the endorsement of the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities. Her response is indicative of the common view among state officials that land allocation could not be a gender issue. Moreover, it reflects how such officials fail to recognize any gap between policy and practice and how they see little value in studying the implementation of a policy, as distinct from the policy itself.*

Given the plethora of methodological and logistical constraints detailed above, we developed certain strategies to negotiate our research objectives. To compensate for missing or hard-to-access data, we turned to alternative means and methods, located other types of informants, and drew on documentary sources, as well as adapted topics to give some areas greater emphasis than originally anticipated. This use of multiple methods and sources of information also allowed for greater rigour (Rocheleau, 1995). To avoid certain sensitivities, whilst still disclosing the purpose of our research, we would sometimes 'repackage' our research topics depending on the context. Steffanie would often present her project to officials by explaining that her focus was the development of the household economy in the *doi moi* period in Vietnam, downplaying the historical and ethnic components. Kate, would present her research as a study of new tourism businesses not emphasising the associated state-private relationships and networks. Fiona, would present her topic as one concerned with environmental change and water resources management, downplaying the power dimensions associated with this change and issues of water access. Both Steffanie and Fiona obtained information about collectivization and decollectivization by using biographical methods of listening to people's life histories and experiences under different policies and historical periods. These various anecdotes related important aspects of settlement history, old landlords, war experiences, administrative changes, and environmental changes. 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’ in policy implementation. Kate would obtain information about the development and status 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.

Despite all the above comments, we do not wish by any means to paint a ‘totalitarian’ portrait of Vietnam. Research on what are perceived to be sensitive issues can in *any* country be cause for official concern and subjected to restricted access. For all the obstacles recounted here, there were at least as many exceptions and many positive experiences. People can also be extraordinarily generous and open, opening their homes to you to share countless meals, drinks, and warm conversations together.

### **Expectations and Access**

This section provides examples of concrete problems and challenges of access we each confronted whilst doing our research, discussing specifically the changing political space for social science research and ways we tried to deal with these challenges. We also discuss the role of power in the field, between the researcher, institutions and individuals, and the influence of regional differences and gender in the research process.

### **Accessing research settings: Getting the ‘Red Stamp’**

In conducting research in Vietnam it is clear to us that researchers must confront not just the ‘ethics [but the] politics of empirical inquiry’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 20) in accessing research settings. There are layers of negotiation involved in fieldwork: negotiation with host institutions, institutional gatekeepers (e.g. provincial international relations offices), commune and village authorities, research informants themselves, plus many others. Lee and Renzetti suggest (as cited in Horwood and Moon, 2003:106), that context and relations matter. They argue that sensitive research topics are ‘emergent’ in that their sensitivity is located ‘in the relationship between [the] topic and the social context within which the research is conducted’ (1993: 5). Good ethical practice in research needs to engage with these contexts and relations, as

“[e]ngagement and familiarity with codes of governance and ethical approval act, often with good reason, to constrain the practice of research. Learning these crafts is a continual process such that accessing a research setting is frequently ‘the art of the possible’ (Buchanan et al. 1988: 53) rather than a genuinely unproblematic choice” (Horwood and Moon, 2003: 106).

Recognising what is and what is not possible in the field comes through greater understanding of these relationships and context. Vietnamese authorities display a cautious attitude to foreign research students,

especially those researching sensitive topics and those in rural areas, where the presence of foreigners is still a rare occurrence. This caution was displayed in the lengthy process facing research students to obtain permission in the form of research visa application, sponsorship from an institute or government department, and specific authorisation letters at each level.

Each level of the government hierarchy must be respected as part of this process of gaining permission, as government officials are rarely prepared to talk openly to foreign students unless they are sure that approval has been granted higher up in the administrative structure. The importance of official authorisation cannot be emphasised enough. However, there are also more informal ways to get things accomplished; having the right connections within a government department or research institution is thus instrumental in facilitating authorisations and contacts in the field.

*Obtaining a research visa and sponsorship was a long and time consuming process. Things were looking grim until a good friend and fellow PhD student helped the process along by sending a letter requesting my research approval to key officials in the Institute, with whom she had studied with in East Germany. Two weeks later I received the appropriate letters to obtain my research visa. Time and again it was through these ‘old school’ networks that I was able to access key informants in the field.*

Whilst in country, getting the ‘red stamp’ (the official seal), was necessary to show that we had passed through the proper channels. Thurston (1983) and Kurti (1999), among others, have written of the importance of official seals of approval for conducting fieldwork in socialist countries. The formalities and bureaucracy of authorization for field research might be indicated by the following account.

*To arrange a visit to a district or commune, I was expected to carry a letter of authorization from the Vietnamese university that was hosting me. The letter was to specifically state the dates and places to be visited, bear a red stamp, and be signed by the rector of the university. A copy was sent to the provincial police, the provincial People’s Committee, and the district-level People’s Committee. Technically, I should even have had a letter of authorization when I visited a foreigner working for an NGO in one district of the province. To facilitate these authorizations and contacts in the field, it was invaluable to have a university liaison. When a senior lecturer from the university recommended that I talk to the provincial Forest Protection Branch or Land Administration office, he cautioned that if I didn’t go with someone from the university “they won’t tell you anything.”*

Writing on Hungary, Kurti (1999: 174) noted that “Just like the socialist state bureaucracy itself, interviews had to progress hierarchically from the top down.” For rural research there is a fairly standard procedure: after first meeting with district officials, you are then generally accompanied or directed to the agreed upon commune for household interviews; upon the first visit to any commune, you would generally meet with one or usually a group of officials and be quoted some general statistics on demographics and production levels. An often all-male entourage—from the commune People’s Committee and sometimes a district-level cadre or agricultural extensionist—then accompanies you to some initial household interviews. As the district and commune authorities became more familiar with your presence and line of questioning, there is generally less need for

these formalities, and then you may be permitted to proceed on your own (with interpreter) to interview other households.

Authorization for a foreigner to actually reside in a village in Vietnam is rare. For Vietnamese researchers themselves, even those doing ethnographic research, it is unusual to spend more than a few weeks in one village. The restrictions on movement for foreigners are not limited to researchers. NGO staff are similarly subject to restrictions and may need to call ahead to provincial authorities prior to visiting the district or commune. One of us was subject to a critical delay of more than 4 months, waiting for permission to conduct fieldwork in one province.

*It became apparent in the weeks just before permission was finally granted that there was a major land scandal going on in the province which implicated a number of senior officials in the province. Until this issue became public and was addressed by the party at the national level, the last thing provincial authorities wanted was a foreign researcher talking to farmers. The difficulty associated with this situation was not just that it was unclear why permission was not being granted but during the delay, permission always seemed imminent. Needless to say, a great deal of anxiety and stress was produced by this uncertainty and the delays greatly affected fieldwork plans.<sup>6</sup>*

Despite the challenges detailed in this paper, it was our experience that partner institutions do take risks working with foreigners and it is important that researchers recognise this and take time to build relationships based on trust. Testing the limits of the “opening up” of research spaces in Vietnam is also a learning process for Vietnamese research organisations. 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 authorizations and accomplish what we did during fieldwork.

### **The Commodification of Research: Expectations and Incentives**

One subjective and ethically challenging aspect of fieldwork involves learning 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. Croll (1994) noted that in China conducting rural research is complicated by the fact that there is now much more competition for the time and attention of cadres and farmers: time is now 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 also reflected that while he was formerly able to work through Communist Party-affiliated mass organizations to identify interviewees, getting to people in the

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<sup>6</sup> Such delays and uncertainty of access jeopardise the viability of doing this kind of research, due to the increasing time limits put on postgraduate students. For instance Australian doctoral students are now required to complete their studies in a maximum of 3.5 years and financial penalties are levied for students failing to meet this requirement. Similar pressures are being introduced for students in Canada to finish within about four years.

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, one of us conducted masters-level research in Mexico, in an area that had become saturated with researchers and ‘interview fatigue’ set in as local people tired of being approached and asked a multitude of questions. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that local people may begin to strategize and ask for compensation for granting yet another interview.

In Vietnam, now that people are more conscious of their relative poverty on a global scale, a foreign researcher is more inclined to be seen as a ‘walking wallet’. On more than one occasion, upon visiting a particularly poor farming families, interpreters have pressured us to give money to the families. In other instances, we were directly asked for money—or more discretely, for an ‘envelope’—in exchange for various services or information, including for interviews with government officials, university professors or museum researchers in their workplace. Occasionally, we obliged. Perhaps under the impression that a researcher’s budget is infinite, some researchers had been asked by state authorities to pay US\$ 200 for a single map. Some foreigners had even abandoned research projects for this reason. One foreigner told one of us he had paid a lot of money for what was assumed to be current data based on government surveys, when in fact the data had been generated through projections of old figures. In another instance, upon returning to Vietnam, a Vietnamese researcher who had been studying abroad was asked to pay US\$ 100 for climate data necessary for his dissertation. One of us was confronted with the appalling 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 Vietnamese interpretation of a market economy and the user-pays principle has perhaps been taken too far. As such, when entering into relationships with interpreters, institutions, and others, it is important to establishment clear agreement on the amount you are willing and able to pay for services, so as to minimise the chances of being hit with unanticipated, ‘extra’ costs.

These responses are often the outcome of experiences with foreign projects that offered remuneration for interpreters and other services far beyond local prices and salaries (a typical university researcher earns less than US\$ 50 per month). This made it difficult for graduate students with smaller budgets to carry out research in areas touched by this monetarized ‘project syndrome.’ One of us was advised to avoid conducting field research in some areas that were becoming known as ‘project districts.’ This methodological constraint might be compared with the *cargo cult*—an anthropological term used in Papua New Guinea and Melanesia to refer to the expectation that outsiders will bring rich cargoes of goods. This cargo mentality can constitute an obstacle to research as well as to development projects, to the extent that it raises expectations and thus the delivery of goods and services becomes disproportionately emphasized over local capacity building or less intrusive research. In this way, such research or development projects can harbour feelings of dependency on hand-outs. 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 (e.g., credit, irrigation pumps, or schoolbooks).

With an increasing number of foreigners doing business in Vietnam, many areas of Vietnamese society, economy, and polity have opened up to people who approach information gathering in very different ways to academic researchers. In many cases those conducting business may actually have better access to information than researchers by virtue of the fact that they are providing something perceived to have economic value. As a result, the business community, investors, foreign aid providers, project collaborators, etc., can be much more appreciated than researchers, particularly students who often have few financial resources.

Academic researchers can also face problems accessing information because of the very nature of their questions. Foreign researchers are inquisitive and can ask difficult questions which may even involve risks for their interview participants. As a result, many officials, are unclear and sceptical about the motives of the researcher, especially in the case when the researcher is a foreigner, who, often because of their training in critical thinking, tends to want to focus more on problems than on positive changes and developments. In contrast, other foreigners working in Vietnam, who may be able to offer know-how, services, products, or funds, may be more appreciated than academic researchers.

Economic imperatives can affect expectations of partner institutes. One of us had the experience that people assumed she was conducting ‘market research,’ and had difficulty convincing local officials that she was a researcher seeking to understand local conditions and issues rather than a businessperson about to invest in the region—much as they might have wanted her to be.

*While I was undertaking my fieldwork on the tourism industry I found that both my sponsor institute and the research participants had a preconceived idea of what they expected the outcomes of my research to be. 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 and 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.*

Relationships between researchers and institutions are increasingly characterised by an economic imperative where acts of assistance (in the form of sponsorship or letters of authorisation) are expected to be reciprocated with financial or other rewards. Students often find themselves competing, or at least being compared to, researchers associated with other well funded projects.

### **Anticipating and Adapting to Constraints**

A key source of stress and frustration while working in Vietnam concerns the process of acquiring research authorization and negotiating the limitations this may place on one's research. Being able to anticipate and plan for delays can help minimise a lot of this stress. However, there are some constraints put on one's movements and activities which can simply not be accommodated without significantly affecting the nature of the research project. As a result, the scope and focus of a research project is likely to change according to these constraints. This highlights the need to recognise that research is a negotiated process that calls for flexibility on the part of the researcher. For one of us who wished to employ participatory research methods and semi-structured household interviews, time and activities in the commune was restricted so much that the research strategy and methods had to be adapted.

*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 I submit a list of all the questions I was 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.*

Whilst one of us was associated with a larger well funded project, two of us were not and were forced to take advantage of 'chance' opportunities.

*One of the most productive stages of my fieldwork was the result of serendipitous access associated with a larger research project. I had been waiting in Hanoi for three months for letters of introduction to meet with a number of provincial officials. Through another contact I was invited to join a group of researchers associated with a UNDP project to travel to Hai Phong and Ha Long Bay. This gave me access to the very officials who I had wanted to meet and more! who subsequently formed an important part of my research network. Another significant event was an invitation to two internal tourism masterplan conferences organised by my sponsor which brought together the key researchers and policy makers from throughout Vietnam. Through this opportunity I was able to conduct interviews in the evenings or between sessions and make arrangements for contacting individuals after the conference. The social setting associated with the conference and fieldtrips also allowed me to bypass the more formal structure of using letters of introduction as my authorisation and permission to undertake research was confirmed by my attendance as guest of the conference organisers.*

Thus single events can often dramatically alter the research process. Levi-Strauss (1966) refers to the “movement incident” – of research, where the fieldwork experience is constituted through a variety of actants in a network: field subjects and interviewees, the news, or a chance happening.

In contrast to these moments of chance, all of us experienced the demands of authorities for clearly detailed and structured research plans, and this was reflected in the way data was collected. When approaching government departments or libraries, rather than asking what information is available and then proceeding to identify what would be the most pertinent to the research, one is often required to go in with a detailed list in hand.

*In gathering data from some government offices, I would explain my general research topic and then ask what related data they had. Officials sometimes had books of statistics and files thick with data sitting on their desks, but rather than volunteering anything they knew to be relevant to my topic, they would ask what specific data I wanted. If I mentioned something specific, they often replied that they did not have that data or would ask “from what year to what year?”. I would then ask them for what years data were available (or ask for “all that is available”), pointing to the stacks of statistical yearbooks on their desk. However, without specifically denying me access to the material, they would continue to ask vaguely what data I wanted. The whole thing began to feel like a strange kind of performance.*

### **Access to Reliable Data**

Anyone using official Vietnamese statistics will encounter a plethora of problems regarding data quality. Indeed, the validity of any findings drawn from official data in Vietnam probably needs to be questioned. Data were frequently inaccurate, inconsistent, unavailable, inadequate, or misleading. There are many possible explanations for data discrepancies. In addition to measurement and recording errors, the data may have been measured at different points during the year or before or after administrative boundary changes had been introduced. In most cases, statistical yearbooks for a given province only covered periods of one, three, or five years. This makes longitudinal analyses awkward due to the need to consult so many books to trace changes in a single variable over time. Unreliable data also stems from poorly developed mechanisms for the collection and processing of data, low professional training, inadequate resources and a lack of coordination between government departments.

At times the statistical data that one is able to piece together are so disjointed and incomparable across time periods or regions as to make them virtually useless. Analysis was further complicated by the continual shifts in administrative boundaries, rendering impossible consistent comparisons over time for the same province, district, or even commune. In some cases data projections are substituted for real data and commune-level data is thrown out once aggregated in district-level figures. Also, maps for adjacent areas can be incompatible, with contours marked at different intervals or with different soil classification systems. Maps are especially difficult to come by in Vietnam. Perhaps this is attributable to concerns over security issues or perhaps due to the absence

of regional studies specializations and general shortage of resources for creating and disseminating maps. Sometimes the only detailed commune scale maps are those painted on the walls of Peoples Committee offices.

As discussed in the previous section, in the 1990s the growing demand by researchers, consultancy groups and NGOs for information from official documents made the reliability of data questionable, as there was a dramatic increase in smuggling, piracy and forgery of official documents (Kanwerayotin, 1994). Original documents are photocopied and dates changed to meet the demand for recent statistical data.

Collecting data on the operational procedures within the Vietnamese bureaucracy is often problematic given the general lack of transparency in government institutions. It was often not possible to clearly identify the processes by which decisions on management and policy are made, and who specifically is involved, because researchers are seldom privy to debates taking place within the bureaucratic structure. Lack of information and reliable published materials, coupled with a tradition whereby information is jealously guarded by government departments, makes data collection extremely difficult and for all of us our expectations on the amount and type of data we could collect had to be constantly revised. It should be noted that bureaucrats themselves faced considerable difficulties in getting information from their counterparts in other organisations with whom they do not have any personal relationship. Researchers can thus play an important linking role between institutions as the following account indicates.

*During the period I spent based in Hanoi at the ministry and its associated research institute, it became apparent there was limited sharing of information between the national authority and its official research arm. Statistical information and documents given to me by officials from one organisation were not common knowledge to their research counterpart. When I discussed this with institute officials they confirmed that unwarranted secrecy between the two organisations was a common occurrence and information was often not shared despite their close association.*

Given the plethora of problems outlined above, one has to draw conclusions rather tentatively. When one of us speculated that the accuracy of statistical data and techniques for collection must be improving in recent years in Vietnam, a researcher from the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities suggested that the opposite could equally be true: since salaries of state sector employees were relatively higher in the past, local cadres who are responsible for record-keeping are now more motivated to seek supplementary employment, so they may be less conscientious in carrying out tasks within their state-sector positions. Moreover, with the increased autonomy of farming households in the boom of the market economy, and the decline in influence of agricultural collectives, it is much harder to keep tabs on the demographics, economic activities, and particularly income data of households. This points to the need to revise approaches to data collection that are oriented to a centrally planned rather than an emerging market economy.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the difficulties associated with reliability of

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<sup>7</sup> The Vietnam Living Standards Survey, with technical assistance from the World Bank, fills some of these gaps.

data raise the importance of drawing on multiple data sources and employing multiple research methods in order to improve accuracy of analysis.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has illustrated the emerging geographical political and institutional spaces and opportunities for social science research in Vietnam. However, the continuation of certain political constraints imposed on social research requires researchers to adopt flexible and negotiated approaches to doing research. One implication of this is the need for researchers to take account of the political constraints and research culture within which partner institutions operate and appropriately adjust their own research expectations. All three researchers found the process of fieldwork was negotiated, adaptive and required a degree of flexibility. Second, whilst this paper documents numerous challenges associated with doing fieldwork in Vietnam, on the whole we all feel a basic understanding of and sensitivity to cross-cultural issues sustained our relationships with research partner institutions. It also allowed us to successfully, although not to the level we had envisioned, collect the necessary data for a PhD thesis. Third, rather than dealing with 'research ethics' as a separate theme, our reflection on our fieldwork experience has aimed to address more culturally appropriate and ethical research, as we have grappled with the real-world challenges associated with doing research in a very dynamic, shifting and ambiguous research context.

Finally, as in many developing countries the extractive research practices of foreign researchers can set a precedent with research institutes and communities, such that they are less willing to cooperate with researchers due to the perceived lack of benefit from the research. This problem may be compounded in Vietnam, due to the continuing incongruence between Vietnamese and Western research cultures, whereby a critical social science analysis of one's fieldwork findings may be difficult to communicate to research partners in a way that is sensitive to current political spaces for debate. So, giving back or sharing of research findings or insights with partner institutions in Vietnam is challenging. As we move on in our academic careers, each of us has sought ways to give back, either directly to our affiliated institutions in Vietnam, or more indirectly, including sharing resources, teaching on the research findings, setting up future research activities, student exchanges, field schools, inviting to participate in future activities, sharing research findings with development agencies, actively participating in forums of debate, and finally reflecting on our fieldwork experience in papers such as this. We hope this honest reflection on our fieldwork experience will be of use to other researchers.

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