

**What role for foreign actors in representing Vietnam's northern uplands?
Negotiating (ethnic) identities and the role of research**

Rupert Friederichsen, R.Friederichsen@shef.ac.uk
Department of Geography, University of Sheffield

Paper proposal for the
Sixth EUROVIET Conference at the University of Hamburg
June 6-8, 2008

Abstract

The relationship between Vietnam's ethnic majority (Kinh) and ethnic minorities has been of crucial importance historically as well as for the postcolonial project of Socialist construction in the uplands. In Vietnam the rhetoric of 'ethnic unity' is still mobilised today, whereas foreign scholars have tended to portray the influence of lowland forces as detrimental to uplands communities and ethnic cultures. This raises the question of what the role of foreign actors (researchers, development workers) should be in this constellation. Common answers include empowering disadvantaged groups, supporting state-led development efforts, or maintaining a detached stance.

This paper discusses the politics of research, drawing on an ongoing case of agricultural research in Son La province and focuses on interactions between researchers and local stakeholders. The observed instances of researcher/local stakeholder interaction reveal a communicative space tightly defined by official positions and political correctness, and the tendency to ascribe a low-status role of passive recipients of 'modern' knowledge and technology to the rural population. The paper concludes that under these circumstances, none of the named ideal-typical roles of research represents a feasible strategy but that the role of foreign actors must be continuously negotiated with diverse stakeholders.

2) Links to the larger themes and concerns of the workshop

This paper addresses several of the workshop's core themes by engaging with and destabilizing several key binaries characterizing Vietnamese 20th century experience. First, the northern uplands region is often described as radically different from the lowlands political and economic centers on the grounds of the ethnic majority/minority, lowlands/uplands, and modern/traditional dichotomies. The problem with these oppositions is not only that they tend to devalorize the latter part of the dyads but also that they ignore the increasingly blurred boundaries between these constructed oppositions.

Second, through an empirical focus on face-to-face interaction, it explains aspects of state power-in-action and negotiated order in marginal areas of Vietnam. This focus offers insights into how Vietnamese and foreign researchers position themselves and maneuver vis-à-vis state power and state representatives, without assuming a monolithic party-state.

Third, and directly related to the exercise of power, is the concern with the key 20th century ideological presumption of detached and objective research. This stance has increasingly come under attack and alternative labels such as 'action research' and 'participatory research' have been introduced and debated in a variety of disciplines. There is, however, a gap in the literature concerning the specific problems of non-detached research in high modernist, (soft) authoritarian socio-political contexts such as contemporary Vietnam. This paper addresses related problems of accessing and equitably integrating local/indigenous voices and knowledges into research.

In drawing these aspects together, this paper is an original contribution to writing about the very recent past in a marginal area of Vietnam, which does not fall prey to oversimplifying binaries. It problematizes aspects of the state's project of modernizing the uplands but also recognizes that the desire to participate in the products of modernity is widespread among uplands populations. Since scientific knowledge plays a central role in visions of modernity, the paper explores important tensions that emerge from attempts at producing situated knowledge in a postcolonial environment.