Belonging in the Karst Mountains:
Hmong Ways of Life on Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, Vietnam

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Statement of Originality

This thesis is the original work of author. All sources used and assistance obtained have been acknowledged.

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Among Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups, the Hmong have been associated with several contradictory stereotypes. They have been celebrated as brave and loyal fighters, yet also are known for being rebellious. They have been portrayed as honest to a fault, even gullible, although also as clever and astute. Despite being known to be skillful and adaptive to different circumstances, they continue to be poor, and in the perception of outsiders, "backward". These stereotypes and contradictions made the Hmong an interesting group to research for many anthropologists in Vietnam. Since I started working as a researcher at the Vietnam Institute of Anthropology (IA), the study of Hmong people has been my dream. It is through this thesis that my dream has become a reality. This, however, would not have been possible without the financial, academic and emotional support of several organizations and individuals.

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Abstract

Research on the Hmong people in Southeast Asia offers contrasting views about their relationship to the mountain landscapes where so many Hmong people live. One view portrays the Hmong as finding self-realisation in mountain settings, which are deemed to provide them a secure refuge from lowland chaos; an ideal place for their distinctive economic pursuits; and a space of cultural and political autonomy. Another viewpoint sees the Hmong relationship with the mountains as being uncomfortable. They are portrayed as refugees, forced to leave their homeland in China, and ending up in remote highland realms in Vietnam, Laos and Thailand under the arbitrary rule of culturally alien lowland states. They have been marginalised, dislocated and reformed according to lowland criteria, and find solace only in millenarianism or conversion to new religions. This thesis contributes a new perspective to this discussion with a case study of Hmong people living on the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau in Hà Giang, Vietnam. Through the concept of belonging, the thesis uncovers the complex nature of the Hmong relationship to the limestone landscape, which is experienced, with ambivalence, as a place of security, awesome power, hardship, familiarity and accomplishment. In their stories, memories, beliefs and rites; through practices of migration, home-building and farming; and by collaborative effort, endurance and ingenuity, Hmong people establish a sense of belonging in the karst mountains.

The findings of this thesis are based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mèo Vạc district of Hà Giang Province. From my base in a village on a limestone mountain near the border with China, I observed and participated in Hmong villagers' daily activities and rites; mapped the social landscape; and conducted informal and in-depth interviews with key interlocutors on their beliefs and customs and narratives of migration and history. These methods enabled me to explore multiple reflections of the relationship of the Hmong people to the limestone landscape. In keeping with the key tension, I identified in literature on Hmong relations to the landscape, I found that the Hmong in Mèo Vạc faced severe, difficult and demanding circumstances living on a high limestone plateau with almost no water and a challenging rocky soil that made house-building and agriculture difficult, and under a nation state with its own powerful agenda for the development of the Hmong. Yet I also discovered how the Hmong have been able to make the mountains their home through their experiences,

memories, rituals, labour cooperation and participation in nation-building. I saw that the Hmong's relationship to the mountain environment was interactive and mutually constituted. While the mountains have imposed limits on Hmong agency and opportunities, and forced them to adapt, the Hmong people themselves have shaped the meaning of the mountains through their culture, stories and beliefs; and through old and new practical, ritual and socio-political collaborations.

This thesis explores multiple aspects of Hmong experiences of belonging in the limestone mountains of northern Vietnam. These aspects include Hmong people's embodied experiences and narrative appropriation of the landscape; ritual relations with natural and supernatural elements; practical adaptations to the realities of farming and home-making on rocky slopes; and collaborative tactics to overcome dangers and resource hardships. I look at social aspects of belonging, for example relationships within the family and lineage, particularly from the perspective of women. This also includes belonging in a political sense: how the limestone landscape is incorporated as national territory and how the Hmong recall their experiences of nation-building. Through these aspects, the notion of belonging offers a way to understand the Hmong experience of living in karst mountains.

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MA	Million age
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VND	Current Vietnamese Currency

Note on Orthography

In Vietnam, the Hmong have five dialects associated to five subgroups of Hmong: White Hmong, Flower Hmong, Red Hmong, Black Hmong and Green Hmong (Vietnam Committee for Ethnics and Mountain Areas, 2003). This thesis has used White Hmong dialects that spoken by the people I studied in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Global Geopark. Hmong is written in the form of Romanized Popular Alphabet (PRA) (see Heimbach, 1979). Seven letters are used at the end of a word to indicate the tones of the Hmong language. They are:

b – indicates a high tone

j – indicates a high falling tone

v – indicates a mid- rising tone

s – indicates a low tone

m – indicates a glottal constriction low tone

g – indicates a low guttural tone

d – similar to an m tone but seldom used

No ending consonant at the end of a word indicates a mid – tone. (Tapp, 2001; Symonds, 2004a). In the Vietnamese Hmong, this converts to -r, -x, - v, -z, -k, - l, - s (Vietnam Committee for Ethnics and Mountain Areas, 2003). Some Hmong words using in this thesis are written in Vietnamese Hmong, which is quoted from Vietnamese reference books or provided by Hmong interlocutors and is noted.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Giàng M. C.[1], 23 years old, is a fourth generation Hmong resident of Mã Pì Lèng village, Pải Lủng commune, Mèo Vạc district, Hà Giang province, Vietnam. Situated atop two mountains, at a height of around 1000 meters above sea level, Mã Pì Lèng is one of over one hundred Hmong villages on the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau in the borderlands between Vietnam and China. C. lives in this village with his wife and two daughters. His father used to be the chairman of Pải Lủng commune after some years serving in the Vietnamese Army. C.'s father had received primary and secondary grade schooling while he was in the Army. When C. was 13 years old, his father died in a traffic accident. C. left school when he finished Grade 9 and was selected as the village leader. At the time, he was the youngest Hmong hamlet leader. When he stopped working as the village leader, C. began working for Viettel, the telecommunications corporation of the Vietnamese Army, earning 800,000 VND per month. In addition, he acted as the health agent in the village, delivering contraceptive pills and condoms to adults, which brought him additional income.

C. had a deep knowledge of the landscape of Mã Pì Lèng village and could identify in detail the features of the mountains in this area, such as the location of caves, various types of soils and vegetation distribution. Although C. was no longer the village head when I went to research Mã Pì Lèng village, he enthusiastically spent days taking me into the mountains around the village to introduce me to the landscape and the history of the village. He helped me draw a map of the village and showed me how the village had been developed since the beginning of the twentieth century. He stated:

I learnt about the landscape of Mã Pì Lèng village from my father and even more so from my father's older brother. My father's older brother used to be my lineage's shaman and he knew everything about my village and my Hmong. Since I was a small child, I followed them to go up to the mountains in my village. No-one forced me to learn about this knowledge. I learnt it because I love to know about my location.

[1] All of my interlocuters allowed and requested me to use their real name in my study. However, in some cases, I decided to use pseudonyms to protect their identity and avoid any inconvenient issues that might arise for them.

Although he is young and energetic, C. rarely leaves the village. He had only once been to Hà Giang province to visit his aunt when she was hospitalised for four days. He claimed that lowland areas such as Hà Giang were not suitable for him because of the heat and the lack of mountains:

When I was in Hà Giang, I missed my home. I missed the mountains, too. The first thing I did when returning to the village after some days in Hà Giang was climb up to the top of the mountain and sit there and breathe the air. I feel very confident and comfortable when I am in the mountains.

Like C., many other people in Mã Pì Lèng village also do not like to go away from their village. However, the village's limestone landscape creates difficulties for them. Around 80 percent of its area is covered by limestone and soil is limited. After the cultivation of opium was banned, the Hmong in this village have had to rely on only one crop of corn per year, and this income does not meet all of their needs. Therefore, they sometimes have to find work elsewhere to raise the money to build new houses or hold weddings or other rituals. Each year, C.'s mother and younger brother, among others, would leave the area for some months between sowing and harvesting to find short-term work in factories in China. Once they had earned enough money for their needs, they promptly returned to the village. The Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng did not work as daily wage earners in their own locality. Most of the time, they did agricultural work on their own plots on the sides of the mountains. In their free time, they liked to climb to the top of the nearest mountain, sitting or standing on it to look around.

This story tells us something interesting about the Hmong relationship to place. It appears C. has a strong attachment to the mountains; he likes being there and is reluctant to stay anywhere else. His attitude could be construed as conservative and traditional. On the other hand, his cannot be said to be an example of a 'primitive', 'insular' or unchanging mindset, for both C. and his father before him used to work for the Vietnamese state as government officials. His positive view about his homeland surely cannot be separated from the fact that he has had jobs, status and income there by virtue of his home being part of the modern state. At the same time many Mã Pì Lèng residents confront the difficulties of the limestone landscape. The stone slopes are infertile and hard to work; many people cannot earn a living locally and, in order to survive, must go away to another country to work. This story raises a

paradoxical truth about the meaning of the mountains for the Hmong people of Hà Giang. The mountains are harsh and not easy to live in. Yet Hmong people long to live there, they know how to live there, and struggle to return there.

I first went to Đồng Văn Karst plateau in 2008. At that time, I worked as a social science researcher for the project named "Integrated Capacity Building Through Research-based Geopark Development in North- East Vietnam" – a cooperative project between Vietnam and Belgium with the purpose to establish a UNESCO geopark[2] in Đồng Văn Karst plateau. I was so impressed to see the beautiful mountain landscape in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. The Plateau consists of four districts, named Quản Bạ, Yên Minh, Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc. However, most of the karst is found in Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc districts, where it covers over 80 percent of the surface area. Less occurs in Quản Bạ and Yên Minh whose mountains are mostly of earth, a more favourable medium for agriculture and residence. But Hmong people account for just over 40 percent of Quản Bạ and Yên Minh's population, while representing around 90 percent in Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc districts. Surprisingly, wherever limestone is at its most plentiful on the Plateau is where the Hmong people are most likely to be found. A local officer who accompanied us stated: "Hmong people like to live on stone mountains. There is a saying about the life of the Hmong here: 'Living on stone and dying on stone'. However, due to the ubiquity of stone, Hmong people live in conditions of poverty. It is hard to improve the living conditions of the Hmong because of the lack of arable land and water. It seems that no plants could grow well on the karst except dry crops and poppy. After the ban of poppy, no commercial plants introduced in this area could achieve success." One of my colleagues observed: "It is miraculous that the Hmong could survive on so much stone." Hearing this conversation, I wondered: What brought the Hmong to the karst mountains of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and why do they choose to remain there? Why do they not move to other places which contain more convenient natural conditions for life? These questions remained in the forefront of my mind, nine years later, during my PhD fieldwork in Mã Pì Lèng village. During that time, I was concerned to understand the meaning of the stone mountains to the Hmong.

[2] A geopark, as defined by UNESCO, is a new type of protected areas which containing rare, significant and aesthetic geological heritages, that can be used for conservation, education and economic development purposes (Farsani, Coelho, and Costa, 2011). Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark was established in 2010, see more in Chapter 7.

What ties them to the karst mountains; how do they live there; and what connects them to the mountains, to each other and to others in their region?

This thesis is about the way Hmong make a home for themselves in the mountains of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Based on original ethnographic evidence that I collected while living in Mã Pì Lèng village, it argues that Hmong people experience the environment of these limestone mountains as harsh, difficult, dangerous and sometimes impossible; however, they also domesticate the karst landscape of northern Vietnam and construct a sense of belonging within it through narratives, rituals, embodied memory, shared knowledge and collaborative work practices. Their relationship to the limestone landscape is interactive in that they are obliged to adjust themselves to the tough mountain environment in which they live, while at the same time shaping its meanings and transforming it into a desirable home. Through the concept of belonging, this thesis provides an alternative way of understanding the Hmong in relationship to the mountains. In what follows I develop the problem and then outline what is distinctive about my approach and methodology.

1.1 The Hmong and the Mountains

The Hmong are an ethnic group living mainly in China and South-East Asia. In China, the Hmong are considered a branch of the Miao minority. The number of Hmong people in the world, including other Miao branches in China, totals over 9 million (Culas & Michaud, 2004). According to the Vietnam general population census dated 1 April 2009, there were 1,068,189 Hmong people living in Vietnam (Vietnam General Statistic Office, 2010).

Among the Hmong people there are various subgroups based on women's traditional costumes. There is debate about the numbers and names of these subgroups of Hmong people in Vietnam. Some researchers have stated that Vietnam has four main groups: White Hmong (*Hmoob Dawb*), Flower Hmong (*Hmoob Leeg*), Black Hmong (*Hmoob Dub*) and Green Hmong (*Hmoob Ntsuab*) (Cu & Hoang, 1994; Diep, 1998; Vuong, 2005). V. T. Nguyen (2009) added a fifth group, the Red Hmong (*Hmoob Shi*). The list of ethnic groups in Vietnam made public by the Vietnam General Department of Statistics in 1979 listed six groups of Hmong, but the group known as Na Mieu was determined as belonging to the Hmu rather than to the

Hmong people. Tapp (2004) stated that there are five groups of Hmong in Vietnam: Hmong Daw, Hmong Ntsua, Hmong Pe, Hmong Pua and Hmong Shi.

Most Hmong people in mainland South-East Asia, including South China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand, live in the highlands, at an altitude from 1,000 to 1,800 m. [3] Scott (2009) referred to the high plateaus and uplands as 'Zomia', a term introduced by Van Schendel (2002), saying that this geographical region aligns with the idea of the 'Southeast Asian Massif' proposed by Jean Michaud (1997). This area is rugged, with a scarcity of soil and water, making it difficult for people to inhabit.

In the field of Hmong studies, two opposed points of views exist about Hmong people's relationship with the mountains. One is a positive perspective that sees the Hmong as a people who are at home in the mountains. According to this view, Hmong have a feeling of attachment to the mountains, which afford them an experience of cultural continuity, safety, confidence, freedom and self-realisation. Another view sees the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains in darker hues: they are only there by necessity as a displaced people or refugees from elsewhere; they are considered marginal, poor, lacking, uncivilized or dangerous; and they are subject to intrusive and unwelcome policies by nation states anxious to make the mountains legible, prohibit mobility, secure borders, and realise 'development'.

The first scholar to evoke the positive view was Francois Savina, a French missionary who spent several years in the highlands of Tonkin and Laos. He worked with the Hmong and spoke their language. In *Histoire des Miao*, published in 1924, Savina gave two examples showing what he considered to be the Hmong nostalgia for the mountains. His first example was of some Hmong people who became sick after being captured by the French. Medical examinations could not identify any health problems. When the doctor asked them through an interpreter why they were sick, they replied, 'We miss our home'. Savina reported that, as soon as the French released those Miao, they looked healthy and climbed up to their houses in the mountains. The second example was a group of Hmong people who were invited to visit

[3] However, Hmong people also sometimes settled at altitudes under 1,000 m in the North and the Central Highland of Vietnam, and in Laos and Thailand. In Vietnam, it is a result of Hmong migration and government efforts since the 1960s to bring Hmong from the highlands to the lowlands (*hạ sơn*).

Hanoi and Hai Phong for some days. They were sick on the train and their luggage was stolen. In Hanoi, they did not feel comfortable because they could not see anything that was familiar to them and they could not understand the life of Hanoi around them. Everything was strange and new, especially the small bodies of the Kinh, the high noses of the Europeans, the lack of cattle on the road and the electric lights. In Hai Phong, they could see the ocean with its vast expanse of water. The weather was hot and humid, and the mosquitoes kept them awake at night. They climbed to the top of the church steeple and stayed there until the next morning. The next day, they were invited to go to the beach. They refused, crying, and asked to be returned home by train. Savina (1924) wrote, 'Back on their feet in the mountains, they climbed them hastily, as if they had not seen them for ten years, swearing by their great gods that they would never leave them again' (p. 178).

Savina, similar to other French colonial scholars of his time saw highlanders such as the Hmong as primitive, authentic, forthright and emotional; contrasting them with lowlanders such as the Kinh, who were depicted as sophisticated and self-controlled, yet weak and dishonest (for historical contextualisation of such scholarship see Michaud, 2004; Salemink, 2003). In some ways, Savina was a romantic and looked down on the Hmong. He deemed them innocent about the complexities of life in the lowlands, thus missing their simple and safe life in the highlands and depicted their attachment to the mountains as somewhat similar to the attachment of a child to its mother. In addition, Savina claimed that as migrant latecomers to the region, the Hmong had no choice but to live in the hills because the fertile lowlands already had been occupied by other ethnic groups. This idea was adopted by several Vietnamese anthropologists (Diep, 1998; Institute of Ethnology [Vietnam], 1978; Vuong, 2005). Savina (1924) argued that rebellions by the Hmong had occurred because they had no territory, property or leader. Some of his suggested solutions for resolving the rebellions of the Hmong were naïve, such as calling on the Hmong to stop their activities before they were subdued by the French government. The French government had allocated an area of land for the Hmong people, giving them autonomy and the right to elect their own leaders.

In contrast to the romantic view about the Hmong as at home in the mountains, Nicholas Tapp, a leading scholar of the Hmong, argued in his first major monograph that the Hmong are a people who exist in a psychologically, culturally and politically fraught relationship to place, and in a marginal position vis-à-vis powerful state. Tapp identified the White Hmong

whom he studied in Thailand as people who had been dislocated from China where they had lost their status, land and sovereignty (Tapp, 1989). The Hmong in Thailand continuously compared to themselves to the Chinese. They were upset about what they had lost and what they lacked in relationship to China. On the one hand, compared to China, they lacked a King, lacked literacy, and lacked land. On the other hand, in Thailand, the Hmong faced three dilemmas. The first dilemma is that they were being forced to abandon swidden agriculture, abandon opium and make a transition to new forms of agriculture which had not, as yet, been proven. The second dilemma is that they were under pressure to adapt to the Thai political system and constitute themselves as subjects of the Thai King rather than people who once had their own Hmong King. They were forced to accept the sovereignty of Thai King even though they did not really feel they belonged to Thailand. Third, they were under pressure to adapt to Christianity even though they still had their traditional belief system. In response to these three dilemmas, it is understandable that the Hmong were highly susceptible to the promises of millenarianism because they desired to restore their lost status and kingdom and seek out the return of their King or the arrival of a new King. Politically, culturally and materially, they were uneasy, ambivalent, and in-between. They were in-between the Hmong past in China and an uncertain future in Thailand (Tapp, 1989). In short, Tapp viewed the Hmong as not comfortably at home in the mountains but rather out of place, in a state of suffering and regret, and in a difficult relationship with the state.

In the fields of ecology and geography, we can also see opposing points of view on the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains. On the positive side, Geddes (1976) argued that the core reason drawing the Hmong into the mountains and keeping them there was their cultivation of opium. At the time of research in the 1960s, opium was the most important crop of the Hmong in Thailand, enabling them to accumulate wealth and serve their cultural requirements. The climate and the altitude of the mountains were suitable for growing opium. Geddes contended that opium took the Hmong to the top of the mountains and its cultivation shaped their social structure and migratory way of life. Thus, Geddes' view was that the Hmong's relationship to the mountains was one of self-realisation and freedom of choice. They were at home in the mountains, migrating freely from place to place over a vast area, constrained only by the bio-ecological requirements of opium growing, which influenced their choice of where to live and what livelihoods to pursue (Geddes, 1976).

This optimistic view of the Hmong finding a niche and achieving self-actualisation in the mountains is challenged by the work of Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin and Jean Michaud (Turner et al., 2015), who studied Hmong livelihoods in Lao Cai province in northwest Vietnam. They argue that in the course of making a livelihood as marginal upland minority actors, the Hmong confront and are constrained by powerful state normalising and market forces. They view the Hmong livelihood strategies in Lao Cai province (Vietnam) and Yunnan province (China) as ways of resisting the governance of states as well as their reactions to the market economy and modernity. The Hmong studied by these scholars were affected by several government policies. For example, sedentarisation encouraged the use of permanent fields, whereas the rotation of swidden fields; the cutting of forest for timber, either for sale or to establish new fields; and the cultivation of opium for commercial purposes were banned. This meant that Hmong households lacked a source of cash income from selling wood and opium. They had to change to a composite form of agriculture that included rice paddy fields, swidden plots (which were banned), small gardens and the collection of forest products and engage in non-agricultural practices such as textile production and guiding tourism treks. In the process of modernity and the implementation of development projects, the Hmong were seen as subjects for development and marginal people who gained few benefits from the government's policies in comparison with other ethnicities. It was only through their creative and agentive livelihood tactics that they were able to mitigate the harsh realities of this subjugation.

From a political perspective, Scott (2009) described highlanders, including the Hmong, as 'Zomians' who had liberated themselves from lowland states by inhabiting the mountains, living light, and mobilising and adopting subsistence economic strategies (e.g. foraging, hunting and shifting cultivation). For the Hmong, the mountains constituted a space of political autonomy and absence of state control. Scott's contention that Hmong people planted opium as a strategy to maximise freedom and escape the heavy-handed control of the lowland state can be contrasted with Geddes' hypothesis that Hmong adapted to opium and moved into the hills for profit maximisation. He argued that the Hmong viewed their settlement decisions as a means of avoiding conflict with the Han, governance by lowland states, and the tendency towards cultural assimilation. Scott stated that his concept of Zomia as a place beyond the state only applied to before World War II. The situation of highlanders

as stateless ended with the establishment of modern states with new means of control in Southeast Asia. However, Jonsson (2010, 2012) pointed out some problems with Scott's idea of Zomia relating to the notions of state and power, the division of lowland and upland, and the cultural, social and political relations of lowlands and highlands. Based on the case of Yao and Mien communities, Jonsson (2012) challenged Scott's notion of Zomians or highlanders as stateless. He argued that the highlanders somehow still maintained relations with the lowland state by tribute or services seeking social, political and spiritual benefits and identities. Nevertheless, looking at the Hmong ethnic history and migration processes in China and Vietnam at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, many researchers agree that the Hmong have been stateless or state-evading people (M. T. Nguyen, 2014; Turner, 2012; Turner et al., 2015).

Scott seems to the consider the aspiration for autonomy as being more important than cultural, economic or environmental factors in explaining how and why hill people such as the Hmong have developed their unique ways of living in the mountains. Cultural ecologists have shown how people who have long-term coexistence with particular environments accumulate knowledge about the landscape, which enables them to adapt to the environment and gives them distinct capacities and preferences. This knowledge is reflected through their everyday practices, cosmology and beliefs, which form their culture and identity (e.g. Steward, 1972). In the case of the Hmong, years of living in the mountainous areas have enabled them to develop their perceptions and knowledge of the geographical and climatic conditions of the mountains, which has allowed them to adapt and take advantage of the landscape.

Contradicting Scott's conception of the mountains as a space of relative autonomy, Ngo Thi Thanh Tam (2010; 2011) argues that Hmong people in contemporary Vietnam are subjected to strong constraints on their action by virtue of being in a marginal mountainous border area, and they experience the dilemma of being caught between tradition and modernity. The establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 is said to have converted Vietnam from a feudal kingdom into a socialist country. In the process, ethnic groups in Vietnam, including the Hmong, were putatively transformed from 'backward' into 'progressive' people – 'new socialist persons' – as the result of a number of government policies. Subsidies aimed to enable them to develop their economy, social relations and culture to the same standard as that of the Kinh, the majority ethnic group of Vietnam

(McElwee, 2004). In the late 1980s, subsidies for minority ethnic groups in Vietnam were narrowed because of the introduction of the đổi mới (innovation) policy and the market economy in Vietnam. Further, the implementation of the Land Law and the banning of swidden cultivation and opium plantations, along with social issues such as population increase, migration and environmental degradation, have made the Hmong the poorest and most marginalised people. Hmong people had been actively discouraged from adhering to traditional livelihoods and practices yet were far from being judged successful as modern subjects of development and civility.

It is in this context that Hmong people began to draw upon cultural ties such as ethnicity, homeland, kinship and Christian faith to develop a new identity conforming neither to traditional cultural identifications nor to state expectations for modernisation. The Hmong ethnic group experienced mass conversion to evangelical Christianity as a result of listening to radio broadcasts by overseas pastors. Soon Hmong in Vietnam were imagining themselves neither as traditional Hmong nor Vietnamese socialist subjects but instead as part of a global transnational Christian community. Ngo Thi Thanh Tam argues that part of the reason Hmong people in Vietnam converted from their traditional religion to Protestantism was to improve their marginal economic, cultural and political status. Via the Christian evangelical broadcast, Hmong people in Vietnam have connected with Hmong people in America and other places (Ngo, 2010; 2011). In this sense Christianity for the Hmong was an innovative means of escaping the constraints of traditional mountainous lifeways, now maligned as obsolete, and the fate of being regarded dismissively by powerful local elites as remote and marginal members of the modern nation.

In short, there is a debate about the Hmong people's relationship with the mountains. One point of view sees Hmong as able to live authentically and to achieve self-realization in the mountains, while another point of view, in contrast, sees the mountains as a place where Hmong people suffer, experience limits, and aspire to change themselves. Such views about the Hmong relationship with the mountains need not be set apart as opposing realities; perhaps both perspectives have elements of truth. I would reframe the debate as being about how the Hmong interact with their mountain settings: both shaping and being shaped by, the mountains. The 'positive' point of view emphasises the Hmong people's capacity to shape the mountains and make the mountains conform to their aspirations and needs: although

originally forced to flee to the mountains, over time they become psychologically and spiritually attached to the mountains as 'home'. Meanwhile in the mountains, they also experience a sense of freedom, and achieve valued objectives through their crops and opium. At the same time, it is clear that Hmong are forced to change and adapt to conditions in mountains. Hmong people must conform to realities of being in the mountains, adjust to adverse environmental conditions, learn to live with state authorities, and deal with danger, oppression and injustice. In short, the relationship with the mountains in interactive and mutually constitutive. Hmong people make the mountains home, but at the same time conditions in the mountains constrain how they may be at home there.

In this thesis, I focus on how Hmong in the limestone hills of northern Vietnam interact with the natural environment of their mountain home. In response to a call by H. Uhlig to undertake comparative research on the human relationship to karst in Southeast Asia (Uhlig, 1980), specifically I investigate the Hmong people's relationship to karst. In keeping with the key tensions identified in Hmong studies, I see the relationship the Hmong have with the karst landscape in two lights. The first is to explore how they have dealt with the harsh realities of the high limestone plateau, with little water and challenging stony soils, making agriculture difficult, as well as coping with a nation state's powerful agenda regarding the development of its mountainous periphery. Equally, I show how the Hmong have made the limestone mountains their home through their knowledge, rituals, beliefs, systems of cooperative labour and participation in nation-building. I focus on a case study from Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark, Hà Giang province, to examine the relationship of the Hmong to the karst landscape. While these people face hardships in the limestone landscape and are poor, they have been able to adapt and bring the landscape into their myths, beliefs and practices and participate in the state nation-building project. In other words, I see the Hmong relationship to the environment as being mutually interactive in that they have both shaped and been shaped by the limestone landscape in which they live.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I review the literature on the notion of landscape and the issue of belonging. I then introduce my field site, methods, and the chapters of this thesis.

1.2 The notion of landscape

My thesis raises questions on the relationship between the Hmong and their karst mountain in the borderland between Vietnam and China. Therefore I briefly review the perception of landscape as it plays a central role in understanding the relationship between human and non-human in space (Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995; Feld and Basso, 1996, Ingold, 2000).

Landscape is the notion rooted in art history as a type of painting and later as countryside scenery. This notion mainly being used in art history and cultural geography (Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995). However, anthropologists also concern about this issue. Hirsch (1995) stated that the notion of landscape has been used in anthropology either as framing conventions or to examine the meaning which people reputed for their cultural and physical environment. Ingold proposed the notion of landscape as the processes of culture (Ingold, 1994) and discerned it to the concept of land, nature, space and environment (Ingold, 1993). He argued that landscape is not land, not nature, and not space; but "landscape is the world as it is known to those who dwell therein, who inhabit its place and journey along the paths connecting them" and different from the environment by its function (Ingold, 1993: 156). He combined the naturalistic view which sees the landscape as the human activities' backdrop and the culturalistic view seeing the landscape as "the cognitive and symbolic ordering of space" into what he called "a dwelling perspective" which produces from the people's activities and "The life process is also the process of formation of the landscape where human lived" (Ingold, 1993: 152).

The notion of landscape also is discussed in the book named *"The anthropology of landscape: perspectives on place and space"* edited by Hirsch and O'Hanlon (1995). Adopt the idea of Ingold (1994) about the landscape is the cultural processes, Hirsch supposed the landscape as the relationship between foreground and background, place and space, inside and outside, and image and representation experiences of social life. Ten following essays, which come from British social anthropologists, in this collection had operated this concept of landscape and contributed theories and framework for the cross - culture study of the landscape. They recognized several dimensions of landscape concepts by connecting this issue to the system of local beliefs and practices, passages of time, kinship, ancestors, houses, stones, social

systems etc. These connections have shaped the individual identity attaching to the place and demonstrated the belonging of people to the land (Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995).

Feld and Basso (1996) claimed that the cultural processes and practices of people on the place bring the meaning into the place and make it sensed. This view has been discussed and developed via a seminar titled "Place, Expression and Experiences" hold by a School of American Research in 1993. Then it was public in 1996 in a book titled "*Senses of place"* edited by Feld and Basso. In this book, the American anthropologists focused on how people perceive and experience the place through their language and language use, local knowledge and local expressions. The cultural processes on the place are reflected in multi dimensions of social life including geography, economic and political characteristics, gender, class, race and identity, under a variety of expressions and writing styles. By this way, the connections of the place and the social experiences through the local imaginations, desires, practices, dwelling and movement have been examined.

In the relationship between human and non-human in space, the notion of landscape is associated with the notion of nature. As the landscape is the cultural process, it differs from nature as Ingold (1994) stated. Nielsen (2004) argued that nature is the complex concept which implicates one or more of four fundamental categories. They are (1) all the things that form the world; (2) not made by human; (3) essence of a thing or a living being; and (4) in contrast to other worlds (supernatural world or unnatural world). Thus, in common understanding, the concept of nature implicates a physical world without the interference of human (Nielsen, 2004; Ingold, 2000). In my thesis, the notion of nature is understood as physical conditions of an area, including mountains, land, soil, rivers, stones, trees… Hmong people interact to nature and create their landscape through the cultural processes of their life.

The notion of landscape also is linked to the notion of environment. Like the concept of landscape, the concept of environment can be seen as the cultural processes attached to the progress of the life of people to a place where they live, what they perceive and develop their relationships with their surroundings (Ingold, 2000). Thus, the concept of landscape somehow synonymous with the concept of environment (Ingold, 1994). The differentiation between these two notions is tiny. Ingold (1994) indicated as below:

"…, I have contrasted nature and environment by way of distinction between reality *of* – ' the physical world of neutral objects apparent only to the detached, indifferent observer', and reality *for* – "the world constituted in relations to the organisms and person whole environment it is'… But to thing of environment in this sense is to regard it primarily in terms of *function*, of what it affords to creatures- whether human or non-human – with certain capabilities and projects of action...

The concept of landscape, by contrast, puts the emphasis on *form*, in just the same way that the concept of the body emphasizes the form rather than the function of a living creature. Like organism and environment, body and landscape are complementary terms: each implies the others alternatively as figure and ground. The forms of the landscape are not, however, prepared in advance for creatures to occupy, nor are the bodily forms of those creature independently specified in their genetic makeup. Both sets of form are generated and sustained in and through the processual unfolding of a total field of relations that cuts across the emergent interface between organism and environment (Goodwin, 1988)." (Ingold, 1994: 156).

The notion of landscape is connected to the notion of milieu which is sometimes considered as synonymous with landscape or environment. Augustin Berque (2004) translates the concept of *fuudo,* which is developed by the Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji (1889-1990), as "milieu" which indicates the physical (natural) and phenomenal (cultural) relations between a human society and its environment. In between the physical and the phenomenal, the natural and the cultural, there is a link, a path, a bridge which is called by Berque as "the sense of a milieu" -the "trajection"- to connect these dualistic relations.

In the nutshell, the notion of landscape and its three associated notions of nature, environment, milieu provide the theoretical framework for analysing, explaining, and understanding the relationship between human and nonhuman beings around them. The notion of landscape is the central in my ethnography thesis of the Hmong. This notion is understood as the cultural process of the Hmong to act and transform nature to enable them to adapt and adjust with the nature and the environment of the mountains. The ways Hmong people think, say and act on the nonhuman beings such as the mountains, the land, the stones, the water, the spirits of the place …that around them reflect their relationships between them

and their milieu and demonstrate the belongingness of the Hmong to their mountain landscape.

1.3 Belonging in a Landscape

In order to interpret the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains, my thesis adopts the concept of belonging. I examine the concept of belonging in multiple aspects. These aspects include a people's narrative appropriation of the landscape, ritual relations with natural and supernatural elements and entities, embodied knowledge of specific landscapes, and collaborative tactics to overcome dangers and resource hardships. I also look at social and political aspects of belonging. How do the Hmong determine their place in their communities or their value as belonging in the nation?

The subject of belonging is found in various disciplines, including human geography, sociology, psychology, politics and anthropology. Belonging is defined as a 'feeling', 'a sense' and a 'set of practices' of individuals or communities that attach them to a place/landscape, social group, nation and/or state and constructs a sense of socially recognised membership (Antonsich, 2010; Bennett, 2014, 2015; R. H. Schein, 2009; Trudeau, 2006; Wright, 2015). Belonging includes diverse aspects and scales. It stretches from emotion such as 'feeling at home,' a sense of belonging as 'feeling in common' to processes of belonging where it is experienced, performed and practiced (Wright, 2015).

Among anthropologists, belonging often is used in a socio-political sense to define national and ethnic identity and citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran & Vieten, 2006; Antonsich, 2010). As Yuval-Davis notes, belonging is dualistic: it can refer to a subjective sense of feeling 'at home', being safe and secure, or 'in place' as an integral part of a society or political collectively. Yet it also is a means by which one's validity as a member of a socio-political collectively is conferred or challenged by others: be it by state authorities or established or dominant social groups (Yuval Davis 2006). Belonging in this political sense can be claimed or contested by virtue of multiple criteria, including a person's origins or appearances; length of stay in an area; involvement in historical events; or the supposed compatibility of their religion, culture or ideology with that of the dominant ideology; and it can be focus of an intense and uncomfortable politics of identity (Antonsich 2010).

In this respect, the question of whether or how the Hmong belong in Vietnam is subject to multiple discourses. In many countries in Southeast Asia and in China, Hmong political belonging has been seen as fraught, with Hmong having been historically involved with rebellions, oppositional movements, insurgency, ethnonationalism, and millenarian movements (Michaud, 2000; Tapp, 1989; Scott, 2009; Lee, 2015). Hmong ways of being in the mountains, be that swiddening, forest destruction, migration or opium production, also have been at odds with official criteria for civility, with state development programs or national policies for securing mountainous frontier areas (Tapp, 1989; Geddes, 1976; Turner et al., 2015). Yet Hmong in Vietnam are also subject to inclusive discourses of belonging. They are known to have migrated from China into the territory of present-day Vietnam at most several hundred years ago, however, in the official ideology, they are seen to 'belong' to the nation as one of Vietnam's 54 ethnic groups and are not labelled, excluded or discriminated against with regards to origins or length of residence, for example as 'invaders', as 'Chinese' or as 'non-indigenous'. In national anthropological discourses, they belong to the Hmong-Mien language family; to the category of 'mountainous peoples' (dân tộc miền núi); and as a group associated with Vietnam' mountainous northwest. Hmong in Vietnam are commonly identified with subgroups such as Green, White, Black, Flower or Red Hmong, with Hmong clans, or with various localities. In socio-economic development terms they belong to the category of the poorest and least developed ethnic groups, or those living in greatest hardship and are thus prioritised (ưu tiên) as recipient of special development programs.

A different approach to the experience of belonging has been to explore existential dimensions of belonging such as being-in, emplacement and dwelling (Basso, 1996, Ingold, 2000). Kenneth Basso (1996) examined the importance of landscape to belonging by studying how place features in the language of the Western Apache Tribe in Arizona, America. Identity is constructed through the process of understanding the landscape where one lives. Places are made "home" by naming and narrating them. These processes, linked with human history, define the people, their way of life, and their understanding of themselves. When people quote their ancestors, use traditional stories and speak their name, it is inferred that they develop their sense of place which connects with their "imaginative experience," their "involvement with nature" and their "social environment." As a consequence, the naming of place and the narrative stories associated with the place are ways to construct and remember

the past as well as to shape current individual behaviour and define moral tradition (Basso, 1996; for Vietnam see Taylor, 2008; 2014).

According to Ingold (2000), people experience belonging by securing attachments with spaces and they create their distinctive character through everyday practical interactions with the landscape and the environment. Belonging is thus embodied and occurs through people's perceptions about the spaces through which they move. Such perceptions can be identified through the stories about human and other-than-human beings and forces. He explained: 'knowledge of the world is gained by moving about in it, exploring it, attending to it, ever alert to the signs by which it is revealed. Learning to see, then, is a matter not of acquiring schemata for mentally constructing the environment but of acquiring the skills for direct perceptual engagement with its constituents, human and non-human, animate and inanimate." (Ingold 2000:55).

Lovell (1998) argued that belonging is a way of remembering and constructing "collective memories" of a place, which may be expressed through history, narrative stories, myths, objects, religious and ritual performances, museums and exhibitions (p. 1). The role of the landscape in shaping belonging is reflected through the world of animals and plants, deities, gods, spirits and rituals, all of which construct identity (Arhem, 1998; De Boeck, 1998; Larsen, 1998; Lovell, 1998; Ottino, 1998). Accepting this understanding of belonging, Arhem (1998) examined the construction of an Amazonian group's belonging through notions of territory ownership sharing by patrilineal kinships, land tenure, cosmology, myths, food systems, rituals and shamanic knowledge. He remarked, 'By learning the names, places, and stories of the land, and by incorporating its creative powers, residents progressively identify with the territory they inhabit and make it socially and experientially their own'. These notions of landscape and the relationship between humans and the land are typical of ethnic groups around the world, rooted deeply in the practical and experiential involvement of people and their surrounding environments, constructing the cosmological perception of the world as a house (Arhem, 1998). High, in her study on a village in Laos, views the sense of place via the belief and practice of a particular ritual which connect and relate people to the place and among themselves (High, 2005). Also, High and Baird have had a lively debate about migration and agency in Laos. High sees migration as a form of agency responding to the desires of rural people and thinks rural people can emplace themselves in their destinations (High, 2014).

Baird sees it more as a symptom of powerlessness and a kind of unavoidable dislocation (Baird, 2010; 2014).

Following such thinkers, I explore the ways Hmong people in northern Hà Giang belong in the mountains, experience home, and value place by attending to the ways the landscape is named and how it features in their histories of migration and settlement. I seek out the meanings to Hmong of the limestone plateau where they live, by recording names, histories and stories that connect them to that place and give them their identity. I learn how they relate to and interact with their environment as an agent, personality or force in its own right, by observing their rituals, ceremonies and offerings in connection to various landscape features. I learn how they belong to the mountainous environment practically through embodiment, relaying my own lessons in walking, lifting, living, breathing, working, playing and resting which I gained during my residence in a Hmong village. I explore the social and political dimensions of their embodied relationship to place though examining the allocation of labour in cultivation, house-building and household tasks, and their involvement in nation-building activities.

Another way I address belonging in this thesis is through discussing the internal relationship of the Hmong to themselves. For example, I explore how the Hmong belong to a lineage and the idea of Hmong women being subordinates, belonging to the men and the lineage in a passive and powerless position. Feminist, Marxist and postcolonial scholars have pointed to the oppressive, exploitative, paternalistic aspects of belonging (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Ortner, 1972; L. Schein, 1997). They believe that the subordination of women to men is rooted in biology, social structures and institutions in terms of economic class, child-rearing practices, sexuality control and gendered norms (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993). Ortner (1972) challenged the saying ‘woman is to man as nature is to culture’ and found that the subordination of women to men is common in almost every patriarchal society. Several Hmong scholars and development discourse scholars have noted that Hmong women have a subordinate position that is described as passive, voiceless and powerless (Liamputtong Rice, 2000; Symonds, 2004a, 2004b; Tapp, 1989; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] Viet Nam & United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] Viet Nam, 2017; World Bank, 2019). However, I challenge this understanding of belonging as subordination. Hmong women are not regarded by the Hmong as slaves. They are not victims, powerless, lacking value or inferior. I argue that

the concept of belonging, from the Hmong woman's perspective, can be interpreted as having power and value within the families, lineages and communities of which they are a part. This is what I mean by the term 'belonging'. In short, the notion of belonging can be appreciated through multiple dimensions as a way to understand the Hmong's experience of the mountains.

1.4 The Village

The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau is situated at the northernmost point of Vietnam, close to Yunnan province in China. This vast karst mountain landscape covers 2,356.8 km2 at around 1,000 m above the sea. This type of landscape is similar to the landscape of South China, especially that of Yunnan province. The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau consists of four districts of Hà Giang province: Quản Bạ, Yên Minh, Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc. The population of this area is over 260,000, covering 17 ethnic groups.[4] The majority of the population in this area is Hmong (Anonymous, 2009). Mèo Vạc is believed to be the homeland of the Hmong in Vietnam where the traditional Hmong culture has been well preserved (Cu & Hoang, 1994; Institute of Ethnology [Vietnam], 1978; H. S. Tran, 1996; Vuong, 2005).

[4]These include Hmong, Kinh, Dao, Tày, Nùng, Lô Lô, Pu Péo, Giáy, Bố Y, Cơ Lao, Cao Lan, Mường, Thái, Phù Lá, Hoa and La Chí.

Figure 1.1: Map of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau in Vietnam.

Mã Pì Lèng village is one of 11 villages in the Pải Lủng commune, Mèo Vạc district. It contains 57 Hmong families living on the slopes of the karst mountains. It is located in between the two main towns of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau (Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc), 10 km along National Highway No. 4, south-east of Đồng Văn town. Mã Pì Lèng village is one of hundreds of ordinary Hmong villages in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark. This site was chosen for my research because of its location and landscape. This village is located at the top of the mountain, where limestone covers around 80% of the total area of the village. The fields where the Hmong people cultivate their crops are located around the houses of the village. Even though it is at the top of the karst mountains, Mã Pì Lèng is not isolated. National Highway No. 4, which was constructed in 1959, runs through Mã Pì Lèng village, connecting it to other parts of the karst plateau and the lowlands. Close to Mã Pì Lèng village is a well-known geological tourist site that attracts several hundred thousand domestic and international visitors annually. The location of the Mã Pì Lèng village was suitable and convenient for me to test my hypothesis

about the Hmong sense of belonging to the karst mountains in environmental, cultural, practical, social and political aspects.

Figure 1.2: Mã Pì Lèng village.

Mã Pì Lèng village was established during the early years of the twentieth century by some families who had migrated from other places of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Since then, the population has grown to 57 families, comprising over 300 people. Most are White Hmong (*Hmoob Daw*), while one family is Green Hmong (*Hmoob Ntsuab*). The White Hmong is a subgroup of Hmong people who commonly live in the mountains of South China, which has a karst landscape similar to that of the Đồng Văn plateau. The Hmong people in Vietnam originated from the Hmong in China.

1.5 Research Methods

This thesis is the result of a year-long ethnographic field study undertaken from mid-2016 to mid-2017 in Mã Pì Lèng village. After obtaining the permission of authorities in Hà Giang province, Mèo Vạc district and Pải Lủng commune, I started my research in Mã Pì Lèng village, introducing myself as a Kinh[5] PhD student who desired to learn the Hmong language and culture.

[5] Kinh is the majority of Vietnam.

I went to the village with a young male master's student, Tùng, from Hanoi National University. Even though he is Kinh like me, my assistant could speak some Hmong language and had a close relationship with a Hmong family in Đồng Văn district as a friend of their niece. Tùng had visited this family several times before and was treated as a member of the family. In Mã Pì Lèng village, Tùng stayed in the same house with me. He slept on the bed of the younger brother of the host. He helped me to collect data in the village and at rituals which women are not permitted to attend. He also captured several images about the life of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village and some of them are used in my thesis with his approval.

After some initial hesitation, the people of Mã Pì Lèng welcomed us. They did not appear to want strangers in their community, but they could not refuse because I had introduction papers from the local authorities. I was eventually accepted to stay in a house with a young couple and their daughter. I slept on their mother's bed because she was away working in China. My host, who I mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable man. He acted as my second assistant during the time I was in the village. During my first days there, he took me around the village to observe the landscape and introduced me to his relatives and other families. Together with him, I sketched the map of Mã Pì Lèng village, for which he assisted me to locate all houses in the village and identify which clan these households belong to. He showed me the relationship between houses in the village and recommended who I should meet and interview. He took me to the rituals and special events of Hmong families in the village, arranged time for me to interview my interlocutors, and assisted me with the Hmong translation into Vietnamese. He was so excited to lead me to climb up to the top of the mountains around his village and showed me how beautiful the mountains are. Thus, with his help, I entered into the life of the Hmong in the village, initially as a novice of Hmong culture and language, but gradually being accepted as an elder sister in the Hmong family.

This fieldwork experience was not the first time I conducted research on an ethnic minority. During approximately 20 years of work as a researcher for the Institute of Ethnology/Anthropology (Viện Dân tộc học), Vietnam Academy for Social Sciences, I had undertaken several research projects on ethnic minorities in the North, the Centre, the Central Highlands, and the South of Vietnam. I also had visited the Hmong in their villages in Lào Cai province and the Central Highlands of Vietnam. All the field trips I had undertaken previously

usually lasted for a week, or a couple of weeks at most, and sometimes during these fieldtrips I stayed in hotels instead of staying in the village. This fieldwork was the first time I acted as a "real" anthropologist: living with, listening to, and sharing in all aspects of daily life with the people whom I studied over a period of many months; becoming an adoptive family member, neighbour, and community member; taking part in all of my hosts' rituals, lifecycle events, mundane happenings and livelihood activities; and interacting conversationally, to the best of my capacity, in their own language of Hmong.

When I first arrived in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and Mã Pì Lèng village, my strongest impression was of the majestic mountain landscape, with limestone covering nearly everything. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of that landscape. I also enjoyed seeing Hmong women in traditional dress, carrying heavy bunches of firewood or grass on their backs, making hemp string for fabric by hand and walking along the national road towards their homes. It was a romantic and peaceful image in the eyes of a lowlander like me. I only recognised and experienced how hard life was for Hmong in the mountains when I came to live with them as a researcher. I shared their daily meals and learned how to work in the mountains as a Hmong in building houses and working in the fields. I slept in the wood outhouse attached to the main brick house, which had a back door connecting them. At night, I felt the cold through the cracks in the wooden walls, listened to the whirling wind and suffered the strong odour of cattle dung coming from the barns next to the house. Fortunately, I did not have to suffer from a lack of running water, which is common in the Đồng Văn plateau, especially in winter. A large water reservoir had been built by the government close to the village gate in 2010. This reservoir collected the rainwater via culverts along the highway and on the ridge. The reservoir fully met the daily water needs of the villagers all year. However, the water was cold and needed to be warmed on the fire for bathing. I expected to have to eat cornmeal every day during my fieldwork. I had tried it once before and found it dry and difficult to swallow without soup or water. However, the two-year-old daughter of my host could not eat the cornmeal because she always choked on it. Therefore, we had rice three times a day. Nevertheless, I occasionally enjoyed the cornmeal because the neighbour's elderly mother, who always called me tus min ntxhais (daughter), sometimes took me to her house to eat. She woke me in the mornings with Hmong songs recorded on her cell phone. She told me her life story and how she had migrated to the village

by marriage. She hugged me and cried when I was leaving at the end of my field trip. Her affection and the welcome of many Hmong people in the village helped me to feel contented during my stay there, which made my work easier.

The main technique I used to collect data was participant observation. I had time to travel around the village and observe the landscape and daily activities of the Hmong people in their houses and fields. I participated in the work of the local people, learning how to cultivate their crops, cook meals with them and build a house. I carried stone powder for making house foundations, even though I sweated a lot. In the fields, they showed me how to recognise the different types of soils in the village and the crops that could grow in each type. I participated in Hmong rituals, took pictures and enjoyed their ritual foods and drinks. The information I collected while participating in local Hmong life and have presented throughout in this thesis includes landscape, topography, social relations, myths, beliefs, rituals, biographies, farming, house-building and dwelling arrangements.

The Hmong were the most wonderful people I have ever met. They sat with me patiently, teaching me the Hmong language and explaining the meaning of every action in their lives and rituals. Once, I had a difficult time with a drunk person at a ceremony to which I had been invited. He believed I was a bad person and that I intended to ruin the family ritual. I gave up my opportunity to attend the ritual, and other family members gathered to convince the drunk man that I had no ill intentions for his lineage.

The language barrier presented some difficulties when communicating with women, especially the elders. Most of them spoke only the Hmong language. My limited Hmong helped me to get along with them initially and make friends with them but did not allow me to have deep conversations. Fortunately, the men and Hmong students were willing to help me to learn Hmong, teaching me the meanings of words and helping me communicate with the older Hmong women. Because they were excited to see an outsider learning their language, they were eager to help. They were proud to introduce me to their rituals, explaining them in detail and the reasons for holding them. In some cases, they asked me in advance to use only Hmong language in a ritual because of taboos. However, after some minutes, they would move closer to me and explain in Vietnamese because they wanted me to understand their rituals. They required me to use their true names and reflected their pride in Hmong culture and identity.

The friendliness and support of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village made my fieldwork easier. I conducted numerous short informal interviews with the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village. My interviewees were men and women of all ages and occupations—they included the elderly, middle-aged, youth and children, village leaders, clan leaders, hired workers and farmers. Interviews took place inside and outside of houses, in the fields, on the road or on construction sites.

Following the informal interviews, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews with some villagers who had knowledge about Mã Pì Lèng village and Hmong customs by snowball sampling methods. These people included the oldest woman in Mã Pì Lèng, who had migrated to the village by marriage at the beginning of the twentieth century; people who had been involved in the construction of the highway; people who had experienced growing opium; middle-aged and young couples; and youngsters who could provide me with information about Hmong identity and culture. They were often suggested and introduced to me by my host or by other key interlocutors at the end of my interviews. They told me their life stories, their village's history, and how they lived with their family, family-in-law, clan and community. They described what they and their ancestors had experienced in their life in Mã Pì Lèng village since it was established until now: how they were involved in road construction and participated in development policies; the ways they lived in and worked the stone landscape; and how they dealt with the struggles of poverty, bans on swidden agriculture and opium cultivation, and their experiences of war with China in 1979. What my interlocutors shared with me enhanced my knowledge of the Hmong in the Đồng Văn Karst plateau, and swept away some bias and stereotypes that Kinh like me often have of the Hmong, such as: backward, lazy, unreasonable, illiterate, rebellious, migrators, and forest and environment destroyers. It is obvious that Hmong people who have coexisted long-term with the stone landscape have accumulated special knowledge which has enabled them to adapt to the environment and has given them distinct capacities and preferences that others do not share. This unique knowledge is reflected in their everyday practices, their cosmology and beliefs, and their embodied memories and skillsets, which form their culture and identity.

As well as staying in Mã Pì Lèng village, I visited and interviewed three local Hmong scholars in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark. The first Hmong scholar I interviewed was Mr Hùng Đình Quý (Shôngx Ntiêx Tuôv). He was born in 1937 in Tùng Vài commune, Quản Bạ district. He

used to work as the vice chairman of Đồng Văn district, the Director of Hà Giang Information and Culture Department, and the chairman of Hà Giang Association for Literatures and Arts. He had retired and was living in his traditional Hmong house in Hà Giang city. Hùng Đình Quý had studied and published books on Hmong customs and poets for several years. The second Hmong scholar was Mr Ma Khái Sò, born in 1930, living in Thái An commune, Quản Bạ district. Mr. Sò used to work for Vietnam government as teacher, senior district and provincial officer, chairman of Hà Tuyên[6] provincial Fatherland Front. He was appointed to study and report about Hmong history and customs for the Vietnamese government while he still held office. After his retirement, Ma Khái Sò has focussed on collecting, performing and educating Hmong youths on Hmong songs and bamboo tube musical instrument (qeej). He had travelled to Thailand and China to study and collect over 360 Hmong traditional songs and how to play these lyrics on Hmong qeej. When coming home, he worked as an advisor for Hmong festivals and qeej trainer for Hmong youngers in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. He was awarded the title of Elite Artist in 2016. The third Hmong scholar was Mr Vàng Tài Phủ, 75 years old, in Thanh Vân commune, Quản Bạ district. Mr Phủ also was a qeej performer and trainer for Hmong people in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. He had studied and accumulated rich knowledge on Hmong customs and traditions. Hmong people living in his village and his neighbour villages always came to see him if they needed advises to practices Hmong rituals and special events.

All these aforementioned Hmong scholars had been involved in events that had taken place in the area since the 1940s. Some of the chapters in this thesis contain data collected from these Hmong scholars. Although some of these data may not be accurate in terms of specific times and dates, I argue that they still have validity because they were provided by people who had participated directly in those events.

1.6 Chapters

The topography, terrain and climate in the mountainous areas of the Vietnam–China border are less than ideal for human habitation. However, the Hmong people have inhabited the mountains of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau for at least 100 years. They have developed a sense of belonging in the karst mountains. They are in a mutual relationship with the mountains, where

[6] Hà Giang province and Tuyên Quang province nowadays

they modify and are shaped by the limestone landscape. This thesis, with six core chapters, explores the Hmong sense of belonging in the karst mountains in environmental, cultural, practical, social and political aspects.

Chapter 2 adopts the concept of place-belongingness developed by Antonsich (2010) and sense of place introduced by Basso (1996) by looking at the value and the meaning of the mountain landscape for the Hmong. In this chapter, I describe Hmong placenames and the narratives related by elderly Hmong about how they and their ancestors had migrated to and settled in the area. Their reasons for leaving former homelands included escaping from war and searching for land and security. The high, remote and infertile stone landscape of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau had value for the Hmong, unlike for the Kinh people, who did not view the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau as arable or secure. The chapter discusses how the Hmong settled here and organised their affairs. It also shows how the mountains have shaped Hmong migration, limited their agency and shaped their social relations.

In Chapter 3, I focus on how the Hmong perceive their sense of belonging to the karst mountains, as reflected through their geomantic practices and daily life rituals relating to the landscape, stone, water and trees. The vast limestone plateau on which they live in the Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc areas of Hà Giang province, flush on the border with China, is a bare and infertile landscape of rock. In their daily struggle to eke out a living, the Hmong are required to exercise considerable ingenuity while facing many dangers and ordeals. I argue that the Hmong are conscious of their karst mountain environment as a place that brings them both benefits and dangers—their rituals express and put into play that sense of place. Through such rituals, they dwell and interact with the powerful entities and forces in this austere and unpredictable land to secure their life. I conclude that Hmong perceptions of the limestone plateau on which they live have both shaped and derived from their life experience in this austere and rocky landscape. In Mã Pì Lèng, Hmong people upheld the concept of mountains, ridges, rocks, caves, trees and other features of the rugged limestone environment as animate, agentive and interactive. These features subsist in a relationship of mutuality with the Hmong people who have made the mountains their home. These understandings and relationships have influenced the attitudes of the people towards the landscape, and they can be used to explain their experiences of life.

Chapter 4 examines the ways in which the Hmong people have domesticated the mountains through their social relations and beliefs. It discusses how the Hmong have made durable houses and fields in the rocky landscape through collaborative effort: modifying and transforming harsh natural features into a place where they can live and cultivate. The challenging landscape and climate of their area makes cooperation within and between families, clans and villages essential and the Hmong have, over time, developed many legends and customs to help them to survive there.

Chapter 5 examines how the Hmong people live within their houses; and how they have adapted to the mountain environment through their kinship relations and architecture. I argue that the Hmong house contains characteristics that are moulded in response to the unique physical landscape of the mountains as well as by Hmong kinship and social and belief systems. Reflecting specific features of Hmong kinship, family members can all live in the same house but can detach easily to migrate. The house structure reflects both exclusivity and inclusivity, allowing familial sub-units autonomy within a larger household unit. The house of the Hmong is a combination of tangible materials and invisible forms and objects, housing both humans and spiritual entities. Both material and intangible forms play a role in protecting and promoting health, reproduction, luck and prosperity for family members.

Chapter 6 addresses the question of belonging from the perspective of women, particularly in relation to marriage and their roles in the family. Several scholars of the Hmong have noticed that Hmong women have a subordinate position within the family that is described as passive, voiceless and powerless (Liamputtong Rice, 2000; Symonds, 2004a, 2004b; Tapp, 1989), just as Hmong ethnicity is considered subordinate to the majority ethnicity and to the state. Indeed, the developmental discourse has taken this perspective, and many studies on the Hmong in Vietnam refer to the inferior and unequal status of Hmong women (UNFPA Viet Nam & UNICEF Viet Nam, 2017; World Bank, 2019). Hmong women are dependent and belong to their husbands as well as to the lineage. In this paradigm, the notion of belonging can be interpreted as being subordinate, and in my research, I encountered considerable evidence to support this perspective, such as the phenomenon of marriage by capture and the harsh attitudes of Hmong husbands and families towards new brides. However, through an investigation of the role of women in the operation of the household economy, I found evidence of equality between genders in the household. In addition, I discuss the dynamic

transformation in the identity and obligations of Hmong women and men as they progress through life. Women are powerful, valued and recognised for their contribution to the household and to extension of the lineage, challenging the argument that Hmong women are simply subordinate to men.

Chapter 7 examines whether and how the Hmong in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau area of Hà Giang experience a sense of political belonging to the nation state of Vietnam through four factors: the Happy Road, the eradication of opium, the alleviation of poverty, and the development of heritage-related tourism. Hmong reactions to these programs were ambivalent: unexpectedly supportive of some, while perplexed or resigned with respect to others. Meanwhile, the Hmong have actively drawn the state into their own world, giving meaning to state projects and participating in state programs for their own reasons. Although they have continued to experience critical material deprivation, the Hmong have enjoyed a certain power over the state as a liminal or 'in-between' group and have used state programs to supplement their traditional livelihoods and participate in locally meaningful communal and cosmopolitan engagements. The Hmong people were appreciative of state programs and dealt with the state as co-operators rather than simply as passive beneficiaries.

Chapter 2: Karst Mountains Migrants: Hmong History and The Formation of Mã Pì Lèng Village

> Once upon a time, the Hmong had their own kingdom and their own national symbol was a flag, which was a red square cloth with a pair of black buffalo horns in the middle. After violently fighting with the Han people, the Hmong were defeated and were killed. The leader of the Hmong people decided to leave their Hmong lands to protect the people and their national symbol and to search for a land where no other races have inhabited. Before leaving the Hmong land, he tore the flag into small pieces and gave them to other Hmong families and asked each of them to stick the piece of red cloth on their main door so that other people would easy to recognise them as [being] of Hmong ethnicity. When reaching the karst mountains of the Đồng Văn plateau, the Hmong found that nobody had settled on these places, while the soil was rich in nutrients for cultivating corn; therefore, they decided to stay.

This story was told to me by Mr Hùng Đình Quý,[7] aged 81 years, a well-known Hmong scholar from Tùng Vài commune, Quản Bạ district, who had conducted several studies on Hmong people and other ethnic groups in Hà Giang province when working as a director of the provincial cultural department. I visited him in his house, a traditional Hmong home in the suburbs of Hà Giang town, at the end of June 2017, after spending some months with White Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village in Mèo Vạc district, one of four districts of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark. I wondered how this story might contribute to an understanding of why and how Hmong people had settled the karst mountains of the Đồng Văn Plateau.

According to Vietnamese anthropologists, the Hmong were not the first people to inhabit the plateau. Before the arrival of the Hmong in today's northern Vietnam from China, Lô Lô and Pu Péo people are believed to have already settled on this land for several years. During Tết festivals, it is customary that before making ritual offerings to their ancestors, the Hmong in Đồng Văn always pray to Lô Lô and Pu Péo spirits, acknowledging them as the founders of the land (Diep, 1998; Institute of Ethnology, 1978, 2014; Vuong, 2005). Mr Hùng Đình Quý explained that a large number of Lô Lô and Pu Péo people had died because of diseases rooted

[7]Unless otherwise specified, the names of people and villages are written following Vietnamese pronunciation and word order which is used in official documents.

in their traditional funeral practices.[8] Therefore, when the Hmong migrated to the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, this land seemed to be uninhabited.

In the field of Hmong studies, there are two points of view on the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains. On the one hand, Hmong people are said to perceive the mountains very positively as a place or cultural, economic and political fulfilment. They were attracted to the mountains because they had knowledge of mountain conditions and considered the mountains as their home; there, they could achieve good health and dignity, and preserve their identity (Savina ,1924); gain economic benefit from highland crops such as opium (Geddes, 1976); and preserve their autonomy well away from lowland states (Scott, 2009). On the other hand, a more critical view sees the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains as one of hardship, lack of power, and lack of choice. The Hmong had no choice but flee to and stay in the mountains because they were late comers, refugees and losers from failed rebellions in China (Savina, 1924; Institute of Ethnology, 1978; Diep, 1998; Vuong, 2005; Tapp, 2001; Culas, 2000; Michaud and Culas, 2004). They suffer the hardships and challenges brought by the mountain landscape and the modernization programs introduced by the state. They have become a marginalized minority living in poor conditions at the periphery of the nation state (Tapp, 1989; Turner, 2011; Turner, Bonnin and Michaud, 2015; Ngo, 2010; 2011).

As suggested in the aforementioned story told by Mr. Hùng Đình Quý, there may be elements of truth in both points of view. In some respects, the Hmong live in the mountains because they lack power, are poor, and lack choices. Nevertheless, the migration narratives of elderly Hmong people in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau construe the mountains as a familiar and secure place: where Hmong people can live the way they choose, where they feel comfortable, and where they feel at home. The attachment to the landscape experienced by Hmong people of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau appears to exemplify ‘place-belongingness’, described by geographer Antonsich (2010). According to him, place-belongingness refers to the feeling an individual has towards a particular place of being ‘at home’. This emotional attitude engages in familiar places, wherever a person finds themselves comfortable and secure.

[8]The remains of the dead were left lying in caves while the skulls were used for ritual practices. As a result, Lô Lô and Pu Péo people had to live within a narrow area suitable for habitation, while others returned to China.

This chapter examines the sense of place experienced by Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village, in the heights of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Through their stories of migration, of how they founded a village, and their knowledge of mountain living, I argue that Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng have developed a sense of place-belongingness in this limestone landscape. The reasons given for migration and settlement in the mountains show the value of the limestone plateau to the Hmong. Those values include the provision of shelter, security and arable land. Furthermore, the centrality of the mountains in history, myths, and narratives point to a sense of connection or 'rootedness' in place as described by Lovell (1998). Stories about site location and clan settlement history related by Hmong families in Mèo Vạc also show how the Hmong put into place their social relations and beliefs. The cultural values people attribute to the lived landscape can be seen in the names assigned to places, which give insights into the Hmong experience of life in the karst plateau (c.f. Basso 1996). Similarly, their practical knowledge of how to live in the mountains – which plants they can cultivate; what sites are safe, fertile and auspicious – suggest that the Hmong understand and have adapted well to the mountainous environment. In these diverse ways, Hmong people make a home for themselves in the Karst mountains.

2.1 The Migration of Hmong People to Đồng Văn Karst Plateau

The Hmong are believed to have migrated to Vietnam from southern China, where they were known as Miao. Based on the narratives of Hmong elders, Vietnamese researchers believe that the first group of Hmong moved from the Guizhou region down to Yunnan (China) and then entered Mèo Vạc, the Đồng Văn area of Hà Giang district (Vietnam) around 350 years ago (Cu & Hoang, 1994; H. S. Tran, 1996; Vuong, 2005). However, Culas and Michaud believe that the period of Hmong migration has been exaggerated and that the Hmong only migrated from China to South-East Asia in significant numbers from the mid-nineteenth century (Culas & Michaud, 2004; Michaud & Culas, 2000).

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is believed to be a period of several strong migration flows of the Hmong towards the south, owing to the failure of the Taiping

rebellion[9] (Quincy, 1988), the growth of the Hmong population and maize cultivation and conflicts with other ethnic groups (Culas & Michaud, 2004; Michaud & Culas, 2000). They crossed the border and entered the northern provinces of today's Vietnam, including the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau (Cu & Hoang, 1994; Culas, 1999; Quincy, 1988; Tran, 1996; Vuong, 2005). Thus, the Hmong came to the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau for a number of reasons, including the search for land and freedom, escape from the lowland state, and finding a secure place safe from water incursion, disease and enemies.

Hmong people in the Đồng Văn Karst plateau with whom I spoke do not recall accurately when their ancestors first migrated to this karst landscape. They only knew why their ancestors had decided to come to this place and how many generations had passed since their arrival. For example, Mr Hùng Đình Quý's family had migrated from China to Quản Bạ district five generations ago in search of arable lands. Arriving earlier than Mr Hùng Đình Quý's family, Mr Vàng Tài Phủ (aged 75 years), whose family had migrated from China to Thanh Vân commune, Quản Bạ district, nine generations ago, believed that all the fertile lands and fields in the lowland were occupied by Han people; therefore, Hmong people, among them his ancestors, were pushed up to the mountainous areas to find lands for cultivation.

The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau provided opportunities for the Hmong who came here searching for arable land. In the early years of the twentieth century, there were thousands of square kilometres of land on the mountains that had not been exploited. Several ethnic groups who came to the Đồng Văn plateau settled mainly in the valleys or at the bottom of the mountains. The top and middle parts of the mountains were uninhabited, becoming the home of the Hmong. One of my interviewees said, 'At that time, there was so much unoccupied land available. We [the Hmong] came here, cut down the forest and cultivated our maize. People could make their fields as large as they could if they had enough labourers'.

[9]The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) was a millenarian movement led by Hong Xiu Quan against the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) in China. This rebellion took place in several localities and attracted the participation of a number of ethnic groups in upland China, including the Miao people (Tiedemann, 2007). It ended in 1864 with the deaths of tens of millions of people, and tens of millions of refugees who fled to other places outside China (Rihal, 2016).).

Figure 2.1: Landscape of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau

Another Hmong scholar who lived in Quản Bạ district, Mr Ma Khái Sò (aged 87 years), shared the idea put forward by Savina (1924) that the Hmong had to live in the high mountains in Vietnam because they were latecomers. The failure of the Hmong in conflicts with the Han meant that the Hmong from Guizhou and Sichuan (in China) fled to what was now the north of Vietnam for the next hundreds of years. However, because they arrived in this land later than other ethnic groups, who had already occupied the favourable lands on the plains, they had to live in the mountain areas. Mr Ma Khái Sò gave other reasons for the Hmong remaining in the high mountains, such as their familiarity with forests and mountains and preference for freedom and not wishing contact other ethnic groups.

Additionally, Mr Vàng Tài Phủ suggested that the people who used land and paddy fields on the plains had to pay considerable money for those lands, which the Hmong could not afford; therefore, they settled in the mountains and cultivated corn, with no need to pay money for their lands. While living in the mountains, they also had no fear of being made to contribute their labour for lowland mandarins or to do hard work without being paid because the lowland mandarins were not be able to extend their rule to the mountains. These ideas are similar to

those of Scott (2009), who saw the Hmong as true “Zomians”, who remained in the mountains to escape heavy state imposts and retain their autonomy.

Another reason that may have prompted the Hmong to occupy the high mountains is the fear of water sources (Savina, 1924). The Hmong people believe that sources of water needed for life also carry diseases and death. The Hmong in Vietnam have a legend about an enormous flood that nearly destroyed all everyone in the world. This legend, named ‘The Deluge’, was recorded by V. T. Nguyen (2007) as follows:

> A long time ago the whole earth was flooded with water. All living beings were killed except one boy and his sister, who had taken refuge in an unusually large wooden drum. After the water flowed away, the boy asked his sister to marry him so that they could make more people. At first, the girl would not listen to her brother’s pleas and said that she could not marry him because he was her brother, but after many days of her brother asking her to marry him, she finally said: “If you really want to marry me, we must each bring a stone and climb up on that mountain. When we get to the top, we will roll our stones down the side of the mountain. If we find them lying together in the same place at the foot of the mountain, then I will agree to marry you. But if the two stones do not lie together, you must stop asking me to marry you”. So, each took one stone up to the top of the mountain and rolled them down its side. After that they went down to the foot of the mountain, where they found the two stones lying together in the same place. So, the sister and brother married and lived together as husband and wife. After a while they had a baby, but it did not look like an ordinary baby. It was round, like a big soft egg, and had no arms or legs. Since they thought that this might be a baby seed, they cut it into 12 pieces, which they then scattered in different directions. Each piece made people of one clan: one piece fell into the garden and made people of the clan named Vangx (Vangx in Hmong means garden); another piece fell into the stable and made people of the clan called Maz (the Hmong word for stable); a third fell into the pigsty and made people of the clan called Muax (the Hmong word for pigsty); and so it went with each of the other pieces. (pp. 31–32)

This legend is similar to those of other ethnic groups in Vietnam such as Dao (Iu Mien), Lô Lô (Savina, 1924) or Khmu people (N. V. Dang & Institute of Ethnology [Vietnam], 1972). Mr Ma Khái Sò believed that the Hmong were obsessed about the flood and refused to settle on the plains to avoid drowning. He pointed out evidence for this belief in the words of a Hmong song indicating that the flood caused people to drown but that the people living in the high

mountains escaped death. Further, Mr Vàng Tài Phủ said that during the process of migration, the Hmong people had to cross a huge river with fast-flowing water. The older Hmong people wanted the younger ones to keep their customs and attempted to explain how to worship the Gods and ancestors. However, the river water ran so fast that younger people could not hear properly. This is why the Hmong people divided into several clans, with each clan having their own ways of worshipping the gods and people who have died. It is also a reason for the Hmong not wanting to live close to water sources.

The mountain ranges in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, with an average altitude of around 1,000 m, were believed to protect the Hmong from floods. The cool weather of the high peaks reduced sweating, thereby reducing the need to use water for eating and bathing. Mùa M. P., a 56-year-old Hmong man, believed that the Hmong lived in mountains and far away from water sources because it kept them away from disease. He laughed and added, 'I have not taken a bath for years to avoid getting sick'.

Other Hmong people found the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau a safe shelter. The ruggedness of the limestone terrain, the separation and isolation of the mountains and the difficulties of transportation in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau were convenient for people who wanted to escape from their enemies. The people who had failed in several rebellions in South China, such as the Taiping rebellion (1850–1864), the Miao rebellion (1854–1873) and the Muslim rebellion (1855–1873), fled to this area to escape the revenge of the Chinese feudal government. Lunet de Lajonquière (1904) noted that, from 1860, several ethnic groups, mainly Miao people, crossed the border into Đồng Văn, Yên Minh and Quản Bạ, conflicting with the soldiers of the Vietnamese mandarin of Hà Giang province and eventually beating them and causing the mandarin to commit suicide. They even went down to the Yên Bình area in Chảy River (Yên Bái province), exterminating everybody they met on their way, including men, women and children. In the Yên Bình area, they were stopped by the Sơn Tây governor and his elephants. Afraid of the enormous animals, which they had never seen before, the invading people escaped towards the mountains (Lunet de Lajonquière, 1904). In addition, the Hmong followed armed Chinese troops, such as Black Flags and White Flags, invading the highlands of Vietnam and Laos in the mid-nineteenth century (Culas, 2000).

After migrating to the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, the Hmong increased their control over other ethnic groups in the area. The proclamation of King Sùng Chứ Đà (Xiong) in Yên Minh[10] and the emergence of the Dương/Giàng (Yaj or Yang) clan in Mèo Vạc, the Hạng (Haam or Hang) and Vàng (Vaj or Vang) clans in Quản Bạ and the Vương (Vaj or Vang) clan in Đồng Văn were examples of this (Lunet de Lajonquière, 1904; Savina 1924; M. T. Nguyen, 2014).

In the 1940s, instability on the border of South China increased because of competition between the National Party and the Communist Party of China. The movement of Hmong migrants from Yunnan province also increased. Mr Ma Khái Sò recalled:

> In 1945, I was 15 years old and lived at Thái An commune, Quản Bạ district. There had been only around one hundred Hmong households in that commune for years; however, that year, more than 200 Hmong families migrated from China to our commune. They cleared the forest to make fields and built their houses there. In 1949, after the success of [the] Chinese revolution, some of them returned to China but many of them stayed and were resettled in Bắc Mê district, Hà Giang province.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party over the Nationalist Party and the birth of the People's Republic of China pushed a number of opposing armed groups into the border areas and the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. They coordinated with some Hmong groups in Đồng Văn plateau, against the instructions of the Vietnamese state and the ethnic Kinh. They created a number of conflicts among the powerful Hmong clans and executed several Kinh officers and traders in the period from 1959 to 1965. The Vietnamese press called these conflicts *loạn phỉ*

[10] Lunet de Lajonquière (1904) recorded that a Miao man named Siong who settled in Tangchang mountain (Yen Minh nowadays) declared himself a King. Before this declaration, Siong had been seen to worship the gods every day. He practiced high jumps with many chairs stacked to form a high tower. In front of many people, he jumped up onto the chair tower and declared: "I am the King of this region. The four gods that I have ordered sowing beans everywhere and from the beans will grow soldiers who no one can beat". Hearing about him, many leaders in the surrounding villages came to visit him with gifts. In front of these chiefs, he took out a high stone tower and jumped to the top of the tower. Everyone who witnessed that event was scared, knelt, and recognized him as the King. He built a golden castle with walls around, recruited soldiers, made weapons and sewed 100 flags. His soldiers had a white scarf on their forehead. At the beginning of his proclamation as the King, only Hmong, Nùng and Mán (Dao -Iu Mien) people submitted to him. Siong decided to conquer other ethnic peoples. His war against the Thổ (Tày) lasted more than two years with over a thousand victims and only ended when he was killed by a group led by his father-in-law.

(disordered bandits). In his interview with me in 2016, Mr Ma Khái Sò said that disorderly situation continued until 1965, when construction on the road connecting the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau to Hà Giang province was completed, and when, with the support of Vietnam's Government, Hmong militia repressed these armed troops and expelled them back to China.

Along with the influx of the Hmong to this plateau, opium was introduced (Culas, 1999). The climate of the high mountains and the quality of soil there were suitable for growing opium which has been grown in Hà Giang since the early 1900s at the latest (Diep, 1998). The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau soon became a large poppy cultivation area and had a place of trade of opium with China. Hmong clans competed to control opium resources. Influence over the cultivation and trade of opium was dispersed among Hmong communities such as the Hạng clan in Hà Giang and four communes in Quản Bạ; the Vương clan in Đồng Văn and a part of Quản Bạ; the Vàng clan in Tùng Vài, Lao Chải (Quản Bạ); and the Dương (Giàng) clan in Mèo Vạc. According to Mr Ma Khái Sò, each clan had their own military, which conflicted with each other to gain control of the Hmong peasants and the trade of opium to China.

2.2 The Formation of Mã Pì Lèng Village

The inflow of Hmong migration and the conflicts between strong Hmong clans pushed several ordinary Hmong into other places to find land and be free of war. New Hmong villages such as Mã Pì Lèng were established in remote areas of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. The Hmong people found Mã Pì Lèng to be an ideal place for cultivating their crops and a secure shelter for avoiding wars and conflicts. The oral histories I gathered from Mã Pì Lèng locals about the settlement of their village demonstrate the rich fund of knowledge they have about the landscape, terrain, topography and climate of the high mountains and the conditions in which their village was founded.

2.2.1 Geological features of Mã Pì Lèng

Mã Pì Lèng village was established in the early years of the twentieth century. The village was named after the highest mountain (around 1,500 m) of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Mã Pì Lèng is how Vietnamese pronounce and write of the peak's Mandarin name [馬 鼻 梁], meaning the nasal bridge of a horse, indicating that the mountain ridge slopes steeply and is difficult to pass. With slopes of greater than 25%, this kind of steep terrain occurs on several

limestone mountains in the area, which are unsuitable for agricultural activities. More than half (55–60%) of the mountains are composed of layers of grey-coloured limestone, with patches of soil at the middle and bottom areas. Similar to the mountains in the south of China, the rocks in this area belong to the stratigraphy of the Devonian period,[11] deposited in the period 416 ± 2.8 million age (MA) to 359.2 ± 2.5 MA (Phúc et al., 2011). The limestone is relatively young karst with a surface that is easily invaded by water, creating sharp and sloping rocky landforms (X. T. Nguyen, 2011). Forests used to cover these mountains. However, because the forest was cleared by the Hmong people for wood to make their houses and fields to cultivate grains and opium, all that remains among the otherwise bare grey rocks are some large banyan trees, which are believed to be places of Spirits.

Figure 2.2: Banyan trees on limestone mountain **(Photo: Tung Tran).**

The tops of the mountains, which have thick karst layers, are left for forest regeneration. The lack of soil and water combined with the cold and humid climate at high altitude, with an average temperature of around 15.7 degrees Celsius, does not allow the growth of vegetation other than bushes and small trees. The middle levels of the mountains, which are not as steep as the top and bottom levels, appear greener because of the fields of corn, vegetables and fruit trees that have been planted there. Among these fields and trees are houses of local people, most of them Hmong. The houses of the Hmong blend into the surrounding limestone environment because they are made of unfired bricks made from a mix of cement and crushed limestone and fibrocement roofs. The houses are not built side-by-side but are separated by

[11]The Devonian is a period of geological stratigraphy belonging to Paleozoic stage, which dates from 542 MA to 252 MA. It was named after Devonshire, England, where rocks of that stage were first studied (The Geological Society, 2012).

a large garden or land and surrounded by limestone barriers. The backs of the houses face the mountain, while the fronts face open spaces to the south or south-east. A number of houses located typically midway up a mountain forms a village; villages also may be found between mountains or stretch up the sides of one, two or even three mountains. Because the villages are located mainly on the middle area of the mountains, this area is the location of roads and pathways as well.

There is less karst and more earth at the bottom of the mountains. This part of the mountains is occupied by ethnic groups such as Giáy, Tày or Nùng, who are familiar with cultivating water paddy fields. Although some Hmong families have moved to this area of the mountains, they still live at a higher attitude than do other ethnic groups.

Running along the northwest face of the karst plateau, in an exceptionally deep valley, is Nho Quế River, which originates in Yunnan, China, and flows through Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc districts, Hà Giang province, before merging with Gâm River in Cao Bằng province. The Hmong and Giáy people, who live along the river, shared the following story about the formation of the Nho Quế River:

> Once upon a time, when the mountains were still one big mountain, the rainwater that fell down was preserved on one side of the mountain, but it could not flow to the other side. One side of the mountain had too much water but the other side [was so] dry that plants and animals could not survive. The Spirit of the River asked the Spirit of the Mountain to move forward a little bit so that water could come around the mountain to the other side for watering the plants and animals. However, the Spirit of the Mountain ignored the request of the Spirit of the River. The Spirit of the River had to express his desire to the King of Heaven, who later called the Spirit of the Mountain to heaven and asked him to move a little so the water could run around it. Again, the Spirit of the Mountain did not let the words of the King of Heaven into his ears and he slept day after day, season after season.
>
> One night, there was a huge rainstorm in this area. The night seemed to be torn apart by thunder and lightning. The Thunderbolt raised his sword and cut the Mountain into two pieces. Water that was stored on one side of the mountain could flow in between two ranges of mountains and became the river called Nho Quế. One range of mountains was called Mã Pì Lèng and the other range was called Săm Pun, meaning thunder, lightning and wind (Hùng Vĩ Mã Pì Lèng Hà Giang, 2015).

The Hmong people who live in the mountains consider the waters of Nho Quế River to be holy water that can cure and heal all diseases in their daily life. They believe that when they are ill, if they bathe in the river, the disease will flow away from them in the water. However, because of their fear of water, the Hmong people rarely go to the bottom of the mountains to the river, apart from youths, who sometimes go there to wash their bodies or catch fish. The old people do not allow children to go to the river, telling them that the spirit of Tigers, who lives on the cliff close to the river, will catch them if they approach the river. The story may be related to their belief that everything has its own spirit and people who annoy these spirits will be punished; or it may simply be the scariest way to prevent children from drowning.

Even though Mã Pì Lèng village is named after the highest peak in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, it is not located on that mountain but stretches along the top of two mountains nearby. It is divided by the main road (National Highway No. 4, which runs around the side of the mountain) into two geographical areas: an area of mountain soil with seven families, and an area of limestone with 50 families. In the past, the Hmong people inhabited only the limestone area, but, in 1984, four houses had been burnt down by a fire, which was believed to have been caused by the spirits' disapproval of them living on that land. Therefore, they moved to another mountain close to their village. More recently, at the request of the local authority, three other families had moved to that side of mountain because their old houses were too far from the other houses in the village, creating security and safety issues when three of their children were kidnapped by an unknown perpetrator.

Mã Pì Lèng is the official name recorded in government documents. However, the Hmong people have a Hmong name for their village, *Cwj av*, meaning a piece of soil or fertile soil. Similarly, most Hmong villages on this plateau have two names: one that is used in government documents, which is the Vietnamese pronunciation of a Mandarin term, and one in the Hmong language, which is the name used by Hmong people. Mr Hùng Đình Quý, who I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, believed that because the Hmong people have no written language, Han secretaries were hired to take notes for the mandarins who used to control this land. These Han people wrote the Hmong names of sites in Mandarin: for example, Lũng Cú [龍 谷] village is the Mandarin written version of the Hmong name *loog kws*, meaning corn courtyard. In the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, the Hmong usually named their villages after the characteristics of their land or landscape, and Mã Pì Lèng village is one example of this.

Another Hmong village in Pả Vi commune, close to Mã Pì Lèng village, is also called Mã Pì Lèng in government documents because of its location at the lower middle level of Mã Pì Lèng mountain. However, this village's Hmong name is *Hav zij*, meaning sloping land. A mixed Giáy and Hmong village located close to Nho Quế River is named *Ntho ti*, meaning close to water. This naming of settlements after the characteristics of the land implies that the Hmong people have developed a sense of place that connects with what Basso (1996) called their 'imaginative experience', their 'involvement with nature' and their 'social environment'.

2.2.2 The clans

According to the records of Giàng M. C. (the person in charge of recording demographic changes in the village), in June 2017, Mã Pì Lèng village had 57 households and a population of 301 people, with 147 males and 154 females. These households came from eight clans named:

- Giàng[12] (Yaj in Hmong RPA or Yang in standard spelling). In Mã Pì Lèng village, Giàng clan is divided into two sub-clans.
- Ly (Lis in Hmong RPA or Lee, Ly in standard spelling).
- Mùa (Muas in Hmong RPA or Muoa in standard spelling).
- Lầu (Lauj in Hmong RPA or Lo, Lor in standard spelling).
- Sùng (Xyooj in Hmong RPA and Xiong, Sung in standard spelling).
- Lư (Lwm in Hmong RPA and Lue in standard spelling).
- Cư (Kwm in Hmong RPA and Kue in standard spelling).[13]

The two sub-clans of the Giàng clan do not share common habits and practices with regard to worshipping gods and ancestors. The Hmong only consider members of the same clan

[12] In my thesis, I write the Hmong clan name in Vietnamese because some Hmong clan names have different pronunciations. For example Yang clan could be said as Giàng or Dương depend on locals, or Vaj clan could be recorded as Vàng or Vương.

[13] The accurate number of Hmong clan names in Vietnam is not yet provided. Vuong (2005) stated that there are over 20 Hmong clan names in Vietnam, while Tran (1996) claimed that over 30 Hmong clan names are listed. In Laos and Thailand, 18 common Hmong clan names are reported.

brothers if they share the same surname and practices (*thongx xenhv thongx dab*)[14] Cu & Hoang, 1994; Institute of Ethnology [Vietnam], 1978; V. T. Nguyen, 2009; Tran, 1996; Vuong, 2005). For the purpose of distinguishing between them in this study, I refer to these two sub-clans as Giàng (A) and Giàng (B). The Giàng (A) sub-clan was the first family to inhabit this village. Unlike members of the Giàng (B) sub-clan, members of the Giàng (A) sub-clan do not hang joss papers with rooster feathers on their ancestral wall altars (*xwm kaz*). A member of the Giàng (A) sub-clan, Mr Giàng M. G., a leader of the village, told me that his household used to make the ancestral wall altar in the customary manner each Hmong New Year. However, one New Year, the people had become so intoxicated from alcohol that they forgot how to make their ancestral wall altar. Members of the Giàng (B) sub-clan had another explanation for Giàng (A) people not making their ancestral wall altar:

> The ancestors of Giàng (A) and Giàng (B) sub-clans were brothers. Hmong people have a custom of killing a rooster on the day before Hmong New Year's Day and using its feathers to stick on worshipping papers, then hanging it on the wall, which is opposite to the main door, for remembering their ancestors and praying to the god of the house. One year, on the 30th of the twelfth month, a poor household Giàng (A) ancestor left his house very early to find (or steal) a rooster; however, no matter how hard he tried, he could not catch a rooster. Finally, the next day, which was Hmong New Year's Day, he found the rooster and then he rushed back to his house. It was, however, too late to practise the ritual of worshipping ancestors and the spirits of the house. From that point in time, the Giàng clan were divided into two sub-clans: Giàng (A), who do not make their ancestral wall altar and do not practise the worshipping ritual on the day before Hmong New Year's Day and Giàng (B), who still keep their tradition of worshipping ancestors and the spirits of the house on the occasion of the Hmong New Year.

A repeating theme in the Hmong stories depicted the Hmong people as being so poor that when they needed something for the performance of their rituals, they had to steal it from the rich - (or from the Han). They had a similar story about the ritual of offering a pig to the god of the main room. This was practised once a year on the second night of a month (preferably the second month of the year) to pray for the health and prosperity of people and livestock. In this ritual, they would close both their main door and the side door, sacrifice a

[14] This Hmong saying is written in Vietnamese Hmong.

small black pig, cook it and put its meat into a number of bowls (depending on the rule of each lineage) and display these pork bowls on the bed of the couple who headed the family. After this offering to the god, the pork bowls would be distributed to the participants for eating. During this whole ritual, the participants were not permitted to speak in languages other than Hmong nor to speak loudly to each other. All the waste matter, such as blood, urine, dung, pig hair, bones and the water used to clean the pork had to be buried inside the house or thrown into the fire. They explained that because the Hmong were so poor in the past, they had to steal a pig from the rich Han people and practise this ritual in secret so they would not be caught. As time passed, this had become their custom when sacrificing a pig for the gods.

The second difference between the Giàng (A) and Giàng (B) sub-clans was in the number of beef bowls offered to their dead parents in the ritual of cow sacrifice (*nhux dab*) to show their thanks and piety to their parents: 33 for Giàng (B) and 13 for Giàng (A). Giàng M. S., a member of the Giàng (A) sub-clan, said that the people of Giàng (A) used to offer 33 bowls of beef to their departed parents, putting these bowls around a big hill. However, because the hill was large, they could not pay attention to them all, and 20 bowls of beef had been eaten by dogs. From then on, families of the Giàng (A) clan practising the *nhux dab* ritual offered only 13 bowls of beef to their deceased parents.

Because of the differentiation of rituals and customs, the two sub-clans of Giàng believed and confirmed that they belong to two different clans. Therefore, the members of Giàng (A) sub-clan can marry the members of Giàng (B) sub-clan[15].

Even though families in the Giàng (A) clan were the first to come to the village, some of them migrated to other places in later years. At the time of my research, the number of families from the Giàng (A) clan who remained in Mã Pì Lèng village was only nine, with a total of 45 members. Giàng (B) was the biggest clan in the village, with 22 families and 126 persons. The clan with the surname Mùa was composed of 12 households with 61 members, and the clan with the surname Ly had six families and 31 members. Next was the clan with the surname Lầu, which had four families and 13 people. The clan with the surname Sùng had two families and 15 people; however, these two families did not acknowledge belonging to the same clan

[15] In Hmong tradition custom, members belong to the same clan cannot marry each other.

because one family had converted from their traditional beliefs to Protestant beliefs.[16] The clan with the surname Cư had one family and six persons, and the clan with the surname Lư had one family with four members. Lư was the only Green Hmong family in Mã Pì Lèng village; the other Hmong families were all White Hmong. Lư Nh. P. (aged 52 years), the Green Hmong household head, had followed his father to this village to escape war. He married a White Hmong woman in Đồng Văn, and they had two children.

2.2.3 History

Given that the height and isolation of Mã Pì Lèng village protected the Hmong living there from wars and conflicts with other Hmong forces, it had become a destination for other Hmong people who did not want to become involved in the wars in the early twentieth century. Giàng M. G., the leader of Mã Pì Lèng village, told me that two families from Giàng (A) were the first people to inhabit this village more than 100 years ago. Two brothers and their families had moved to this area from other mountains in Mèo Vạc in search of arable land. When they reached this mountain, which was covered by thick forest, the two Giàng (A) brothers realised this land contained arable soil for cultivating corn and opium. Therefore, they decided to clear patches of land on the south side of the mountain for making fields and built thatched houses near their fields so they could look after their crops. This kind of migration is familiar among the Hmong. Even when they had settled in this area, the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village still went to other nearby mountains to see if any cultivable land was available. This was a way to ensure they had a means of living in the karst mountain conditions. Giang M. C. remembered that his father, who had passed away some years before, used to be the chairman of Pải Lủng commune's People Committee in the late 1980s. He had

[16]Sùng M. V. (aged 32 years) had married his first wife some years ago and then crossed the Vietnam–China border to find a casual job during the cropping off-season. When he returned from China with his earnings, he discovered that his first wife had gone to China with another man. He decided to try to get his first wife back and returned to China to find her. In China, he learned some kung fu and was introduced to Protestantism. After several months of looking for his first wife without success, V. returned to his village and became seriously ill. Although he was treated in Mèo Vạc hospital as well as by Hmong herbs, he felt no better. He decided to convert to Protestantism and stopped practising Hmong rituals. After converting, his health returned to normal, after which he took a second wife, who already had three children, from the Mùa clan in the same village. V. said that he felt isolated from the Sùng clan as well as from other Hmong families in the village because he could not participate in Hmong rituals. From the other side, other Hmong families in the village avoid communicating with him. One reason is that he practices different beliefs and rituals than what other Hmong families do. But the most important reason is that the influence of local authority. Village leaders are required to prevent the spread of Protestant in the village. Thus, they impacted to Hmong people in the village by emphasizing the different from V.'s beliefs than Hmong traditional beliefs

continued going into the mountains in Thượng Phùng commune to burn new fields until 1989, when the district authority asked the Hmong people to restrict themselves to settled cultivation and not invade the land of other communes.

As the first arrivals, the two brothers of Giàng (A) clan occupied relatively flat land in the south-east of the village, which was rich with *av pa thw*, a yellowish-brown Ferralsol formed on deep limestone rock, which was considered the best soil of the village for cultivating maize. Because the older brother had no children and the younger brother had seven, all of the families of Giàng (A) clan in Mã Pì Lèng village were descendants of the younger brother.

Some years later, Hmong families from other places, including the families of Giàng (B), Mùa, Ly and Lầu clans, migrated to this Mã Pì Lèng village. Mrs Vừ Th. X. (aged 90 years in the official demography records but believed to be 98 years old) remembered that Giàng (B) families, led by Giàng Chá Tòng, moved to Mã Pì Lèng village from Phố Bảng village, which is on the border of Vietnam and China. Giàng Chá Tòng offered his two hectares of land in Phố Bảng to his older brother and led his sons, daughters and grandchildren on a migration of more than 80 km to the south-east, through many rocky mountains, to settle in Mã Pì Lèng because of its high-quality of soil. When he and his family moved to this village, his youngest son, who was born in 1919, had not yet been delivered. No-one knew why Tòng decided to give up his land in Phố Bảng and move to Mã Pì Lèng village—it may have been because of conflicts with his brothers or that Phố Bảng had become the centre of the opium trade between the Hmong people and China, attracting people from both Vietnam and China, making the village crowded with less available land and more conflict. Therefore, people who wanted to work on the land and were afraid of wars had to migrate to other areas. A third possibility is that his land, after several years of cultivation, had become less fertile and the crops did not grow well, resulting in a low income. This explanation would fit with Savina's (1924) description of the Hmong people migrating from mountain to mountain:

> We will always see them abandon a mountain that has become sterile as a result of deforestation, quickly cross the plain with carts, pushing their herds in front of them, sleeping at night along the roads as exiles, and go looking elsewhere for another more fertile mountain. (p. 175)

> They bring with them only their clothes, their blankets, if they have them, kitchen utensils, iron tools and ploughing tools, and the grain necessary to subsist until the next harvest. All is crammed together in carts that have been patched for the occasion, and there are enough carts for all the members of the family, from the youngest to the oldest. Children still young are also put in the carts, with poultry and small pigs. When everything is ready, they give the signal of departure, and everyone goes away, as if they were going to the market. (pp. 183–184)

The elderly Vừ Th. X., who gave me these details about Tòng's life, was Tòng's granddaughter in-law and also Tòng mother's relative. Marriage with members of one's mother's kin is encouraged among the Hmong in the mountains because keeping in touch with kin (both father's and mother's sides) will help keep the family strong. X. lived in Lũng Táo commune, Đồng Văn district, for around 12 or 13 years before getting married and moving to Mã Pì Lèng village to live with her husband. At that time, the village had nine houses: two houses of Giàng (A) clan, four houses of Giàng (B) clan, one house of Mùa clan, one house of Ly clan and one house of Lầu clan. Newcomers were welcome to settle in the village by Giàng (A) families because they could help each other to make fields and protect each other from thieves and wild animals. As latecomers, Giàng (B) clan settled in the southwest of the village, at a higher attitude, where the quality of soil was not as good as in the area where the Giàng (A) families lived.[17] Meanwhile, the Mùa, Ly and Lầu families, being fewer in number and hence weaker, lived near the Giàng (A) clan in order to unite and combine strengths.

Families from the Sùng, Cư and Lư clans were the latest arrivals in this village. Mr Cư N. X. said that he had followed his mother's brother, who belonged to the Sùng clan from Mùa Sà Lủng village, close to the Đồng Văn district, to escape from the conflicts between Hmong villages. This situation was the same for the Lư family, the only Green Hmong family in the village; the head of the Lư family had followed his grandfather to escape from the fighting. The Lư family came to this village with some other Green Hmong families. However, those Green Hmong families left Mã Pì Lèng village for other places during the border war between Vietnam and China in 1979, while only the current Lư family head decided to stay at Mã Pì Lèng village, where he married a White Hmong wife.

[17] The soil in the Giang B neighbourhood of Mã Pì Lèng is a kind of yellow-brown Ferralsol that the Hmong call *av suab*, which forms on the surface of limestone rock.

Before 1959, it was difficult to access Mã Pì Lèng village owing to the fact that this village was surrounded by several high mountains and there was no road to get in and out except some narrow earthen paths for local people to go to markets and visit their relatives in other villages. This isolated situation was not unique to Mã Pì Lèng village but was common in other Hmong villages in Đồng Văn Plateau. The steep landscape of this part of the Đồng Văn plateau and lack of road access allowed Hmong people to live in relative freedom and safety, isolated from other ethnic groups as well as from authorities in the lowlands. It also created advantages for Hmong rebel groups to expand their control and their opium trade activities. In 1959, Vietnam's government in general, and the Việt Bắc Autonomous Region's authorities in particular[18], decided to construct a 185-kilometre-long road through four mountainous districts of Đồng Văn Plateau, connecting this area with other lowlands of Hà Giang and Cao Bằng province. The reason was to take the control of this area and overcome the isolated location of the Đồng Văn Karst plateau. Young volunteers (*thanh niên xung phong*) from eight provinces including Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Lạng Sơn, Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Thái Nguyên, Nam Định and Hải Dương were sent to Đồng Văn Plateau to build the road. Subsistence for these volunteers was supported by Vietnam's state budget and the contributions of local people. 20 families of Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village were asked to offer their corn and livestock for constructors.[19]

The national road, which was completed in 1965, ran through Mã Pì Lèng village, ending its isolation. It made it easier for the Hmong to go to the market and sell their produce to the government. Because of the conditions, the Hmong could cultivate only one crop of maize, planting in February and harvesting in October. This main crop provided the entire grain needs of a family for one year. All other expenses, such as taxes and those for special occasions such as weddings, funerals and rituals, were covered by selling opium.

[18] Việt Bắc Autonomous Region was established by Decree No. 268-SL of the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, issued 1 July 1956. It comprised the provinces of Cao Bằng, Bắc Kạn, Lạng Sơn, Tuyên Quang (not including Yên Bình district), Thái Nguyên (not including Phổ Yên and Phú Bình districts) and Hữu Lũng district of Bắc Giang province (Thư viện Pháp Luật Việt Nam, 2019). Hà Giang province was merged into the Việt Bắc Region three years later, by Decree No. 020-SL of the President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, issued on 23 March 1959. The Viet Bac Autonomous Region was dissolved in December, 1975 (Thư viện Pháp luật Việt Nam, 2019.

[19] For more on the history of this road, see Chapter 7 of this thesis.

Some Hmong have moved from Mã Pì Lèng village to other places. The first time this occurred was in 1979 because of the frontier war between Vietnam and China. Because of Mã Pì Lèng's location near the border of Vietnam and China, the Vietnamese government sent 40 Kinh soldiers to the village to intercept attacks from China. These soldiers set up their tents in the cornfield of Giàng Giống Sò's family. Several Hmong villagers hid in a small cave near the soldiers' station. Around 10 Hmong families in Mã Pì Lèng village refused to hide in the cave, instead going to live in Niêm Sơn commune, close to Cao Bằng province. The Hmong people who lived in the cave had to eat uncooked vegetable seeds for three months; however, no attack occurred. The Kinh soldiers moved out of the village and the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village returned to their normal activities.

The second episode of outmigration of Hmong from Mã Pì Lèng village was in the early 1990s, when around ten families from the Giàng (A), Giàng (B) and Mùa clans moved to Tà Làng village, which was closer to the Nho Quế River, to stay close by their fields. Tà Làng village was, up to that time, comprised of a mix of Giáy and Tày people who cultivated rice paddy fields. Even though living together in one village, when Hmong people moved to Tà Làng village, they settled separately from Giáy and Tày people and at higher attitude. It appears as though that they had some conflicts with Giáy and Tày people at the beginning, even though the Giáy people in Tà Làng village I interviewed said that no conflict had happened and that they were friends of the Hmong. However, the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village said the Giáy and Tày people used to hit their relatives when they first migrated there. Therefore, they had mistreated two Giáy families that had moved to Mã Pì Lèng village some years before, refusing to accept them into their village. One Giáy woman complained to me that the Hmong people treated her family badly, including buying all the goods in their shop on credit and, when drunk, using offensive language and hitting their family members.

2.3 Village demography

During my first days in Mã Pì Lèng village, I spent most of the time going around the village to become familiar with it and make friends with Hmong villagers. Most of the houses were located along two sides of the cement main pathway, which was put in by the local authorities as one of the requirements to qualify as a 'new rural area'. Some houses at a higher altitude were connected to the main road only by small earth pathways. As a stranger in the village, I

was followed by several small children who watched me curiously. They were shy and tended to run away every time I looked at them. There seemed to be children everywhere: in the houses, inside and outside classrooms, in the fields and on the pathways and roads. This was not surprising because, in 2017, children comprised 47.5% (301 people) of the total population of the village. Most children, especially teenagers, were required to help their parents with housework and work in the fields, but younger children could play with their relatives.

According to the general censuses of Vietnam (UNFPA, 2011), the Hmong people have the highest fertility rate in Vietnam. In 1989, this was more than nine children per woman, declining to less than eight children per woman in 1999, less than five in 2009 and 3.6 in 2014, because of the implementation of a family planning program. Although decreasing, the high birth rate among Hmong people reflects the demands of living in remote and high mountainous areas and working on dry fields. Having more children in such a difficult context means more labourers and hence more wealth and security; and more protectors for the family, now and in the future.

When I was there in 2017, families had an average of 2.8 children. Most couples had three or four children, two had six children and some had none. Because of factors such as poor nutrition during pregnancy and after delivery, diseases, and falling accidents because of the steep terrain, each family had also lost at least one child. Clearly, living in the high, rocky mountains presented the Hmong with many risks and hazards and they always had to be aware and cautious and, when having children, plan for the worst.

Of the total population, 46.5% were adults aged 16 to 60 years. This group were the main income earners of the family. The number of Hmong elderly (60 years and above) was small: 18 people, 5% of the total population, most of them women.

Working hard in the fields in the limestone mountains, living in poor conditions and drinking excessive alcohol were the main causes of short life expectancy. In addition, adults died from falls in the mountains when they went to cut grass or take water to their livestock. Elderly Hmong mainly lived with their son's or grandson's family. Only three elderly people, who were widowed and had no sons (or whose daughters had moved to the husband's family home) lived alone in small houses.

The average size of Hmong households in the village was 5.3 people; the largest household had nine members while the smallest had one. Figure 2.3 below shows that the most common form of household in Mã Pì Lèng village is the nuclear family household with one or two generations living in the same house (38 families equal to 66.7 percent). Nineteen households are extended families which are composed of three and four generations (18 families and 1 family, respectively, equal to 31.6 percent and 1.7 percent). The nuclear families mostly came from extended families because traditionally, when Hmong boys grow up and marry, they leave their parents' house and build their own house on nearby land, which is often gifted by their parents. Parents live with their youngest son, who will inherit their house and look after them when they are old and can no longer work. Living in different houses but still within the same piece of land is advantageous for high mountain dwellers, keeping the familial relationships strong while facilitating the mobilisation of labour during the cropping season. It was the custom for Hmong families in one lineage to live close to each other for the same reason.

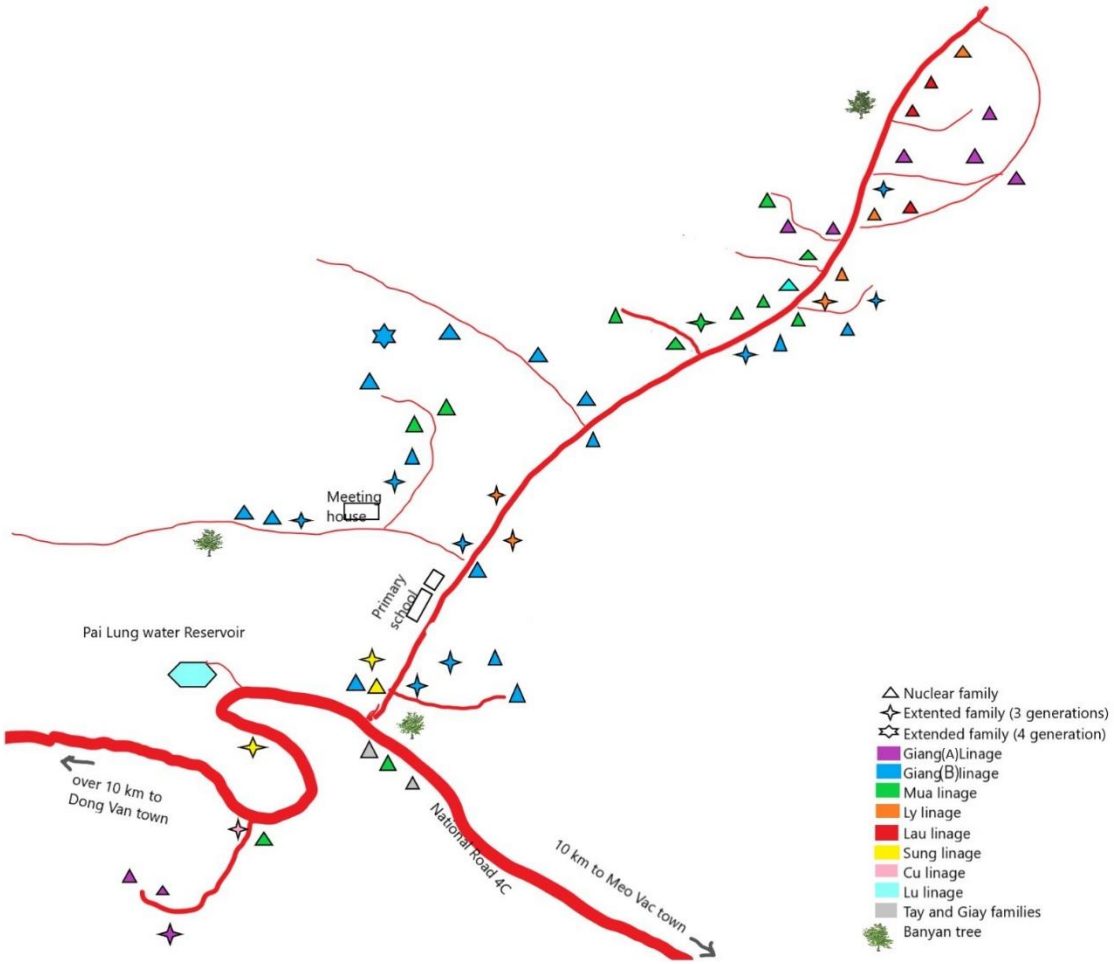

Figure 2.3: Distribution of families and clans in Mã Pì Lèng village in 2017 **(Drawn by Thu Tran and Giàng M. C.).**

When I first visited Mã Pì Lèng, at first sight, it appeared to be not a very poor village due to the fact that almost all Hmong houses were built essentially of cement, with ground-stone bricks and cement roofs; only three houses in the back corner of the village were still of thatch. However, in fact, some houses, especially houses near the road, were constructed with subsidies from the Vietnamese government or under the name of the Ministry of Police. Indeed since 1989 the Hmong in this village have experienced pronounced poverty owing to the difficulties of earning a living in a karst landscape, working on dry fields with only one corn crop a year and without any successful replacement crops after the official ban on opium cultivation. According to the leader of Mã Pì Lèng village, in 2016, 25 households in the village were recognized officially as the poor, equal to 43.9% of total households in the village. These households are supported by the government such as an amount of money for reconstructing

their house, dozens kilograms of rice, salt, and blankets, not to mention subsidies or exemptions for education and health costs.

The listing of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau as a Geopark in 2010 and the promotion of eco-tourism by the provincial and national governments brought large numbers of tourists to the plateau who have come to view the majestic, otherworldly landscape of the stone mountains. However, for the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng, this change has brought about relatively few opportunities for off-farm work in the tourist industry. For earning small cash income, some Hmong people, who are strong and young, find part time jobs such as kitchen hands in nearby Đồng Văn town or as labourers in small manufacturing firms. A more significant source of income comes from transnational labour and this has opened a new chapter of migration. When requiring large cash income for some special purposes such as paying for a wife or constructing a new house, some Hmong people travel across the border and find jobs in Chinese farms or factories for a short time in the agrarian off-season period. Others, who are very young or still single, both men and women, can leave their family to work in China longer; they only come back home one time a year, on the New Year's days. Oftentimes the destinations in China to which Hmong travel for employment are in adjacent mountainous regions of a very similar geology and topography. They include places from which, or through which, the ancestors of the Hmong of Vietnam migrated many generations ago. In making these journeys, Hmong people reconnect with their history of mobility as karst mountain migrants, and they put into practice their capacity and experience of working and travelling in the limestone mountains.

2.4 Conclusion

The Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng live in a challenging landscape of high limestone mountains on the border between Vietnam and China. In the Hmong studies literature, there is a debate about the relationship of the Hmong with the mountains. On the one hand, a positive perspective sees the Hmong as attracted to the mountains as places to realize deep-seated aspirations. The mountains provide the Hmong what they want and need. In the mountains, they feel free, secure and at home. On the other hand, a more critical view describes the misery and inconvenience experienced by the Hmong who are only there in the mountains because they have no other choice. They are latecomers, refugees, displaced people, losers

from the rebellions against the Han Chinese and now targets of strict development discipline. They had to move to a new home as the last place left and are now stranded in the mountains where they face hardship, poverty and isolation.

This chapter examines the relationship of the Hmong with the limestone mountains of northern Vietnam via the concept of belonging introduced by Basso (1996) and the notion of place-belongingness (Antonsich, 2010). Relating the narratives of elderly Hmong people about why and how their ancestors migrated to and settled in the Đồng Văn karst plateau, we gain insights into the meaning of the mountain landscape for the Hmong and how they emplace themselves within it. The histories of settlement offered by elderly Hmong confirm the value of the limestone mountain landscape to preceding generations of Hmong who, according to living memory came to this place to escape from war and oppression, search for arable land, and find security. In times of conflict, overpopulation and land shortage, the remote stone landscape of Đồng Văn Karst Plateau assumed great value for the Hmong as a place of freedom, security, and agrarian livelihood opportunities, despite its isolation, inaccessibility and harshness. The chapter talks about how the Hmong settled in Mã Pì Lèng, named its landscape features, familiarised themselves with the possibilities, limits, and dangers of its environment, and organized their residence, community and livelihoods. Through these poetic and practical activities, Hmong people have made a home in the Đồng Văn Karst plateau and have transformed the austere stone setting into a secure, familiar and viable human abode. The chapter not only relates how Hmong people have domesticated the limestone mountains, but demonstrates, in turn, how the mountains themselves have shaped Hmong migration, constrained action and facilitated certain settlement patterns and social relations. The relationship between people and their mountainous environment thus has been interactive and mutually constitutive.

Chapter 3: Dwelling with Limestone: Landscape Beliefs and Rites

Given the rocky, steep and irregular terrain of the limestone mountains, it is not easy for the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng to find a place to build their homes. During my time in this northern Vietnamese highland village, I witnessed the efforts of Hmong people to break large stones into small pieces and arrange them to create an area of flat ground that was large and stable enough to construct a house. It would take several days of hard work by clan members, both men and women and sometimes even children, to carve out such a space. An amount of money would be needed to supply food to the labourers. Therefore, I was surprised to see Ly M. P. moving his house from a large and flat location opposite the local primary school onto a plot of narrow and sloping ground that had nothing but stones and bushes. He explained that his old house had been built on 'bad land' that had caused his family members to be sick all the time. In addition, his animals could not develop, and his income was limited. Hence, he wanted to move to a new place that he considered 'good land'. When I asked why his father and his father's family had been able to stay on that land with no trouble, he stated, 'The land was good for him but not for me'. His father had been born in the Year of the Tiger, and the Hmong people believe that people born in that year have a spirit as strong as a tiger and can eliminate bad luck from the land. P.'s father had died and the title of head of household had automatically transferred to his eldest son, P. However, P. was not born in the Year of the Tiger; therefore, the land was not suitable for him to inhabit.

In Mã Pì Lèng village, there were signs of ritual everywhere: in the houses and fields, as well as along both main and small pathways. These included red cloth strings in the corners of houses; red threads tied to trees, rocks, stones or grass stalks; animal bones placed on branches; bamboo pipes hung on stones; corn cakes placed on grass on huge stones; and clothes and bamboo baskets left on stones. I was quite nervous when touching anything or even stepping because I was afraid that I would infringe a taboo or make a ritual invalid by carelessly kicking a stone out of its position on the path. Looking around the mountain landscape, more than 80% of which seemed to be covered by limestone, I wondered what the ritualistic symbols stood for, what led the Hmong to practise these rituals and whether they had any connections to the Hmong perceptions of the land in which they lived. In situations like that of P. and his family, I wondered what the meanings of 'good land' and 'bad land'

might be; how their experience of the steep and rocky terrain might be sensed and expressed; and how it might influence their behaviours and activities. Three conceptual approaches have helped me to guide these questions.

First and fundamental to Hmong conceptions of the mountainous landscape in Mã Pì Lèng is a belief in geomancy. This orientation, which is widespread in East Asia, considers the forms and orientation of the lived landscape as imbued with auspicious power (Freedman, 1968; Yoon, 2006). Humans must understand and accommodate themselves to such power if they are to prosper and avoid catastrophe in any setting. Hence, Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng diligently consult specialists in geomantic knowledge when selecting sites for houses, villages and graves; choosing dates for marriage, rituals, journeys and other major ventures; and interpreting illness and misfortune in their lives. Their practices accord with the geomantic beliefs of Hmong in other localities (Tapp, 1986), mountain peoples of southwest China (Roche, 2014), and peoples of lowland China and Vietnam (March 1968; Bayly, 2013; Harms, 2012).

Like many of the peoples in Southeast Asia, Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng also practice an animist system. They believe that spirits live inside the body of most things: for example, the spirit of mountains occupies the top of mountains, the spirit of water lives in rivers, streams, or ponds, the spirit of human, animals and plants stay inside their bodies. Even though these spirits abide in the bodies of things, Hmong people believe that these spirits belong to different world than the world in which we (humans) are living. The world spirits inhibit is called the world of darkness (*yeeb ceeb*) and the human occupied world is called the world of light (*yai ceeb*) (Cu & Hoang, 1994; Symonds, 2004). These two worlds exist not separately but connect together in some ways. Shamans are the people who have a power to come and go across these two worlds and communicate with spirits.

Animism, according to Descola (2006), is a notion which is quite common in South and North America, in Siberia and some parts of South - East Asia. People in these areas believe that every world being including mountains, rivers, stone, animals, plants, etc. share the same kind of spirit like human. Human and nonhuman beings, therefore, develop their personal relationship to each other, for example, friendship, exchange, seduction or hostility. When studying the relationship between South American indigenous people and their environment,

de la Cadena (2010) learnt that the land, mountains and other natural entities were conceived by the indigenous people as 'Earth beings' and they were recognised as part of the indigenous community. These Earth beings and people developed a mutual relationship in which they cared for, respected and nurtured each other. She cited the work of Oxa (2004) and Taussig (1980) as evidence for her statement:

> To care and be respectful means [to] want to be nurtured and [to] nurture others, and this implies not only humans but all world beings . . . We nurture our kids and they will nurture us when we get old. We nurture the seeds, the animals and plants and they also nurture us . . . By feeding the mountain spirits, peasant producers also ensure that the mountain spirits will feed them. (p. 354)

Writing of similar practices among Hmong people in northwest Vietnam, Tran (1996) emphasised that the relationship between the people and the spirits is equal and mutual. The spirits are considered members of the community and share an equal social hierarchy with humans. When Hmong people offer something to the spirits, they expect to receive support from the spirits. If they believe that they violate or infringe the spirits, they also offer gifts to the spirits for asking forgiveness from the spirits.

Thirdly, the Hmong belief in spirits, animate entities and invisible landscape powers can be approached as a vernacular version of environmental history, encompassing personal biography, collective memory, and local Hmong experiences of living in the mountains. As several scholars have noted, the relationship between people and their landscape is culturally mediated via local knowledge, myths and rituals (Basso, 1996; Blu, 1996; Kahn, 1996). Ingold (2000) observes that, not only through their experiences with the landscape and the atmosphere in their daily activities, but also through their impressions of those spaces, people develop a strong connexion to the specific spaces that build their distinctive characters. Their experiences can be seen through the stories about both the human and non-human beings. As Taylor has observed among the Kinh, Cham and Khmer ethnic groups in Southern Vietnam, animist myth and ritual serve as a kind of environmental consciousness and local people's history. Analysis of such myths and rites gives access to events and experiences not otherwise recorded in mainstream or official histories (Taylor 2004, 2007, 2014).

Basso (1996) similarly observed that people develop their self-consciousness of places and enrich their relationship to geographical spaces through daily experience. He emphasised:

> For the self-consciousness, experience of place is inevitably a product and expression of the self whose experience it is, and therefore, [it is] unavoidable [that] the nature of that experience (its intentional thrust, its substantive content, its affective tones and colorings) is shaped at every turn by the personal and social biography of the one who sustains it. (p. 55)

This chapter examines the Hmong sense of belonging to the karst mountains through their myths and geomantic and animist practices. The limestone plateau on which they live in the Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc areas of Hà Giang province, is bare and infertile. Yet the Hmong have a consciousness of their karst environment as a place imbued with a host of forces, entities and spirits whose presence is not apparent to the untrained observer. In their daily struggle to eke out a living in the limestone landscape, local Hmong people show respect for these occult forces and entities. In their daily life rituals relating to the landscape, stones, water and trees, Hmong interact intensively with these powers of nature. They do so to secure their life in a demanding environment in keeping with traditional knowledge and local memory. I argue that though their myths and rituals, Hmong give expression to their experience of dwelling in the mountains and put into play their unique sense of place.

3.1 Hmong Perceptions of the Landscape Through Their Geomantic Beliefs and Practices

In the geomantic world view of the Hmong, the mountain landscape plays an important role in their own lives as well as those of the next generations. The Hmong believe that the mountains help to protect villagers and enable life; therefore, people must have mountains around them to prosper and avoid misfortune. The people must take strict measures to protect the mountainous landscape to ensure that it continues to protect the Hmong and enable them to flourish. This point of view is similar to the indigenous knowledge found in the sacred mountains of Latin America, as described by de la Cadena (2010). The indigenous people in the Peruvian Andes believe that mining concessions in sacred mountains, which are considered a ‘powerful earth-being, the source of life and death, of wealth and misery’, will cause accidents and dangers for humans. This led to social movements opposing violations to

the Earth beings, which are believed to have rights that should be respected (de la Cadena, 2010).

In the history of the Hmong on the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, the emergence of the Vương clan in Đồng Văn is a legend that connects with a belief in geomancy. In his interview with me, Mr Hùng Đình Quý (aged 81 years) related the following story:

> Vàng Dúng Lùng (another name for Vương Chính Đức, who was considered on Vietnam media as Lord of the Hmong in Đồng Văn from 1865 to 1947[20]) used to be a very poor man who lived near Lũng Cú village, today the northernmost point of Vietnam. Once, when he was climbing a hill that now belongs to Sà Phìn commune, Đồng Văn district, to cut grass for his cow, he eavesdropped on some Han people who had brought goods through China to Vietnam for trade, while they were sitting under a tree to rest. They observed that the hill on which he was cutting the grass was very good land, so if anyone made a house on that hill, they would be promoted and become rich. He decided to move his house to that hill immediately. After a while, he organised the Hmong men to rebel against the invasion of troops of the Black Flags, who had been chased by the Qing Dynasty after the failure of Taiping Rebellion in China (1850–1854) and then again by the French colonial push to gain control over the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. In 1913, after the Hmong-French Agreement, Vương Chính Đức was given the title of *Bang tá* and he governed all the Hmong in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau region and answered directly to the French. He sent his son, Vương Chí Sình, to Ma Li Pho (China) to learn about opium trading and subsequently, gained a huge amount of money from the opium trade, enough to build a palace replacing his old house on the hill.
>
> When he died, his body was buried on the top of a mountain not far from his palace; however, a long time after his funeral, his descendants fell and hurt their backs. Another Han geomancy reader was invited to the palace to find out the reasons for this. He stated

[20] The title "Lord of the Hmong" is a legendary and abstract notion. It emerges in the legends of the Hmong and also stays in the minds of Hmong people. No evidence shows if a Lord of the Hmong actually existed in their history, however, many Hmong people believe that one day a Lord of the Hmong would appear and save them from poverty and life sufferings. Some individuals and organizations have used this notion for gathering Hmong forces or other political purposes (Vuong, 2005). Vương Chính Đức (*Vaj Tsoov Loom*) did not declare that he was the Lord of Hmong people. This title was given to him and later his son, Vương Chí Sình (*Vaj Txhiaj Lwm)* by Kinh officers from lowlands. In fact, Vương Chính Đức was a leader of a group of Hmong people in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. He used to control a part of Đồng Văn Plateau, including nowadays Đồng Văn district and some communes of Quản Bạ district. Stories related to Vương Chính Đức were told among the Hmong who live in the fluency area of Vương clan first. Recently, these stories were spread over the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau with the support of Vietnam media.

> that the tomb of Vương Chính Đức was located in the wrong place, on the back of a dragon; therefore, his tomb should be moved down to the foot of the mountain and then the health of his family members would return.

This story reflects the geomantic beliefs of the Hmong people described by Tapp (1986, p. 90). The interactions and the causality among the ancestors, descendants and landscape were mountains, water flows and natural creatures that could determine the appropriate burial site for the departed. The ideal burial site was a place in which the mountains were specifically organised around the location, with rivers flowing down through the mountains. The mountains were imagined as a dragon, and the water flows were seen as the veins of the dragon, which were linked with natural energy, strength and royalty. Thus, if a deceased person were to be buried in such place, he would capture the geomancy of the other world and become a king. After Vương Chính Đức's tomb was shifted, his son become the king and ruled the land.

Other people believed that after becoming the Lord of the Hmong, Vương Chính Đức hired a Han professional geomancy reader who spent several months going around the four districts in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau to identify the ideal land for his new palace. A small hill located in the middle of the Sà Phìn valley, surrounded by mountains, was chosen as the grounds for the new palace because of its shape and orientation. The Han geomancy specialist interpreted the shape of the hill as the shell of a turtle, which was believed to be a symbol for long life, wealth and career success. The rocky mountains surrounding the valley were said to act as a protective wall for the palace, securing its residents from all kinds of enemies (Viet Tuan, 2018).

These stories express the Hmong belief that the land affects human life—good land supports promotion and wealth, while bad land brings bad luck and poor health for the landholders. In the minds of the Hmong people, the Han people had more power than the Hmong because they were rich, while the Hmong were poor; the Han had their own written language, while the Hmong had none. Therefore, the Han people's knowledge of geomancy was considered richer and more precise than that of the Hmong. When the Hmong practised their rituals, they believed that using the Han language in their chants would have more power than the Hmong language in defeating evil spirits. Hence, the Hmong people accepted the geomancy

knowledge of the Han, which was based on the shape of the land and water. However, only a wealthy person such as Vương Chính Đức had enough money to pay for a Han geomancer; Hmong people, as the poorest group in Đồng Văn, could not afford it, although they had their own ways of assessing the value of a piece of land. The Hmong called this '*tiv (saib) liaj*', meaning 'to observe the land'. The practice of *tiv liaj* only applies to houses and tombs and relates to the wealth and safety of the family and the clan. It has a close relationship with the perceptions that the Hmong people have about the mountains, the living environment with which they have been associated for hundreds of years.

In the Hmong language, the word for mountain is *roob*. This word comprises both the meanings of the mountain itself and the spirit located on the mountain. Both of these things have an influence on the Hmong's life. In local Hmong belief, mountains play an important role in the enhancement of life. Mountains provide everything that necessary for the life of the Hmong people such as places for making houses and dry crop fields, construction materials, herbs, protection, and more. Besides that, mountains also bring spiritual values to the Hmong people. Living on the mountain, they are the first people to obtain the first light from the morning sun, bringing luck and convenience in working. When constructing a house, the back of the house is set against the mountain, which protects the house as well as the family living in the house. The main front door is open to space, meaning that luck and wealth will freely flow into the house. If from the main front door, the people can see the top of a high mountain slope, they will become rich and healthy. The Hmong avoid setting the main front door opposite a cave or hole because of their belief that all the money they earn will fall into that cave or hole.

The principles adopted to build a house also apply to tombs. In Mã Pì Lèng village, three cemeteries were located between the village and the fields. Almost all deceased people were buried alongside other members of their clan, and their tombs were set the way Hmong people situated their houses: the feet were put against the mountain and the head pointed towards the open space. Only one tomb was set in a different direction: the grave of the man in the Ly clan who had killed himself. The Hmong people believe that if people kill themselves, their spirits will not be together with their clan in the world after death.

Choosing a piece of land for building a house or setting up a tomb depended on the age of the head of the family building the house or of the deceased person being buried. Similar to several ethnic groups in China, Vietnam and other Asian countries, the Hmong calculate time by lunar cycles, which are named after animals: mouse, cow (buffalo), tiger, rabbit (cat for the Vietnamese), dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, chicken, dog and pig. They believe that people who are born in the tiger or dragon years have a strong spirit and can live on hard land such as limestone. People who are born in other years that do not have a strong enough spirit have to study the land more carefully to find land that is suitable for their year of birth, which will make their family safe, enable them to raise healthy livestock and earn a sufficient income. Land that is not suitable for their birth year ('bad land') will bring danger to the family such as illness for both people and livestock and poor harvests.

To discover whether the land on which to build a house is good or bad, the Hmong practised a ritual called *suav su ua lub tsev* (count the direction to make house) as follows:

> One morning in November 2016, Sùng M. C., after getting married and having a baby, decided to live separate from his parental family. He intended to build a new house on a piece of ground in front of his father's house. His father, Sùng M. V., asked Giàng M. P., a middle-aged man from the Giàng (B) clan who was V.'s mother's nephew and had experience in geomancy, to see if the ground was good or bad for house construction. V., P. and three more men from the Giàng (B) clan sat together on the ground. In the space between them were a pot of homemade corn whisky, some small ceramic cups filled with whisky, incense sticks and some corn flour, which was all put into a bamboo basket and a ceramic bowl. The five men drank wine and talked for a while. Around 10 minutes later, P. lit an incense stick, used this stick to draw a round line around the bowl of corn flour and then put the bowl upside down into the basket of corn flour. Then he continued to use the incense stick to draw a round line around the bowl, now inside the basket, and used his finger to trace a line in four directions from the bowl's rim to the edge of the basket. After doing that, he carefully lifted the bowl out of the basket. The mound of corn flour seemed to retain the shape of the bowl for a moment, then one side of the mound collapsed. P. shook his head for a while and repeated the ritual, but one side of the bowl-shaped corn flour mound still fell away. After repeating this four times with no change, P. pointed in the direction that he saw from the ritual was bad and informed the head of Sùng household of this and then threw the corn flour in the basket onto the ground. Everyone took a long breath, finished their whisky and

returned to the house. They sat around a table, had breakfast and chatted about which ground should be best to build the new house. Finally, they decided to build the new house on the ground that was situated to the left of the old house and behind the local kindergarten and primary school.

At 11 in the morning of this day, four youths from the Giàng (B) and Sùng clans brought heavy hammers and started to break up the big stones on the ground. Suddenly, a middle-aged man came and asked them to stop breaking up the stones. He said that ground was not good for building a house either. After a day of consulting with several relatives in the Giàng (B) clan who were good at constructing houses, Sùng M. V. took a bottle of whisky to his neighbour, Giàng M. V., also from the Giàng (B) clan. He asked V. if he could swap his land with V.'s garden, which was the most suitable land for building the new house for his son's family. V. accepted the bottle of whisky and agreed to swap the land. A day later, the construction work started.

In the ritual described above, the bowl of corn flour represents the mountain—when its side collapsed, it meant that the land would not be stable enough to build a house and, if the house was constructed on that land, the family would be vulnerable to accidents, become unhealthy or have poor harvests.

The Hmong occasionally practised an additional ritual to assess the land by placing three or more rice kernels (or corn kernels for the Hmong who lived at lower altitudes and cultivated rice) on a corner of the ground proposed for the house and covering it with a clean bowl. After three days, they lifted the bowl and inspected the seeds. If the seeds were in the same place or had sprouted, the land would be favourable for the family. However, if the number of seeds had changed, this indicated that the land was not favourable for building a house. They did not use the seeds that they cultivated in the fields because they were afraid that if they used the common seeds, mice would come and eat them.

3.2 Sacred Stones, Trees and Natural Spirits: Animating the Karst Mountains

In the Hmong belief, some natural spirits are believed to play a crucial role in the protection and development of life. Descola (2012) suggested that, in some societies, the natural spirits, for example, appearing in a tree or an animal, which are important to the local economy, are seen as 'founding ancestors and guarantors of human well-being'. Hoang (2009), when

studying the forest exploitation of the Thai in Muang Tấc, Sơn La, Vietnam, contended that sacred trees are signal of Thai rights over land. Hmong people, living on a stone plateau, have formulated beliefs about sacred stones, sacred trees and other natural spirits which have a vital impact on their life.

3.2.1 Sacred Stones

In the landscape of Mã Pì Lèng village, there were stones everywhere, covering almost the entire surface area. Therefore, stone was the most familiar material for the Hmong, who used it to build their houses, gates, fences, fields, paths, cooking facilities, water cisterns and other items. The Hmong discriminated between types of stone based on colour, such as green stone (limestone), white stone (granite) and yellow stone (a kind of soft stone that develops from limestone). They understood the characteristics of each type of stone and knew whether it was fit for an intended purpose and how to determine the amount of labour they must expend to use it. For example, when constructing houses, they used only limestone to grind powder for forming bricks or to make a cement mixture to stick the bricks together. They did not use granite for this purpose because it was much harder than limestone and could destroy or damage the grinder. They tried to avoid building their houses on ground that contained granite, but if they could not, they had to use more labour to break up the stones when preparing flat ground for a house. While the soft yellow stone could not be used in construction, it could be used in rituals such as *thi su*, which was practised to eliminate risks and bad luck for a clan, because it could be cut into the required shape easily.

Stone played an important role in the spiritual life of the Hmong residents of Mã Pì Lèng. According to Symonds (2004a), the *Qhuab Kev,* the epic pan-Hmong song of creation and death, mentions stone and rocky landscapes several times, as where ‘the earth springs from’; where people could find yeast for making wine, hemp seeds for making clothes and seeds for domestic food crops; and where the souls of dead people could hear the sound of their parents and relatives. Because it is stable and unbreakable, stone is believed to be the material from which the bones of a body were first made in the origins of humankind (Doan, 1974). The Hmong people’s beliefs about stone are similar to the belief in sacred stone of the Chinese people (Wang, 1992) and several Indigenous peoples in America and Africa, where stone is believed to be alive and to have created the sky, animals and first people (Varner, 2004). In

many cultures, it is believed that stone possesses supernatural powers that help protect humans from evil spirits, eliminate danger and misfortune, heal illness and nurture children. Researchers who have studied sacred stones have noted that this widespread belief has its roots in the Stone Age and is still practised all around the world (Bernstein, 1997; Varner, 2004; Wang, 1992). The Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village had grown up around limestone mountains, and their veneration of sacred stone was multifaceted and a common practice in their lives.

The Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng believed that stones contained wildlife spirits that could affect their lives. Men of the Giàng (A) clan told me they were afraid of a kind of stone that was located on the very top of the mountains called a tiger stone (*zeb tsov*). (In fact, this stone appeared everywhere around the Hmong people and they did not need to go to the top of the mountains to collect it). Because the tiger was the most dangerous animal that threatened their lives, they believed that a stone containing the spirit of the tiger would bring harm and death to their families. They believed that if someone brought these tiger stones into the house, they would have sickness in both humans and livestock, accidents, bad luck and even death. If anyone accidentally brought this kind of stone into the house, they had to take it back to its location on top of the mountains after holding a ritual to apologise to the tiger stone and eliminate bad luck.

The top of the mountain was believed to be the habitat of spirits and evil entities; thus, it was thought that when people climbed there, they could disturb these spirits and evil entities and their spirits could be caught if the spirits and evil beings liked their faces, voices or music if they played their instruments there. Talkative and drunk people would not be welcomed by the spirits and evil entities (or even by humans).

In addition, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village had a legend about tiger spirits who made their homes on the steep slopes near the Nho Quế River and who would catch anyone who went there and take them to their deaths. It could be that the mountain peaks and sheer cliffs near the river were dangerous places where people could easily have an accident if they were not paying attention; therefore, the elderly Hmong may have created stories as a way of preventing children and other people from venturing there to save their lives. Whatever the

origin of the beliefs, the awe felt towards such places was widespread and was transferred via tales from generation to generation.

Giàng M. C., my host, took me to his corn fields and proudly introduced me to his snake stone (*zeb nab*). While this stone looked similar to other stones on any one of his fields, one side was shaped like a cobra. C. said this stone had the spirit of a snake inside it that would help protect his harvest from thieves and mice. Among all creatures, tigers and dragons were considered the most powerful species because of their strength and capacity to bring misfortune. The snake was considered dangerous as well because of its poison, though of lower rank because it is small. When I asked C. whether he made offerings to this stone, he replied that he didn't. When I asked why, he replied, 'Because it has not brought any danger to me and my family yet'. Thus, the degree of awe or danger the Hmong people sensed from the power of stone to affect their lives had parallels with the degree of complexity or intensity of ritual veneration or avoidance practised in the presence of stone.

The Mã Pì Lèng villagers worshipped two large limestone rocks, one close to a sacred tree and the main path of the village and the other not far from Giàng V. S.'s house, near the top of the mountain. These rocks were taller than the height of a normal adult; the bottoms of them were narrower than their girths, so that where the stones met the ground, they made a small cave in which the Hmong people could stick joss papers with decorations, similar to those they used to adorn their altars for ancestors in their houses. The offerings typically included 10 or 12 joss papers stuck together, representing the months of the year; on these joss papers, they carved out the shape of several round coins, with the purpose of asking for wealth. They would affix three cock feather tufts to these joss papers, one on top and two below.

These prominent stones played a role in the protection and nurturance of the clan members that lived near them. I learned about one when visiting the house of Giàng V. S. It was winter, the low season in the agricultural calendar, and he was preparing to build a new house for his adoptive son, Giàng X. M. Six people, both men and women, all of them relatives of S., had come to help him with some construction work and they sat together around a square wooden table having dinner. It was quite early to eat at that time, around 4 pm, but the dinner was served early so that these helpers could return to their homes before nightfall. S.'s wife, aged more than 60 years, was busy cooking in the kitchen and putting more food on the table. The

meal consisted of two plates of boiled chicken, two big plastic bowls of noodles, one plastic bowl of unsalted pumpkin soup and one big plastic bowl of *mèn mén* (cooked corn flour), their staple food. These dishes were all put in the middle of the table. S's mother was sitting against the rear wall of a bedroom area, feeding her great-grandchildren. I was invited to join the dinner. We were not given separate small bowls to hold our own food portions; instead, each of us was given a large aluminium spoon that we could use to take food from the big plates and bowls on the table. Homemade corn whisky, contained in a plastic jar, was poured into a small cup and given to the most high-status person at the table, a middle-aged man in the Giàng (B) clan. He finished his cup of whisky and gave it back to the person who kept the alcohol jar. This person refilled the cup and delivered it to the person seated to the right of the man who had just drunk from it. This drinking sequence continued until one round was finished, and then the people started to eat. We ate and drank while toasting people's health and wishing for the new house to be constructed well. I told them I had heard about their clan stone and requested to visit it if permitted. Everybody laughed happily, and M. said he would take me there right away because it was close to his house. We went through the rear door and climbed to the top of mountain. M. used to be a son of S.'s older brother, but his blood father had died when he was very young and his mother had remarried some years later, so ever since then, S. had cared for him as his own son because he had no sons.

On the way to the clan shrine, M. told me how that stone had become his clan stone as follows:

> One night around 10 years ago, when everybody was sunk deep in sleep, a big rock around 1.5 m high and wider than four humans' arms separated from the top of the mountain and rolled quickly downhill, directly toward the house of Mr Giàng V. S. from the Giàng (B) clan. At the time, the house contained Mr S., his mother, wife, son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. The huge noise made by the falling stone woke up everybody in the house. They were so scared and immediately ran away from the house. Fortunately, when the stone was just 20 m from the house, it fell into a quite big hole and stopped there. The shaman of Giàng (B) clan, Mr Giàng Giống Lùng, was invited to the S.'s home the next day. After consideration and calculations with an incense stick, he announced that the falling rock was a sacred rock for the clan, a clan rock (zeb senhv) that had come to protect S.'s family as well as other Giàng (B) clan families. Therefore, people of the Giàng (B) clan had a responsibility to worship this sacred rock.

Since then, at every Hmong lunar New Year's festival, the head of the Giàng (B) families takes a cock, joss papers, incense sticks and a bottle of homemade corn wine to the foot of the stone. There, they sacrifice the cock, daub some of its feathers in its blood and stick them onto three spots with the joss papers, which they hang at the foot of the stone. The cock is boiled in hot water on a fire by the stone until thoroughly cooked, before being put onto a plate in front of the joss papers. The head of the clan burns incense sticks them into the soil close to the plate of chicken and prays that the sacred stone will protect their families and other Giàng (B) clan members from external harm. Because the chicken has been sacrificed and offered to the sacred stone, it cannot be brought back to the house after the ritual but has to be eaten totally, mostly by men, in the area in front of the stone.

Through this powerful interaction between stone and humans, we can see how a normal stone can be detached from its ordinary nature and transformed into the realm of the sacred. In this case, the Hmong showed their recognition of the limestone boulder as potent yet benign; it crashed directly towards them, but it conspicuously pulled up short and did them no harm, thus becoming identified as protector of this Hmong clan. Their annual offerings to the sacred stone acknowledged its protection and affinity with their clan. These types of rites show the mutual relationship that exists between the humans and rocks that co-inhabit this mountainside landscape. The sacred stone also is the signal of Hmong ownership over the stone areas like the meaning of sacred tree for the Thai (Hoang, 2009).

The second of the large sacred stones in Mã Pì Lèng village had a role in reproduction and specifically, child nurturance. When I visited a Hmong scholar in Hà Giang city, Mr Hùng Đình Quý, I told him about the aforementioned clan stone (*zeb senhv*) of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng. Mr Quý told me about the sacred stone called *zeb xinhz* (a name with a pronunciation similar to the clan stone), which had the ability to aid human reproduction. This Hmong belief was different from the Kinh ritual for 'ordering children'. The Kinh people believe that particular stones in some Buddhist temples have the ability to support fertility and if a woman failed to become pregnant after some years of marriage, she would come to touch these stones. However, the role of *zeb xinhz* for the Hmong was as an adopted mother or father for an infant or child who was weak and sick. Z*eb xinhz* could be any sandstone boulder around the village.

As Hmong women in Mã Pì Lèng work hard on the stone corn fields and lack nutrients during pregnancy, their children are at high risk of becoming malnourished, both in utero and postpartum, because the women typically fare poorly with their everyday food of cooked corn flour, salt and boiled vegetables. Moreover, the climate of the high mountains in the north of Vietnam is harsh, dry and very cold in winter, causing illness for newborns or young children with low resistance. If a family had a malnourished or sick baby, they had two options to solve this problem. The first solution was changing the child's name, because the Hmong people believed that if the name was not suitable for the child, it would bring him or her sickness. For example, a son of Giàng M. Ch. was given the name 'Sa' two days after birth. However, he cried throughout the day and night for days and was sick, so his father changed his name to 'Tu'. Some children in Mã Pì Lèng village had had their names changed five times before they finally became strong.

The second solution was having an adopted father or mother, which was where the *zeb xinhz* assumed its role. The parents of a sickly new-born would bring him or her to a big stone in the village, tie a red cloth around the top of the stone and ask this stone to become an adopted father and mother and support the child to become healthy. Sometimes, the parents would choose a large tree as the adopted father and mother for their baby. Large stones and trees were selected because the Hmong people believed they were strong, unbreakable and proliferous. After this ritual, the stones or trees would be not destroyed by the Hmong villagers because they did not want to harm the baby. Three days after this ritual, the first villager who entered the house would be considered the representative of the baby's adopted father and mother and would be asked to give a string of cloth to the baby to tie on his or her wrist as protection from sickness. Sometimes, the parents would bring the child out to the crossroads with joss papers and incense sticks and ask the first person to pass by to give the string of cloth to the baby.

As the most common material of the limestone landscape, stone appeared in several other Hmong rituals in Mã Pì Lèng village, playing a different role in each ritual. For instance, at funerals, stone was used to serve food for the dead, a natural tray for the corn cakes and *mèn mén*. After the funeral, the Hmong would feed the dead spirit over nine days, with baby chicken and *mèn mén* placed in three bamboo tubs (*taj xyoob)*, which were hung on a standing stone outcrop close to the village path. In the *thi su* ritual, which asked for wealth and the

elimination of bad luck for the whole clan, yellow stone was cut small and placed in a glass bottle that contained wood coals representing the bad luck and bad habits of every member in the clan. This served to keep the bad luck and bad habits inside the bottle, preventing them from leaking out and threatening the life of clan members. The bottle would be hidden in a secret cave so that no-one could release its contents. Stones featured in the *da su* ritual, which was practised for a pregnant woman who was close to delivering to pray to the spirits to help ease the process of giving birth. The shaman, along with the members of the family, would make a grass circle and tie onto it joss paper strips and strings of red cloth and prepare three small bunches of grass with some red cloth strings attached to the heads and the roots. The grass circle would be circulated around the body of the pregnant woman from head to toe about five times before it was discarded through the main door. Then he would circulate the three bunches of grass, tied to a live cock, counter-clockwise around the woman three times, sometimes uttering prayers as he raised the chicken to the head level. Then the shaman would throw the chicken out through the main doorway. This chicken was sacrificed later near a village path and its blood was used to put on the three bunches of grass. These grass bunches would be taken to the crossroads of a path that connected the village with the fields and laid down in the middle of the trail. A stone would be put on these bunches of grass to keep them in place so they could not be moved by wind, animals or people. In this case, the stone represented the hardship and difficulties that the pregnant woman had to face during the pregnancy. When the pregnant woman was about to give birth, her husband would go to the crossroads and take the stone off the three bunches of grass to free the pregnant woman from the hardship and suffering of pregnancy and ensure she would deliver the baby easily.

The Hmong people used to worship a stone that they called *thw tiv.* When studying the cultural life of the Hmong people in Lao Cai province, Tran (1996) translated *thw tiv* as 'the Landlord(s)'. He described the following:

> Within a village or inter-village, the Hmong people worship the Landlord(s) *thu ti*[21]. The Landlord(s) is worshipped under a huge tree [or a standing rock] in the forbidden forest *lung san*. [In] some places such as Seo Mi Ti-Sapa, Ta Thang-Muong Khuong . . . the Landlord of a village is only a strange-shaped stone. The worship of trees and stones is a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia. However, in some villages upstream [from] Chay River, Mr

[21] These words are written in Vietnamese pronunciation of Hmong language

> Hoang Sin Dan, the leader who led the Hmong to oppose the Han Yellow Flag troops, is worshipped as the landlord. Also Mr Giang Chin Hung, who led the Hmong against the French colonial troops, is considered the landlord and worshipped . . . in the villages in the upper part of Bac Ha district. Some Landlords in Sapa, [who were] the first people who came to the new land and created a new village, were worshipped after dying as the Landlords of that village. These Landlords [lived] under a stone roof, in a cave or below a big tree in the forbidden forest . . . [The Hmong] people believed that these Landlords [had an] influence in their lives. People in the village could be strong, have a good harvest and have several livestock due to the support of the Landlords. [Conversely], [if] livestock got a disease or people were in an accident, [this meant] that someone had acted disrespectful to the Landlords, such as cutting a tree in the forbidden forest or destroying the place where the Landlord was settled . . . Every year, on the Day of Dragon in the second month (or [the second day] of the second month [of the Hmong year]), the representatives of all [the] families in the village go to the forbidden forest to the worshipping place, in order to practise an offering ritual to the Landlord(s) . . . [using] chicken or pig(s). The head of the village—*lung thau*[22]—prays to the Landlord(s) for the blessing:
>
> 'I bring here two chickens.
>
> Joss papers and incense sticks for the Landlord(s).
>
> You have to bless us, adults and children, for no sicknesses. (pp. 50–52)

According to Tran, the landlord was considered a member of the village and was treated as equal to other villagers. If the villagers delivered offerings to the landlord, they believed he was obliged to support the villagers' fortunes and protect them from dangers, diseases and bad luck. Tran acknowledged that the ritual of *thw tiv* was relatively simple because of its ambiguous role in the Hmong's life compared with that of the spirits of the house or the ancestors that governed the whole fortune of all members in the Hmong family and clan. He commented that the Hmong people worshipped *thw tiv* only when they were in trouble or on the second day of the Hmong New Year. I have assumed that the Hmong in Lao Cai still worship *thw tiv.*

[22] These words are written in Vietnamese pronunciation of Hmong language

For the Hmong people on the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, *thw tiv* has several meanings. Mr Vàng Tài Phủ, a Hmong intellectual in Thanh Vân commune, Quản Bạ district, told me that each clan had its own *thw tiv*. For his clan, *thw tiv* was a sandstone rock located near the production fields with the purpose of protecting the corn and rice from mice, the chicken from foxes and people from tigers and bears. Mr Ma Khái Sò, also from Quản Bạ district, told me that *thw tiv* was located only near the dry fields, stressing its connection with mountain agriculture. Thus, *thw tiv* somehow shared the same role as the spirits of the field, who were responsible for the productivity of crops.

The fifth or the sixth day of the Hmong New Year was called the *khiav tsaz*, meaning 'open the new (crop) season'. On this day, the head of the household would take in his back-basket some joss papers, incense and homemade corn wine, as well as a pickaxe in one hand, to the standing stone close to his corn field. He would burn the incense and put it, together with the joss papers, into a crack on the rock. Then he would pour the wine into a cup and pray for a good crop while pouring the wine at the bottom of the rock. Finally, he would take the pickaxe to his field and bury it in the soil, before returning home.

Figure 3.1: A Hmong man practising the *khiav tsaz* ritual in his field in Đồng Văn district **(Photo: Tung Tran).**

The second meaning of *thw tiv* is the representative for the war ghost (*dab trob*). Mr Vàng Tài Phủ believed this meaning had its roots in the Qing Dynasty, when conflicts between the Han and the Hmong became frequent. At that time, *thw tiv* was a way to worship the war ghost and seek a blessing to prevent the Hmong people from being injured. Only a person who had been appointed by the shaman of the clan could hold this ritual. If the clan had not practised this *thw tiv* ritual in the past, they could not start practising it now and if they did, they would be in trouble with the ghost.

Third, *thw tiv* can mean the place for worshipping the lords of the land. Mr Hùng Đình Quý described *thw tiv* as a long stone that is put in a small cave near the main path, which makes it convenient for people to recognize it. At the beginning of the new year, the Hmong people would bring joss papers, incense sticks and a cock to where the *thw tiv* had been placed and offer them to the spirits of the land, begging them to protect both humans and animals from diseases and to support a good harvest. Mr Hùng Đình Quý believed that, in the past, the area was full of tigers and leopards that threatened the lives of Hmong and this practice helped them gain protection from the landlord. In addition, they believed the practice helped them to avoid stone avalanches or collapsing trees, which happened frequently in this karst landscape.

However, veneration of the *thw tiv* was also risky. The place of the *thw tiv* could not be urinated on nor destroyed. Vàng Tài Phủ said that one member of his Vàng clan who was a soldier of French troop once destroyed a *thw tiv* and he became mad. The youngest son of Mrs Vừ Th. X., the oldest woman of Mã Pì Lèng village, also went mad after he unintentionally urinated on a *thw tiv*. He eventually killed himself by ingesting poisonous leaves (*Gelsemium elegans)* at the offices of the Pải Lủng People's Committee after he had injured his brother's horse and tried to kill his neighbours with a knife.

In Mã Pì Lèng village, I could not see any *thw tiv*, even though the Hmong people confirmed that they existed. They were not comfortable when sharing the information about *thw tiv* with me, lowering their voices into a whisper. I wondered if they were afraid of infringing *thw tiv* if they told others about it. According to some elderly informants, the practice of *thw tiv* had recently become less common. Even though the incidence of stone avalanches was still frequent, because the limestone slopes were constantly eroding, fracturing and producing

loose boulders, the other conditions given for the existence of *thw tiv* seemed to have been eliminated (e.g. fewer wild animals and a reduction in war and conflicts). In addition, its decline could have been a result of the official socialist discouragement of practices associated with traditionally more localised and autonomous land use decisions and property relations; however, this conjecture was not asserted explicitly by the local Hmong people. They said that unless a shaman told them to worship *thw tiv*, such as after a string of unlucky incidents in their family or village, they did not practise this ritual because they were afraid to bring trouble to their family, clan and village.

3.2.2 Sacred trees

A karst landscape does not support the development of flora. The dry, cold weather, thin topsoil and highly porous underlying rock do not allow the conditions and nutrients for the growth of large, evergreen trees. Pine trees can grow (or be replanted by people) only on the earth-covered mountains near Mã Pì Lèng village. On the limestone mountains that predominate in this area, there was no sign of reforestation after the forest had been cleared to make houses and cornfields, which had begun around 100 years ago. In Mã Pì Lèng village, a small number of large, old banyan trees remained untouched because of the belief that they were sacred trees and helped to protect the people. As with the clan stones, these banyan trees were worshipped by the Giàng (B) clan, with an offering of a sacrificed cock on Hmong New Year's Day. In addition, these trees were worshipped as the adopted father or mother for young babies who were weak or ill.

The Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village hung cobs of corn, which had a red colour, on the front door to prevent evil spirits from entering the house and harming family members. In the hu plig (calling the soul) ritual, corn seeds and corn flour were used as offerings to the ancestors and supernatural spirits, and corn seeds were used to represent members of the family or clan.

3.2.3 Water spirit

The Hmong people had contradictory feelings about water. Water was important for their daily lives. However, the nature of the limestone landscape meant that water was limited because rainwater could not be collected and stored, instead flowing away through a

multitude of cracks and holes in the rock. Conversely, they believed that their lives were threatened by water because it could bring illness and disease to them as well as killing people when it flooded. The Hmong maintained the legend and song about a massive flood that destroyed almost all of humankind and other beings in the world. Together with my interviewee Mr Hùng Đình Quý, Savina and other scholars have suggested that this fear of floods is one reason for the Hmong people living on the mountain—to avoid being drowned by flooding (V. T. Nguyen, 2007; Savina, 1924). According to Falk (2003), this massive flood was associated with contamination and infection from putrefied corpses, which no longer transformed into rocks, trees and other natural objects as they used to before the flood.

Even on the mountainside high above the nearest stream or river, there were many water-related dangers. Rainfall could release deadly landslides and spontaneous water torrents could sweep through a house; the scarce topsoil could be washed off the sloping, rocky fields; and precious supplies of corn or hay, which were renewed only once a year, could mildew and rot if they were not protected adequately from rain and humidity. In addition, water was seen as a dangerous essence, or spirit (dab), whose ingress into the body, if not properly managed, could cause infection and death. I observed the following ritual during my time in the village:

> On 14 October 2016, Ly M. P., a 35-year-old man who was the head of a family of five people, went to cut and gather small pieces of dry wood for cooking near the water reservoir, which is located close to the village gate. Unfortunately, during the work he cut his left toes. After three days without any treatment, his toes were swollen and red and pus began to drain from them. Instead of going to hospital or seeing a doctor, he went to see an old woman shaman because he believed that he might somehow have offended a wild spirit (*dab*) while chopping the wood. The shaman told him that he had been harmed by the spirit of the water and he had to hold a ritual to expel the spirit from his house and his body. The old shaman, a small woman, went to P.'s house with her grandson, who was learning to become a shaman and worked as her assistant in the ritual. They brought with them a white cock, which served as a tool to expel the water spirit.
>
> To commence the exorcism, the gate and the main door of P.'s house were decorated with some branches and tufts of a kind of *imperata* grass, tied together by a red cloth (*ntaub liab*), to prevent other wild spirits from getting in. In addition, this was a sign to inform strangers that they were not welcome to visit this house, as they might bring wild spirits in with them.

Inside the house, in front of the *xwm kaz*, the place on the rear wall of the house where joss papers are stuck, which is considered the altar for worshipping the god of the house, food items were displayed on a table. A small bamboo basket filled with uncooked corn stood in the middle of the table; to the sides of the basket were two bowls, one with uncooked corn and a raw chicken egg on top and the other containing uncooked corn flour and a raw chicken egg on top. Below the corn basket there were three goat's horns cut into six half-pieces, which would be used to divine whether the spirit agreed with the ritual and assented to leave the house. A cup of fresh water and some pieces of joss paper were put below the goat horns. Two big bamboo baskets were placed upside down by the sides of the table, a live cock confined in each. The shaman put her tools near the table, including two small black knives and a large metal ring with some metal charms, which made a jingling sound like horse's rings when the shaman conducted the ritual. All these tools were tied by several strips of red cloth, each strip representing a ritual that the shaman had held during the year until now. A small bench was put near the table for a seat for the shaman. She took a number of incense sticks and put them into the fire until they had burned down a little. Then she went around the house, from the main gate to the single rooms on both sides of the house and the two main cookers, into which she put one incense stick each. One stick each was put into the corn bowl and the corn flour bowl; the rest were put into the corn basket on the table.

P. was sitting not far from the table. He was wearing a Vietnamese red flag T-shirt, long trousers and several strings and red cloth strips on his neck and on both wrists to protect him from evil. The shaman sat down on the bench and burnt some joss papers. She held two of the goat's horn halves in her left hand and the metal ring in her right hand. A black cloth covered her face. Then she started to pray to the spirit. Her head shook up and down, left and right, while her foot bounced up and down, making a sound like a horse walking. While she was chanting, her hands went up and down, with the two halves of goat's horn and the metal charms on her ring hitting each other, making a sound like a bell around the neck of a horse. The shaman acted as if she was riding a horse to find a spirit, as it was known that horseback was an ideal way to travel long distances in the mountains.

After a while, the shaman threw the goat's horns over her shoulder onto the ground. The first time she did this, the cut faces of the two half horns did not both land facing up the same way, which meant the spirit did not agree with the shaman's request. She collected the two half horns and repeated her chant and actions a second time. This time, both pieces

of horn faced the same way, meaning that the spirit agreed with the ritual. She nodded and her nephew, the shaman's assistant, tied up the white chicken with a string and took it right around the house. He then tied the chicken to the base of a tree outside the house. The main door was closed, with the bench overturned against the door to keep it shut. The door would be opened again, and the bench put back in the right position only if P. got well. In the meantime, residents who wanted to go in and out of the house could use its two rear doors.

After the ritual, the shaman and her assistant ate lunch with P.'s family and the guests who had attended the ritual. After the lunch, she left the house with an amount of money (120,000 VND for her and 70,000 VND for her assistant), along with the corn and the chickens used in the ritual. P. stayed at home until he become well. Unfortunately, the next afternoon, his older daughter cut her hand when going to collect grass for their cows. She was scolded seriously by her mother for not being careful. This meant the spirit had been able to get back into the house somehow. Thereafter, one of the rear doors near the gate was closed and *imperata* grass bunches were put on it. Eventually, after some days, P.'s wound healed, and all the doors of the house were opened again.

3.3 Conclusion

Hmong perceptions of the limestone plateau where they live both shape and derive from their life experiences in this austere and rocky landscape. For the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village, the evaluation of land as 'good' is not directly linked to its utilitarian value for agriculture and the construction of stone houses. Instead, this evaluation seems to be linked to the ability of the land to enhance their fortunes (both personal and clan) according to the principles of a distinctive complex of geomantic and astrological beliefs (Tapp, 1986). In this same system, the land also can be divined as 'bad', but this has a relationship, often post-factum, to experiences of loss and danger. The way the Hmong orient their houses and graves is culturally coded in a manner that embodies generations of knowledge about the dangers and advantages of life in a mountainous environment. Their unique way of dwelling in place (Basso, 1996) has resonances in the Vietnamese and Chinese lowland civilisations that lie to the south and north of the limestone cap they inhabit. However, the way the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng embody and live in this system differs from their neighbours, just as it varies subtly from locality to locality where Hmong people live.

In Mã Pì Lèng, the Hmong people saw mountains, ridges, rocks, caves, trees and other features of their rugged limestone environment as animate, agentive and interactive. These features subsist in a relationship of mutuality with the Hmong people who have made the mountains their home. They inhabit an inspirited stone landscape and dwell among a congregation of animate rocks and other elements that could both threaten and protect them. The diverse identities and propensities of this collection of animate objects have to be acknowledged and respected if human flourishing is to be possible. In Mã Pì Lèng, the Hmong live among stones that dramatically demonstrate their power to take or give life. They have boulders as neighbours, which, albeit dangerous, showed an affinity for certain people or groups. Through their rituals and stories, the Hmong people entertain relations of mutual care, respect and identity with the stones among which they live.

The relationships Hmong people maintain with the landscape features around them offer a key to understanding their sense of place. Investigating their perceptions and knowledge of the landscape as potent and animated enables us to comprehend what it means for them to dwell in place, and to live in a challenging mountainous environment. Through the study of their symbolic systems, ritual observances and spiritual beliefs, I could appreciate the unique technology applied by the Hmong to deal with the vicissitudes of life in their mountainous home. Their embodied way of being in the limestone landscape is a cultural accomplishment and it entails a unique experience of place.

Chapter 4: Making Homes, Making Fields: Cooperation in a Landscape of Rock

In the last months of 2015, Mã Pì Lèng village looked like a construction site, with five new houses being built. From early in the morning until late in the afternoon, banging on stone could be heard in many parts of the village. Hmong houses in this village are built on an incline, with their back recessed into the mountain and the front projecting out over the slopes. Therefore, the surface of the land had to be levelled by digging into the slope at the back of the house and raising the level of the downhill side. People achieved this by smashing big rocks at the rear of the house plot into smaller rocks, using them to form a stone retaining wall at the front, and filling in the space behind the wall with small stones and soil.

Almost all of the Mã Pì Lèng people, including the elderly, women and children, were involved in the construction of new homes. People who belonged to a clan would help their clan relatives to build their houses. Families in a small clan, with few members and not enough manpower to build a house, had to hire other people to build their house. Men and some healthy women used large, heavy hammers to break the big rocks into smaller stones. Older people, weaker women and children used their hands, back-baskets or wheelbarrows to move small boulders to the lower side of the plot, where Hmong men would stack them to form solid walls without anything joining them together. The large rocks were laid at the bottom of the walls to form a strong foundation and the higher the wall became, the smaller the stone that was used. Smaller stones were inserted into the niches as well.

Breaking rocks and making rock walls is difficult work and requires a large labour force. Therefore, not only the members of the patrilineage but also relatives from their mother's and wife's clans were expected to be involved in this work. They welcomed other people, such as guests or friends, to join in. I was often invited to participate in this work.

One afternoon, I visited one of my host's relative's house, which he had just started to build, not far from his father's house.[23] On the jagged rocky floor, not yet made level, four young

[23]He still lived in the same house as his adoptive parents, but according to the Hmong, he was now a good age to build a house. Therefore, he had sold his cattle and asked his blood mother, who had remarried into another

men were bringing small rocks to fill in several holes in the floor. Three older men were sitting in the right-hand corner of the piece of land, chiselling a tree trunk to make the frame of the house. At the left side of the site, there was a small pile of crushed stone and two women and empty baskets. All of these people were relatives of the householder or his wife.

When I arrived, everyone stopped working, smiled and welcomed me. I did not know whether they were happy because I was visiting or because I had come to help. I was given an empty back-basket and, together with two of the wife's relatives, I was assigned the task of moving approximately one cubic metre of limestone powder from the ground near the old house to the new house site.

Before the start of the work, we were all invited to have a cup of corn wine to quench our thirst. After drinking the wine, the two women and I, wearing our baskets on our shoulders, climbed about 20 metres up the rocky road to the pile of stone powder that had been prepared by the owner a few months earlier. To make this pile of stone powder, the landlord had broken the limestone cliffs, gathered up the rubble and hired a mill to grind the stones into powder that could be used to pour between the larger stones of the foundation, along with small stones, to make the floor smooth and firm. In addition, this stone powder could be mixed with water and cement to form a mixture that helped to stick the wall bricks together.

Four smiling, young, and thin but healthy teenagers, who were the children of the relatives, were waiting patiently for us by the stone pile. We removed the empty baskets from our shoulders and placed them on a patch of ground that was higher than the path so it would be easier for us to put these baskets back on our shoulders after they were filled. The children quickly shovelled in the stone powder. When I put my basket on my shoulders, it felt very heavy and stressed my shoulders. I estimated its weight to be more than 15 kg. I trudged slowly back to the new house. The stone powder pile in the new house site was already as tall as a small hill after a several days of work by the other women. I climbed to the top of the pile and sharply tilted one shoulder as I had been taught, so that the stone powder poured out of the basket. I then repeated the whole process, finding the load becoming heavier and heavier on my shoulders. I poured with sweat and my shoulders ached. I was exhausted after moving

commune, to provide him 4,000 yuan (Chinese currency) to build a new house just below the house of his adoptive parents.

five baskets of stone powder and decided to quit the job. The other women laughed at me and continued to work. They only stopped the work when it was time for dinner at 4 pm, returning to their homes about an hour later.

The transporting of stone was just one job of many that the Hmong do to make homes for themselves on this limestone landscape. My experiences undertaking such tasks gave me a practical sense of how hard their work is. Thus, I gained a better understanding of the explanation given by the landlord's son for why he needed to build a new house that year, even though he had no urgent need of housing: 'Each year in a clan, only one new home is built, because they can only mobilise the labour needed to build one house'. That year, Mã Pì Lèng gained four new houses, belonging to the families Giàng (B), Lầu, Ly, Mùa and Sùng. Apart for the family of the Giàng (B) clan, which did not pay any labour costs for the construction of their house, the other four families belonged to small clans and had to hire other workers in the village.

The terrain of Mã Pì Lèng village is not suitable for farming. It is located at the top of a mountain range, with altitudes ranging from 700 to 1,200 m above sea level. The land slopes steeply through the village, at an incline of over 25%, and the groundcover consists mainly of limestone karst outcrops and some shrubs. In the last months of the year, the main colour is grey, seen in the ubiquitous rocks and the fibro-cement roofs of the houses. Rocks cover over 80% of the land surface and limestone is the dominant rock variety. This blanket of limestone covering the mountains from top to bottom, and from mountain to mountain, creates an imposing rocky plateau.

The relatively young limestone in this area developed in the Devonian period, about 500 to 300 million years ago. Weathering by rainwater and other natural factors has worn the limestone, creating many caves and holes that collect and absorb water. At the same time, this weathering process has caused the limestone to crack and break up, making the surface rough and sharp. Over time, soil has been deposited into the irregularities in the rock, but the soil cover is mostly thin. Soil is particularly scarce on the limestone slopes.

The most difficult resource to obtain in the karst area is water. The Nho Quế River that flows through this area is at the bottom of the mountain, making it almost impossible to transport water to the top of the mountain for use. The water source in Mã Pì Lèng is mainly rainfall,

with the average annual rainfall ranging from 1,760 to 2,000 mm,[24] mostly falling between May and August. While this figure is not low, the rainwater is not stored because the multi-holed structure of the limestone landscape allows it to drain away. The primary maize crop of people here is grown in the rainy season, when there is enough moisture from rainwater alone. As well, this is the time of the most sunshine, from 5 am to 6 pm, with temperatures up to 40 degrees Celsius.

In the winter months, the scarcity of rainfall becomes severe. In October and November of 2017, I saw it rain only three times: two half-day falls (each in the morning) and one two-hour spell of rain in the afternoon. The rainfall was light and an hour after it stopped, the ground was completely dry again. The temperature in the winter months is lower, with a low of 5.6 degrees. Mist appears most mornings and late afternoons, often hiding the village from sight. With the thick fogs, hoarfrost sometimes appears as well. During this season, the Hmong cultivate only a few vegetables and beans in a small area near their homes, where they can water and care for them more easily. As the weather is dry and cool, winter is a good time to build homes for people and the domestic animals.

In this terrain and climate, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng must significantly modify the mountainous landscape to create liveable houses and cultivable fields. This hard work requires a large amount of effort, which an individual working alone cannot accomplish. These factors create room for cooperation to take place. Almost everyone is involved in the landscaping process, including older people, young people, children and both men and women. Everyone, depending on their experience, skills and health, is involved in the various tasks of village life. The description I provided at the beginning of this chapter is an example of the cooperation among the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village. Highly skilled people, usually older, performed skilled tasks such as carpentry or stone laying, while those with poorer landscaping skills, often the women (of which I was the weakest, an apprentice), handled the materials. Children did lighter jobs, such as filling the empty back-baskets with stone powder.

Cooperation is a human adaptation to nature which increases the productive benefits of individuals (Gardner, Griffin and West, 2009). According to Tuomela (2013), cooperation in a

[24]Figures taken from *The Master Plan of the New Rural Area of Pải Lủng Commune for the Period of 2013–2020',* People's Committee of Pải Lủng Commune, 2013.

social context is informed by shared reasons, shared attitudes and shared goals (Toumela, 2013). In peasant communities, like Mã Pì Lèng, where livelihoods rely heavily on agriculture, cooperation helps peasant households pool their labor power to deal with seasonal cropping demands (Wolf, 1957; Moore, 1975; and Downey, 2010). It also permits people to perform complex tasks beyond the capacity of any one person or family by combining complementary capabilities, skills, and specializations in a shared undertaking (Murdoch and Provost, 1973; Chen, 2004). Labor cooperation is mobilized through reciprocal social relations such as lineage, marriage, neighbourhood and community relations. Such mutual relations build human social and cultural identities and create connections between people and their place (Gow, 1995; Toren, 1995; Layton, 1995). Gow (1995) argued that kin cooperation to transform the environment is a form of place making: a process that transmits knowledge from elders to youngers; connects them with the landscape; and reaffirms social relationships. Descola (2012) similarly noted that mutual cooperation in livelihood activities, which appear in daily life in flows of gifts, exchanges and sharing, are forms of place attachment.

This chapter examines how the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng have transformed a rocky landscape into a habitable home through co-operation in building houses and cultivating fields. The Hmong people in Đồng Văn do not live lightly on the land. They spend much time and effort carving houses and fields out of limestone slopes. Modifying the mountainous terrain to create houses and fields is difficult and cannot be sustained by individuals working alone. It requires cooperation in many dimensions: within the family and among household members; between clans; within the village; and sometimes between villages. From such cooperation, people transfer knowledge about their lives and the landscape from person to person and from generation to generation. Through mutual co-operation in landscaping, Hmong people draw upon proximate social resources; create attachments to place and to each-other; and make an enduring home in the mountains.

4.1 Cooperation in Constructing Houses

Creating foundations for houses on the steep slopes at the top of a mountain is a difficult task that requires skill and experience. The first task is to choose a plot of land that is appropriate for the family, which will enhance the health, good luck and development of all members of the family, as well as the domestic animals. The procedure for choosing the appropriate land

for houses has been discussed in the previous chapter. The next step is to transform an expanse of uneven and sloping rocky soil into a flat piece of ground that is large enough for a house.

4.1.1 Making a house foundation

First, the width, length and height of the foundations (the flat stone and soil platform on which the house will be built) needs to be determined. This is entrusted to experienced men.

To determine the dimensions of the foundation for Ly M. Ch.'s house (shown in Figure 4.1), the tools used were four 3.5 m stems of bamboo (*pob tw xyoob*) and a long coil of cotton (*dov xov*). The width of the house was equal to the length of one bamboo stem. One man stood at one side of the land plot, to mark where one corner would be. Another man took a bamboo stem and extending it from where the first man stood, marked a point 3.5 m away for the next corner. They then laid out three bamboo stems in a line from where the first man stood to locate the third point, the length of the house. The fourth point was located by laying out the fourth bamboo stem from the third point, as the width of the house.

After marking the four corners with upright bamboo stems, they measured the required height of the foundation. Healthy men used hammers and long and short chisels to gouge out the rock in the upper half of the designated house area and break up large rocks into smaller pieces. When they encountered a rock that was too solid for them to break, it was used to set the height of the foundation. After the height of the floor was determined, one man used wound cotton from the cotton coil around and between the four bamboo stems at the corners of the house, creating a cotton rectangle on a horizontal plane, so that everyone involved in creating the floor would know the required height of the foundation.

Figure 4.1: Hmong people calculating the size of the foundation for Ly M. Ch.'s house.

After determining the width, length and height of the foundation, more Hmong people joined in and focused on building up the foundation of the house from stones and stone powder. They transported the large pieces of stone on the upper slope of the plot to the lower slope to raise the ground level. Smaller stones were inserted into the small holes between the large rocks. They spread a layer of stone powder over the top to create a smooth floor. Building the foundation took about five days. When the foundation was finished, the head of the family put a wooden stick on the middle of the foundation and hung an old coat of his on it. This coat, called *hom tsho tsev*, was to protect the house from evil spirits. In addition, he built a small tent on a corner of the land so he could sleep there at night until the house was finished to protect it from thieves.

As mentioned earlier, stone crushing and stone laying were the work of healthy and experienced men. They knew where to place the chisel and the pressure required from the hammer to break the large rocks without straining themselves or injuring those around them. They also knew how to stack large boulders tightly together into a solid wall without the need for mortar. The women and children were supporters. The women used small wheelbarrows or bamboo back-baskets to bring the smaller stones close to where the men were working on

the wall, within comfortable reach. They also helped transport the stone powder to the site. Young children shovelled the stone powder into the women's bamboo back-baskets for transporting to the construction site. Sometimes, the children transported smaller amounts of stone powder with plastic back-baskets. Some two- or three-year-old toddlers, who usually wore a shirt and no trousers, were left close to the site. They played by themselves or imitated what their parents did to break a stone or dig a hole. Inside the old house, two older women prepared meals for the helpers.

4.1.2 Making a pathway for the construction materials

For house sites close to the village's main cement road, it was relatively easy for the Hmong people to gather the stone powder, bricks and other materials required for house construction. However, if the construction site was at a high altitude or a point that the cement road did not reach, the Hmong people had to make a rocky access path wide enough for a motorbike. Path construction was carried out after finishing the foundation.

This was the case for Giàng X. M.'s house site. First, a group of young men cleared and widened the existing earth path by cutting the grass and bushes at both edges. They flattened the path by breaking any protruding stones into smaller pieces and then used these pieces to make stone walls along the edges of the path. Then they filled the potholes on the path with soil and small stones and filled the gap between the existing path and the newly made stone edging walls. Finally, they covered the path with small stones. Now, the young men could carry four to six bricks on their motorbike from the national road to the new foundation on the higher slopes.

4.1.3 Making a house frame

The traditional house of the Hmong used to be made of wood framing and mud walls 40 cm thick. These walls, made from soil mixed with water, helped to keep the house cool in the summer and warm in the winter. However, because soil is limited in Mã Pì Lèng region, the Hmong here used stones to make their houses. Ly M. Ch.'s house plot was very steep and contained hard rocks that could not be broken up. Since he could not recess the house into the side of the mountain, he had to create very high above-ground foundations to create a sufficiently large expanse on which to build the house. The foundations were so high that he

did not have enough soil to fill them in; instead, the men fitted together several plywood planks to make a blank frame, with iron reinforcing laid within it, then filled the frame with a mixture of stone powder and cement. Because this mixture would become hard quickly, making the foundation required a large number of labourers. On the day the foundations were made, the men and women from this village gathered very early. The women mixed the stone powder with cement and water, put it small buckets and transferred them up to the men who were sitting on the blank frame. The men used it to fill in the frame. This work lasted four or five hours. Then they waited for a week for the mixture to dry and harden before starting the next step of construction.

If the house frame was made of timber, as in the case of Giàng X. M.'s house, the logs for the house pillars and frame were chiselled at the same time the foundations and the stone path were laid. Usually, the timber for this purpose had been prepared beforehand. The timber used for house frames could be from a kind of pine (*Cunninghamia lanceolate*) that had been planted on the mountain or evergreen trees that grew naturally on the rocky mountains. The latter kind of tree was rare because most had been cut down many years before to make way for the fields. The village now had only a small area of these trees, which were currently being regenerated and were protected by forest protection contracts signed between the Hmong people and the local authority. This regenerated forest project is a sort of "ecosystems services" project. The villagers received protection fees of 14 million VND annually for the trees, which was evenly distributed to all households, each household earning about 250,000 VND. A house frame required 12 large logs, each 2.5 m long and around 30 cm in diameter, to form the main pillars of the house. Eight pillars supported the exterior walls and four pillars were set inside the house to support the roof. In addition, several smaller logs were used for beams and rafters.

The frame for Giàng X. M.'s house was made by two middle-aged men. Next to a pile of wood prepared for the house, they took a small plate, added some water and sharpened a black Chinese ink-stick by rubbing it in the plate to make some liquid ink. They then dipped a length of cotton string into the ink, which made the string turn black. They used the inked string to mark the wood for chiselling by holding each end of the string, pulling it straight out, then turning it lightly so that the string touched the wood. The ink from the string transferred to the log to make a straight black line that was easily recognisable. Depending on whether the

logs were to be used for a pillar or a beam, the locations of the chiselled portions were different. If the log would be used as a house pillar, they marked two slots, near the top of the pillar, that would go all the way through, at right angles to each other, while the base of the pillar that would touch the floor was left unmarked. As the uppermost slot would be used to support a horizontal beam, it was smaller than the lower slot, which would be used to support two longitudinal beams. If the log would be used as a beam, the ends would be cut down to fit the slots at the top of the pillar. After identifying the locations for cutting the pillar, the two men sat on the log to hold it still. Then they used a hammer and chisel to cut gently into the wood, removing slivers of wood little by little, until they had formed a rectangular slot, about 20 cm long and 10 cm wide, running from one side of the pillar through to the other, near the top. Then they turned the log a quarter of a rotation and repeated the same actions to form a second, lower rectangular slot, this time about 40 cm long and 10 cm wide. After completing this work on all 12 pillars, they cut the other leftover logs into 14 planks which have 3.5 m long, with sections about 20 cm long and 10 cm wide, using an electric handsaw and a machine plane. These planks were to be used as beams. These steps for framing the house would take about 10 days to complete.

4.1.4 Setting the house frame on the foundation

At this point, the houseowner would ask experienced elders to determine a 'good' day to set the frame of the house on the foundation. This would be based on the head of the household's year of birth in the Hmong calendar, which is similar to the Chinese lunar calendar or Vietnamese lunar calendar.[25] This calendar is circulated in rounds of 12 years, which as outlined earlier, are named after 12 animals: Mouse *(nas)*, Ox (*nyuj)*, Tiger (*tsov),* Rabbit [26] (*luav)*, Dragon (*zaj),* Snake *(nab)*, Horse (*nees)*, Goat (*tshis)*, Monkey *(liab)*, Rooster (*qaib)*, Dog (*aub)* and Pig (*npua)*. Each year has 12 months, which are named the same way as the name of the years. Each month has 30 days. In the Hmong beliefs, each animal that represents a year, a month, a day or an hour has an animal in opposition to it. For example, the opponent animal of the Snake is the Pig, because the Pig could eat the Snake without fearing the Snake's poison. The antagonist animal of the Goat is the Ox, because they share the same kind of food.

[25]The difference between these three calendars is that the New Year of the Hmong calendar is one month earlier than in the Chinese and Vietnamese calendars.

[26] The Year of the Rabbit of the Hmong people is equal to the Year of the Cat in the Vietnamese calendar.

For people who want to build house, a good day is every day except the year, month, date and hour with the name the same as both the animal he was born under and the antagonist animal. For instance, according to Doan (2013), who studied the traditional houses of the Hmong in Bắc Hà, Lào Cai, a man born in the Year of the Snake could not build his new house on the year, month, date and hour of the Snake and the Pig.[27]

Although the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village wished to follow this taboo because they wanted to guarantee that their family would develop well in the new house, they could only build their new houses in the last months of the year because that was the dry season, suitable for house building and when their labour force was available. In addition, it shows their perception of the months that were beneficial for putting the house's frame on the foundation, being the tenth to the twelfth months, to improve the health and wealth of family members. The time for setting the house's frame on the foundation was usually from 3 am, which is considered the time the sun begins. Those who were born in the hour of the Tiger or the hour of the Monkey could do it at a later time, but it should not be too late. In addition, each clan or family has 'good' days and 'bad' days in each year, depending on the calculations of the shaman. For

[27] Contraindications for house construction, according to year of birth, listed in Doan (2013, p. 56):

- Year of the Rabbit: month of the Rabbit [*first month of the Hmong year*], day of the Rabbit, hour of the Rabbit [*5am–7am]* and the Year of the Rooster.
- Year of the Dragon: month of the Dragon [*second month],* day of the Dragon, hour of the Dragon [*7am–9am]* and the Year of the Dog.
- Year of the Snake: month of the Snake [*third month*], day of the Snake, hour of the Snake [*9am–11am]* and the Year of the Pig.
- Year of the Horse: month of the Horse [*fourth month]*, day of the Horse, hour of the Horse [*11am–1pm]* and the Year of the Mouse.
- Year of the Goat: month of the Goat [*fifth month],* day of the Goat, hour of the Goat [*1pm–3pm]* and the Year of the Ox.
- Year of the Monkey: month of the Monkey [*sixth month],* day of the Monkey, hour of the Monkey [*3pm–5pm]* and the Year of the Tiger.
- Year of the Rooster: month of the Rooster [*seventh month*], day of the Rooster, hour of the Rooster [*5pm–7pm*] and the Year of the Rabbit.
- Year of the Dog: month of the Dog [*eighth month*], day of the Dog, hour of the Dog [*7pm–9pm]* and the Year of the Dragon.
- Year of the Pig: month of the Pig [*ninth month*], day of the Pig, hour of the Pig [*9pm–11pm*] and the Year of the Snake.
- Year of the Mouse: month of the Mouse [*tenth month*], day of the Mouse, hour of the Mouse [*11pm–1am*] and the Year of the Horse.
- Year of the Ox: month of the Ox [*eleventh month*], day of the Ox, hour of the Ox [*1am–3am]* and the Year of the Goat.
- Year of the Tiger: month of the Tiger [*twelfth month*], day of the Tiger, hour of the Tiger [*3am–5am*] and the Year of the Monkey.

instance, the Giàng (A) clan had to avoid going out of the house, working or practising rituals on the 21st, 27th and 29th of each month, to avoid having an accident or some kind of failure.

The people involved in erecting the house frame on the foundation were always healthy men. They would have to arrive half an hour earlier than the time considered a 'good' time for frame building. They would sit around a small table, chatting and drinking cups of corn whisky to keep them warm and provide energy for the work. Once the 'good' time had arrived, three or more men would hold a pillar, which was already connected with beams and rafters, and stand it up at the proposed pillar position. Other men would do the same with the other seven main pillars of the house. Logs would be used to push against the pillars to balance the frame. Once the frame was balanced, the men would put stone pedestals under the pillars to keep them from touching the foundation so they would not become damp and rot. These stone pedestals would increase the height of the house as well. Then the logs used to keep the house frame balanced would be withdrawn. The work of erecting the house's frame on the foundation would take four to five hours.

After erecting the house frame on the foundation, the head of the household would remove the *hom tsho tsev* (the coat that protected the house) because one of the main pillars of the house would now protect the house from evil spirits and bring good health to family members. This pillar was inside the house, to the left of the altar. It had several names: '*dab tru'*, meaning the pillar for the god of the house; '*tsho dai tru'*, meaning the pillar for hanging the coat (of the owner);[28] and '*kev noj qab haus huv tru'*, meaning the pillar for health. A bamboo basket was put in the middle of the house, containing four cups of wine and some joss papers. Neighbours or relatives who visited the house at that time were welcome to put money into the basket and they would be thanked by the house owner with four cups of wine.

4.1.5 Building the walls

The task of gathering the material for constructing the walls was undertaken after the erection of the house frame. Several people, of all ages and genders, would be involved in this work. In the past, the walls of the house were made of wet brown soil. However, because Mã Pì Lèng

[28]If the owner's shirt was hung on the pillar, it could be a sign of a ritual in the house to exclude ghosts or for wishes for good health. However, sometimes the head of household would hang his old shirt on it for everyone, family and guests, to dry their hands.

terrain does not supply enough soil for building the houses, the people here used bricks that were made from a mixture of stone powder and lime/cement. These bricks were bought from the outside, at a cost of about 11,000 VND per brick, and transported to the main gate of the village. Young men could transport four bricks at a time on their motorbikes; women could carry two bricks in their bamboo back-baskets and children could carry one or two bricks in small wheelbarrows. The old women stayed at home and cooked the meals (two per day) for everyone involved in this task.

The task of laying bricks to make the walls was considered the work of experienced men. If the landlord had no relatives with enough experience in bricklaying, he had to hire experienced workers from other clans in this village, paying them 3,000 VND per brick. They used a mixture of stone powder, cement and water to bind the bricks together. Preparing this mixture was the work of women and young men, who mixed a pile of stone powder with one or two buckets of cement and over 5 L of water to make a wet mortar. This was put into a tin bucket and taken to the experienced men to use. Women carried the water for this mortar in plastic containers from the water reservoir at the main gate of the village to the construction site. This phase of building took about a week.

4.1.6 Roofing

Now the house would be ready for roofing. The owner would ask an experienced person in the clan or the shaman to calculate a 'good' day to roof. Roofing day was also a new home celebration, with everyone in the village and relatives in the neighbouring villages invited to attend. They would first help to roof the house and then participate in a new house party in the afternoon. Today, their houses are roofed with fibrocement tiles, which last longer than the old-style grass thatching.

On the roofing day that I observed, a group of men climbed up to roof level while the women stayed on the ground and passed tiles up to the men. The men used a hammer and nails to fix the tiles on the roof, insulating the nail holes with rubber pads to prevent water from entering. Young men and children helped to cut the rubber pads and put the nails through them in advance. After the roofing, the people were invited to have a special meal of sticky rice, boiled eggs, cooked pork or beef, fried tofu, vegetables and soups and handmade corn whisky. The men, women and children sat separately in the house—the men sat around tables close to

the back wall while the women sat around a table close to the front wall and the children had dinner outside the house. The children were served with wine, the same as the adults. One woman sat next to the tables of children. She served the children with food and stop the very little children if they drink too much alcohol. For teenagers, they are treated as adult men and can drink as much alcohol as they can.

4.1.7 The need for cooperation

Clearly, building new houses in Mã Pì Lèng village requires the involvement of numerous people, whether experienced or inexperienced, of all ages and genders. Most of them will be the relatives of the owner of the house and of his mother and wife. Some will be neighbours of the owner. They are all obliged to help with building new homes. This obligation is called 'giving a hand' (*pab* or *pab li cas*). Because a homeowner must spend a lot of money on the project, relatives, villagers and friends help to reduce his costs by contributing labour, gifts or money. Because these people also have to complete the work of their own families, they take turns to help at certain times. In return, the homeowner must provide them with two nutritious meals per day (lunch and dinner), including steamed corn, meat, vegetables and beverages. If the householder has to hire workers and pay them, he does not have to prepare meals for them—they return to their homes to eat. In the process of helping, young and inexperienced people learn building skills from the older experienced people by observing and imitating.

These kinds of support, including labour, money and gifts, are not free but must be reciprocated, as Mauss noted with regard to gifts as a mode of exchange in primitive societies (Douglas, 2002). When other households in the clan build new houses or cow sheds, then the beneficiary of their past gifts has a responsibility to help those households in return. As described earlier, when the construction is complete, the homeowner holds a party to worship the ancestors and tell them that the household has a new house, inviting them to visit and have lunch or dinner with their descendants, as well as to thank everyone who has provided help. The attendees, including other villagers as well, bring wine and money; people in the village can contribute about 10,000 to 50,000 VND, while relatives offer from 100,000 to 300,000 VND. This money is clearly documented and handed over to the homeowner. Later,

he refers to these records when he needs to donate money to relatives or neighbours who build new houses or cow sheds.

This reciprocation is mandatory. If a homeowner does not give the same amount of money, he will be considered stingy and still indebted. When I went to the inauguration of the new home of Ly M. P. (mentioned in Chapter 3), I went to the desk and handed over an envelope with 100.000 VND to the recorder. He smiled and said to the people around him, 'P. will be tired'. He explained to me, 'P. will have to go to Hanoi to pay the money back to you if you build a new house'. I replied, 'Please tell him not to worry because I built my new house a few years ago'. The people around me seemed very happy with my answer.

For the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village, the house not only provides people shelter from the sun, rain and thieves but also a safe place for their spirits, as well as the future development of all members of the house. Thus, building houses requires not only the involvement of relatives, neighbours and villagers but also of supernatural beings such as the surrounding spirits and their ancestors' spirits. These supernatural beings are involved in all of the steps in building a house, from choosing appropriate land, through the foundation and construction stages and continuing even after the construction process is finished. It includes the suggestions for 'good' land through the practice of geomancy, as described in the previous chapter; the protection of the land from evil spirits when the foundation is created; the continuous protection for the house and family by alerting the head of household to danger through his dreams or unusual sounds in any part of the house (the subject of the next chapter); and the blessing on all the members of the house for good health and wealth.

In the celebration to inaugurate a new house, the homeowner practises a ritual to acknowledge the involvement of the supernatural spirits and the ancestors' spirits in the process of building the new house and asks them to continue to protect and bless the family. This ritual is conducted inside the house by one of the experienced and knowledgeable members of the clan. For the house of Giàng X. M., the person who conducted this ritual was his adopted father, Giàng V. S. (aged 61 years). Even though he was always drunk, S. was one of the most respected people of the Giàng (B) clan and he was invited to be the practitioner of several rituals for other members of the Giàng (B) clan. His good memory helped him to

remember all the names of the people who had departed from the Giàng (B) clan over the last three generations.

A small table and a bench were placed in the upper middle of the house, close to the back wall and in line with the main door of the house.[29] On the table, the landlord put a bowl of double-steamed corn flour, a bowl of chicken soup with a big aluminium spoon in it, a bottle of handmade corn whisky and a small Chinese-manufactured cup. No incense was burned in this ritual. S. sat on the bench. He turned his face (reddened by drinking too much) to the back wall, with his back towards the main door. He grasped the bottle of wine, poured it into the cup, held the cup in his right hand, lowered his head a little and sang a chant to invite the spirits of the mountain, river and water to come to celebrate the new house and to ask them to continue to bless the family. Then he poured the wine in the cup onto the ground between the table and the bench. He took half a spoon of steamed corn flour and tipped it out on the table, then used his hand to take a piece of chicken out of the soup. He tore up a few of pieces of chicken to put on the corn flour and then poured some soup on it. That was the offering to the spirits of the mountain, river and water. He repeated this action to call the ancestors to come back to celebrate the new house and bless the family by calling their names, one by one. He listed the ancestors in groups of five and offered them a cup of wine, a half spoon of steamed corn flour, some small pieces of chicken and a spoon of soup. He continued this action until all of the ancestors had been invited. Finally, he took all the offerings (the mixture of steamed corn, chicken and soup) on the table in both his hands, pressed them into a ball then went out the main door and threw it into the space in front of the house. With this, the house inauguration ritual was completed and the obligations to the ancestors were fulfilled.

4.2 Cooperation in Landscaping for Agricultural Fields

The terrain of Mã Pì Lèng village needs to be landscaped for cultivable fields, which are the residents' main source of income. The terrain, soil quality and weather conditions in the

[29]On the last day of the Hmong lunar year, this back wall would become the altar of the house, adorned with new joss papers to eliminate bad luck and evil spirits from the house and to request the protection, good health and wealth for the family in the coming year. They would also place a new red cloth (*liab daim ntaub*) on the main door at this time

mountains are harsh, making this task particularly difficult, and villagers need to cooperate to make the land fit for agrarian production.

As mountain dwellers, the main agricultural activities of the Hmong are dryland cultivation. Because of the limited soil on the plateau, along with the dry weather and scarce water resources, the Hmong can cultivate only one maize crop per year. Although they farm some auxiliary crops in the winter months, the cultivation area for these plants is negligible.

The Hmong farmland in Mã Pì Lèng is of two main types. The first type is the earth field (*teb av*), which has few or no stones. This kind of field is usually located at the bottom of the mountain or in a valley between mountains, on quite flat ground or an area with a gentle slope. With this type of field, the Hmong people prepare the land for cultivation by using a plough pulled by a cow. In places close to a water spring, such as near the village of the Giáy people, the people can water the fields and turn them into wet fields for cultivating rice. Only a small number of households in Mã Pì Lèng village owned wet fields. The second type is the rocky field or stone-hole field (*teb zeb* or *teb khauv zeb*). This type of field can be found at the top of the mountain or on very steep cliffs. All households of Mã Pì Lèng village owned this type of field.

To build fields on the limestone slopes, Hmong farmers take advantage of the natural deposits in small holes, cracks and hollows in the limestone. In addition, soil can be carried up from the foot of the mountain far below. The soil is supplemented annually with both chemical and organic fertiliser and ash. Where there are shallow hollows, a low rock wall can be laid along the lower edge of the hollow to prevent the soil from washing away when it rains. Owing to the steepness of the slopes and the shallowness of the soil, it is hard or even impossible to plough these fields. To separate their plots from one another, the people use small pieces of limestone arranged in stone barriers around their fields. Some build a low barrier made of a simple line of rocks. One more sophisticated person, with the help of two others, spent more than three months building a very impressive straight stone wall between the fields; the wall was over a 100 m long, about 30 cm wide and nearly 1 m high.

To determine the suitable seedlings and treatment for their fields, the Hmong people categorise the soil into three group based on its quality. The soil considered the best quality is *av pa thw*, which are deep yellowish-brown Ferralsols overlying the limestone rock. This soil

is usually seen in the lowlands and around the residential area. *Av pa thw* is rich in nutrients, suitable for the cultivation of maize, hemp, vegetables and poppy. Most of this soil is occupied by fields belonging to the families of Giàng (A) and Giàng (B) clans, who were the first people in this area. In the 1980s, it was used to contribute to the wealth of these families through the cultivation of poppy. Other clans who migrated to this village later have a smaller area of *av pa thw* soil and their fields are mostly *av xuav* or *av da*. *Av xuav*, which is a rich soil on loose ground, is a kind of black Ferralsols that is dry and may or may not be mixed with rock. *Av xuav* is more often found in rocky fields than in earthen fields. It is good for cultivating maize and all vegetables except cabbages. *Av da*, the poorest soil, is greyish-brown, dry and low in nutrients. This type of soil is common in the earth-covered mountains and is suitable for growing pine trees. If maize is planted in this type of soil, it only grows for a few years; after that, the land should be left uncultivated for several years for restoration. These fields can be ploughed with the power of cattle to make the soil porous. This type of land is found mostly in the residential area of four households of Giàng (A) clan who had to resettle after the fire in 1984.

Owing to the high rocky terrain and the lack of water, the Hmong people practise dry cultivation or, more precisely, maize agriculture. The growing season for this main crop stretches from the first month of the lunar year to the ninth, which are the months of sunlight and rain and are good for the development of plants. The other three months are used for house construction, ritual practices and the cultivation of additional crops. The additional crops used to be opium poppy, hemp and various kinds of beans and vegetables. The Hmong told me that in addition to bringing a very high income for the people, opium cultivation was good for the land, similar to the effects from the cultivation of beans. The Hmong knew that after planting opium or beans, the maize would attain higher yields.

Since growing opium poppy was banned at the end of the 1980s, the Vietnamese government has tried to introduce alternative crops that were expected to bring a good income for the Hmong people, to offset the income lost because of no longer growing opium. These other crops included medicinal herbs (*Ligusticum striatum* and *Scrophularia nodosa*) and canola for producing seed oil. However, none of these alternative crops has succeeded in generating income for the people because no individual or organisation has participated in trading them. Recently, the Hmong people in this village have started to plant hemp, various kinds of bean,

buckwheat, vegetables and more maize as 'additional' crops, between the main maize seasons. Hemp is used for making clothes; beans, buckwheat and vegetables are used for eating; and the maize cultivated in this short period yields stems and leaves that can be used as feed for cows.

4.2.1 Agrarian calendar: Giàng M. C. family

The practice of cooperating in cultivation activities in this Hmong village can be seen through examining the seasonal calendar of one Hmong family, the Giàng M. C. family. C., the household head, was born in the Year of the Dog; therefore, he avoided starting any work at the time of the Dog and the time of the Dragon. In addition, he did not work on the day of his father's birthday or death day. His 'good' days for undertaking any activity or ritual, as calculated by the shaman, were the 18th and the 24th of the month. His family had five members: himself, his wife, his mother, his younger brother and his two-year-old daughter. However, his mother and his young brother had been away from home for over three years, working in a small firm producing bricks and an electronics firm in the borderland with China. They occasionally returned home for a short time, sometimes at Hmong New Year, and then continued to work abroad. They kept their money for their own needs, except for when C. built his new house in 2015 and his mother donated 3,000 Yuan. Thus, the work in the fields was being done by only C. and his wife, but as his wife was pregnant, she could not do hard work. Instead, he received help from his parents-in-law and brothers-in-law. In addition, C. was involved in the labour exchange groups of five families who were his relatives.

4.2.1.1 First month: the month of the Rabbit (ib hli: tus luav hli)

The first to the fifth day of this month were used to celebrate the Hmong New Year. The third day was used for the khiav tsaz ritual, which was performed by the head of household on the standing stone in the fields, praying to the gods of the mountain, springs, fields and trees to support the family with a good harvest during the year. This ritual marked the end of the time to relax and the start of the new cropping season. After praying, the head of the household took a hoe to the land as a symbolic gesture, before returning home to continue the celebration of the Hmong New Year.

The land preparation began on the sixth day, on which the old corn was removed, and the soil was scraped. This period lasted about a month, until the first spring rain had moistened the soil prepared for sowing.

Each stone hole (*khauv zeb*) had only enough space for three maize seeds, which would grow into two to three maize plants. To ensure there was enough corn for the family to eat during the year, a family of four people needed to sow at least 30 kg of corn seeds. Therefore, the cultivation area of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng was very large. Some fields here occupied almost half of the mountain, around 5,000 m2, and each family had two or three such fields.

C.'s family had four stone fields in which they planted 15 to 30 kg of seeds, as well as one earth field of 200 m2. C. was the owner of half of them, while the other half belonged to his brother. After the death of his father in a vehicle accident, his mother invited the relatives of her husband, the Giàng (B) clan, to witness the division of productive land and residential land for her two sons. The land was divided equally between them but because his brother was living away from home, C. was cultivating the whole area. When the brother marries and resides permanently in the village, he will have to return the land to his brother. C. cultivated only maize on the rocky fields and the earth field was reserved for hemp.

With such a large land area, the preparation of arable land required a large labour force. Usually, the men were responsible for preparing the land because ploughing on a rocky field or hoeing in the rock holes required a great deal of muscle strength. A man had to force the cow into the wooden plough with an iron ploughshare, which was pushed into the ground while he said 'chit chit' to urge the cow to move. He had to steer the cow and the plough around the large rocks in the fields, so the plough lines did not make straight lines like those of the Kinh people on the plains. In addition, the men cleared the land by cutting weeds and leaving them on the edges of the fields. These weeds could be collected for the cows or left to dry and then burned, with the ash used as fertiliser for the soil. The women helped by shaking the soil off the old corn stalks, topping up the soil in the rock holes and putting small stones from the rock holes around the edges of the holes to prevent the soil from being washed out in the heavy rain. Older people and children did this work as well, or they did the housework while two main household adults worked in the fields. The siblings of the husband and wife could be required to help, or they could do a labour exchange with others for the

preparation of the fields, though the labour exchange largely occurred later at the sowing stage.

4.2.1.2 Second month: the month of the Dragon (ob hli: tus zaj hli)

Almost all of this month was used for the land preparation that had started in the previous month. Every day, the whole family woke at 4 am, cooking for the whole day, having breakfast and then spending the whole day working in the field. Even the two-year-old daughter was carried to the field on her mother's back. She had been going to the fields since she was one or two months old, placed in the temporary shelter at the edge of the field. When she was hungry, her mother would feed her with milk. Now that she was older, she could run around and play in the field or imitate her parents, clearing the land in the stone holes. At noon, when it was too sunny to continue working, they ate the lunch they had brought from home and then rested in the shelter until late afternoon, when they continued to work until it was dark. They then collected their tools and went home, washing their hands and feet before having dinner. The long day of hard work made them so tired, they went to sleep very early, right after dinner, around 8 or 8.30 pm.

At the end of the second month, when the land was ready and it was raining, the family began to sow the seeds. The cultivation of the Hmong is completely dependent on the weather. They do not have access to irrigation water for their crops but rely entirely on the rain. The climate in this mountainous region close to China is dry and cold in winter and when spring comes, there is a small amount of rain that briefly falls for only a few days. Sowing is only done during those short rainy days. If the seed was sown late after the rain had stopped, the soil would have dried out and the plant would not have enough water to grow well.

The work for sowing seeds was divided according to gender. The men were responsible for making the fertiliser from the compost, mixed with ash and chemical fertiliser. Then they put the sacks of fertiliser on their shoulders and carried it to the field. The women walked with a small child lying on the front of the chest and lunch boxes for the whole family on the back. On the hillside, the men chose a flatter area of ground to empty the fertiliser from the sack, mixing it again with their bare hands. Once this was completed, they rested for a while and played with the baby, while the women dug small holes and planted two or three seeds of corn. Sometimes they would add some pumpkin seeds and spinach seeds to intercrop with

the corn. Then, the men added a little fertiliser to the holes and covered the seeds with soil. The men were considered more knowledgeable than the women about the appropriate ratio of animal dung, ash and chemical fertiliser, as well as the amount of fertiliser to use to make the corn plants grow well and produce high yields.

4.2.1.3 Third month: the month of the Snake (peb hli: tus nab hli)

They continued to sow seeds at the beginning of this month, then when that was finished, the Hmong men prepared the land in the earth field for the women to plant hemp for making cloth. Although they could now buy cheap clothes from China in the market, the cultivation of hemp and making hemp cloth is central in their lives. This cloth is used in some rituals and in funerals. They believe that without the hemp cloth, the ancestors would not recognise their descendants who died, and they would not be able to go back to their ancestors in the afterlife. Therefore, they always saved the high-quality land for hemp, which was planted the same way as the maize.

4.2.1.4 Fourth month: the month of the Horse (plaub hli: tus nees hli) and the fifth month: the month of the Goat (tsib hli: tus tshis hli)

These were the months for crop care. Often the man of the household would do this job while the woman was busy with the housework or planting hemp. Men are considered experienced in caring for the corn, checking the roots to see whether the corn had enough water, adding fertiliser if necessary and removing any weeds.

4.2.1.5 Sixth month: the month of the Monkey (rau hli: tus liab hli)

According to the Hmong calendar, the people could work in the fields every day of this month except 6 June, which they believed was the time when the maize plants would flower and reproduce. If they went to the field on that day, it would make the corn pollen travel in different directions. The local corn was mixed with glutinous corn and hybrid corn, resulting in a corn that was dark red and colourful.

This was the time for harvesting the hemp. Both the men and women came to the field, cut down the hemp plants, pulled off their leaves and carried them home to spread them in the

loft of the house to dry. They saved some hemp plants that were growing well on the edge of the field for seeds for the next crop.

4.2.1.6 Seventh month: the month of the Rooster (xya hli: tus qaib hli) and eighth month: the month of the Dog (yim hli: tus aub hli)

Once the maize kernels had emerged, one or two men started sleeping in the temporary shelter to protect the field from mice and theft. In this remote area, thieves from Thào Lủng village in the commune of Pải Lủng, often addicts, came to steal the Hmong people's assets. They used to steal opium, but now stole corn, chickens and cows. Although the Hmong people's houses had high fences and closed doors, these could not prevent the thefts. When the thieves were stealing a cow, they would often hide it in a rock cave so the Hmong could not find it and then return to take it away later. As the limestone mountains had many caves, it was difficult to find missing cows.

The women stayed at home doing housework during this month, cleaning the dried flax in one place and using any spare time to take the hemp string off the hemp stalk. They peeled the flax off the stalks, tied it together and rolled it around a small piece of wood to form a long roll. This process continued for several months. Once the hemp plants had been stripped, they used a rudimentary tool to make the hemp into hemp coils, then they bleached it in ash mixed with water, dried it and wove it. After weaving pieces of fabric about 5 m long by 1 m wide, the women continued to bleach the fabric until it was white. This fabric was used for making women's skirts or dyed blue for men's clothing. They could sell fabric to people who needed it for rituals for about 800,000 VND per piece or sell skirts in the market for over 1 million VND.

4.2.1.7 Ninth month: the month of the Pig (cuaj hli: tus npua hli)

During this month, the maize was dried in the field before being harvested and transported home. Collaboration in maize harvesting was similar to that for land preparation: the whole family engaged in harvesting, sometimes with support from the siblings of the husband and the wife, sometimes with a labour exchange. The people cut the dried corn from the corn stalks and carried it home. There, the corn was stored in the loft, which had been cleaned up in advance. When they took the corn home, they selected the best-quality corn, boiled it and presented it on a plate placed on a small table in front of the altar, to invite the ancestors to

eat the new corn. They practised a similar ceremony when cooking the first corn wine of the year, putting a bottle of the new wine and a small cup in front of the altar for the ancestors. The cornstalks were cut down later and moved to the roadside or into the garden, piled up to use as fuel for cooking. This work was done by both the man and the woman of the house. They would tie 20 cornstalks into a bunch and the man would stack them into piles up to 2 m high. If the woman did not have the capacity or time to do this work, they could not use the exchange of labour or helpers for this job but had to hire labourers to help them at a cost of up to 1 million VND. The hired work included cutting the cornstalks of a hectare of land, making cornstalk bunches and carrying these bunches to home. In Mã Pì Lèng village, there is a woman group available to do this work.

4.2.1.8 Tenth month: the month of the Mouse (kaum hli: tus nas hli); eleventh month: the month of the Ox (kaum ib hli: tus nyuj hli); and twelfth month: the month of the Tiger (kaum ob hli: tus tsov hli)

This period was for helping people construct new houses, cultivate alternative crops, weave cloth, cook corn whisky and practise rituals. The last month of the year was for preparing for the Hmong New Year's celebration. This involved several rituals in the house, including *hug plig* (calling in the soul), *cheb tsev* (house sweeping), *tau dej tshiab* (taking new water), *ntxuav lub qhov rooj* (door washing) and *dab tuag tsev thiab dab laug yawg koob* (praying to the spirits of the house and the ancestors). These rituals helped to clear the house of evil spirits, strengthen the protection of the house, request the support of the gods of the house and the ancestors, give thanks and give the production tools and domestic animals some time to relax after a long year of working.

Discussion

This account of cooperation in agricultural activities demonstrates various forms of mutual assistance, which are similar to the kind of help the Hmong draw upon in constructing houses, as described earlier. Both involve forms of labour exchange. In the Hmong language, labour exchange is called *paoz zoo* or *ua zoo*. When examining the exchange of labour among Mayan farmers in Mexico, Downey (2010) explained labour exchange as a kind of resilience in swidden agriculture, as follows:

> Labour exchanges are main social process involved with swidden agriculture in most villages (Wilk, 1997). These occur when a farmer asks a group of men to help with a difficult or dangerous task such as planting or clearing the forest for a new agricultural field. After the workgroup, the farmer is expected to return a day of labour for each man who helped him, closing the debt in a form of reciprocal exchange. (p. 2)

Downey noted that the labour exchange in Mexico was only for corn production. His description is relatively consistent with the situation for the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng, who were also producing maize. In addition, the Hmong labour exchange in Mã Pì Lèng was influenced by the Vietnamese government's policy of developing cooperatives. In Vietnam, the development of agricultural cooperatives began in 1955, during the period of land reform (Liên Minh Hợp Tác Xã Việt Nam, 2015). As a result, much of the farmland was collectivised and became the property of the cooperative. Farmers became members of the cooperatives, working in the fields (growing rice, maize and other crops) or animal husbandry and handicraft production and being given one point per day of labour. Their points would be converted into rice for the farmers after the harvest. In such cooperatives, labour exchange groups were organised to help each other in their work, under the motto 'a tree cannot make a mountain; three trees gather together to make a high mountain' (*Một cây làm chẳng lên non, ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao*) (Tổ đổi công kiểu mẫu, 1955). The members of the exchange team (both men and women) took turns with agricultural production.

By the 1980s, when the food production was not enough for the people, the cooperatives were in crisis. In the mountainous areas, the people, apart from the labourers in the cooperative, used their own new fields to grow food without entering it into the cooperative's assets. This food crisis led to a change in Vietnam's policy. Step by step, the land was allocated to households under Instruction No. 100 of the Secretariat Session IV, January 1981 on contract farming in agriculture (1981), Resolution No. 10 of the Politburo of the VI Session on Agriculture issued on 5 April 1988 (1988) to Land Law (1993) (Nghị Quyết 10 và những đột phá trong nông nghiệp, 2010).

After the land had been allocated to the households, the role of the cooperative changed from production organisation to providing services such as the supply of seeds, fertilisers and

pesticides, the transfer of new technologies in agriculture and the collection of agriculture fees. Labour exchange groups did not work in the cooperatives.

Despite the long-term land use allocation from 1993 under the Land Law, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng continued to use the land around the village and extended this to the neighbouring villages and communes. They only stopped expanding their land around 1997, when the authorities warned them that they could not continue to create new fields. Labour exchange was transferred from the size of the cooperative to the size of the household group and the practice continued.

Given that the Hmong had stopped both swidden agriculture and cooperative production about 20 years ago, I wondered why the labour exchange among the Hmong was still practised. I thought the conditions of the land and the mountain climate made them maintain this form of labour exchange as a way of pooling their human resources to work in a very short and intensive period.

As mentioned above, Hmong labour exchanges took place in groups of households. Usually, four to five households in a clan formed a workgroup. People who engaged in the exchange of labour were only the able-bodied adults of the family (both men and women). Most of the Hmong families in Mã Pì Lèng were nuclear families, so the people involved in the exchange were usually spouses and husbands, sometimes only the husband. The exchange was rotated from family to family daily and occurred mainly during the sowing period.

Each family in a workgroup would send one to two members to help a family on one day. The next day would be the turn of another family. Depending on the number of members of the families who contributed to work on a day, the family who was helped in the first day would send a corresponding number of family members to the next workgroup. The family did not need to prepare special delicious food for the people who came to help; they would eat the same food as the family ate for lunch, usually cooked crushed corn and vegetable soup. The exchange of labour would be rotated around all five households in the group until they had all completed the sowing.

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4.3 Conclusion

From the analysis above, it can be seen that a limestone karst terrain with steep cliffs and sharp stones is not an ideal habitat for human beings. To adapt, survive and develop in this limestone karst environment over the last 100 years, the Hmong have had to modify and transform the terrain into a place where they can live and cultivate corn. The Hmong experience of modifying and transforming the karst landscape is an illustration of what Ingold (1994) calls the 'cultural process': a landscaping activity based on kin cooperation that enables life and the belonging of people to the land (Gow, 1995; Toren, 1995).

Modifying and transforming the karst terrain is heavy work that an individual cannot achieve alone; it requires a large labour force. The Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng village have had to develop collaborative strategies to cope with this issue. These collaborative strategies mobilise diverse skills and embodied capacities and draw upon multiple ties to the family, clan, village and community. They are based on a combination of gender, age, experience, skill, talent, authority, and ability. They have resulted in the transfer of knowledge between people and generations. In addition, this cooperation has made the Hmong community more united, giving a vulnerable people a stronger sense of security, and it has brought economic benefits to the community.

The Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng have developed a viable habitat of enduring value by making a significant impact on the limestone landscape. They break up the rocks to form flat foundations that can support their houses. They carry soil from the lowlands up to the high mountain areas to create their cornfields. These tasks require intense effort, considerable time, and specialised knowledge. They have settled on the mountain as their chosen place to make an abode and do not consider moving to other places. By cooperating with each other,

the Hmong people have developed a sense of belonging to a place and social universe forged in the transformation of a limestone plateau into a home.

Chapter 5: Dwelling Among Rocks: The Hmong House in Mã Pì Lèng

When conducting fieldwork in Mã Pì Lèng village, the first thing to consider was somewhere to live. I could have chosen one of the many hotels, motels or homestays growing like mushrooms because of increasing tourism in the towns of Đồng Văn or Mèo Vạc, which would have offered ample clean water, a sanitary toilet and a comfortable bed. However, given that these towns were more than 10 km from Mã Pì Lèng village, they would have been inconvenient for conducting research. My understanding of Hmong life in the karst mountains would have been hindered had I not lived with them or become a member of their community. I hoped that living in a Hmong house would help me become acquainted with the villagers and have the opportunity to observe, participate and experience the life of the Hmong in this rocky area. From my previous field trips to this region as a researcher with the Vietnam Institute of Anthropology, during which I was welcomed into the homes of people from other ethnic groups, I assumed that I would also be welcomed into Hmong homes. However, gaining entry into a Hmong house was more difficult than expected.

On a September morning, armed with an introduction sheet from the People's Committee of Pải Lủng commune, I visited the home of the head of Mã Pì Lèng village, where I was greeted by two fierce black dogs and a flock of chickens. The house was located close to three other brick houses atop an earth mountain and surrounded by a garden of Oriental canna and bamboo hedges. This area was isolated from the rest of Mã Pì Lèng village. Nobody was at home when I arrived, and I could not find anyone in neighbouring houses to tell me the whereabouts of the village headman. Because I did not know when he would return, I spent the rest of the morning wandering around the village.

I returned to the house in the afternoon. The village head's wife and children were at home, but he had not yet returned. His wife, a joyful round-faced woman with wine-flushed cheeks, invited me in with a smile on her face and bid her son to find his father, who was working in the village, and ask him to return home. Thirty minutes later I was sitting opposite the village head—a short, skinny man with a constant smile on his face. I gave him my introduction papers from the People's Committee and briefed him about who I was and what I wished to do in the village. He gave his consent for me to remain in his village to conduct research and offered me

accommodation in the village common room, which was used as a sleeping place for village officials when events were held in the adjacent meeting room. However, at the time, it was being used as a food storage facility for a nearby household.

I expressed my gratitude to the village head but rejected his offer, explaining that I would prefer to stay in the home of a Hmong family. He frowned, wrinkled his brow, bowed and thought for some time—he appeared to be considering various homes in which I could stay. He quickly excluded his own house on the grounds that he had a family of five and it was too small to accommodate an extra person. He considered the former village head's house, which was clean and spacious. However, the houseowner's wife was pregnant and would be giving birth in the coming months, and he did not know whether the houseowner would agree to me staying. The village head continued to encourage me to stay in the room he had initially offered because he thought it would be convenient for both my work and his. I explained that I could stay there for a few days but would continue to seek a Hmong house in which I could stay. He finally capitulated and took me to the house of the former village head, which was close to the village gate and not far from the meeting room.

Built in 2015, the new brick house was relatively clean and surrounded by a robust stone wall. This type of defensive architecture was popular in this remote rocky area because of past and ongoing regional insecurities. We passed through a gate in the stone wall, walked around an old water tank built in 1984 with financial support from UNICEF and entered the house through a side door. The houseowner's pregnant wife, her daughter on her back, was standing in front of a large wood stove cooking food for the pigs, while the houseowner was in the cow shelter near the main door, cutting grass for the cows.

On seeing us enter the house, the houseowner stood up and placed a small low tea table and some plastic chairs in the middle of the house opposite the altar, inviting us to sit. The village headman introduced me, explained the purpose of my visit and kindly requested whether the houseowner could accommodate me. He explained that he would have been willing to accommodate me himself had his house been large enough.

With his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the floor between his feet, the houseowner listened quietly. We waited while he thought. After some time, he lifted his head and gently refused on the grounds that his house was not as clean and comfortable as a guesthouse.

Despite my objections, he reiterated his reasons for rejecting my request three times. Once, he stood up and walked around the house. Thirty minutes later, after drinking some homemade whisky, the houseowner agreed to let me stay in his home for two months until his wife's delivery due date. Because his mother was currently working in China, I would stay in her room and sleep on her bed. I was not required to pay rent for the duration of my stay but was asked to buy a gas stove for the family. The houseowner said it would be convenient for me to cook. After thanking him, we returned to Mèo Vạc market to buy groceries and personal items such as matches, a mosquito net, a blanket and a pillow, and I moved into the house the following day. I also gave the houseowner enough money for a gas stove and asked him to purchase it from the gas station in Mèo Vạc town.

The following day, while I was out walking and visiting another family in the village, several villagers pulled at my hand and asked how much it was costing me to stay in the house. They were surprised and sceptical about me not having to pay for anything except my food and personal belongings. Their reactions made me reconsider the hesitation shown by the village headman and host when arranging accommodation for me. I understood that it would cost me something to stay in a Hmong house—however, why was it a stove and not something else? What was the meaning of the stove in the Hmong house? Did it have any relation to the perceptions of the Hmong about their homes or lives? Moreover, I was intrigued and interested in the house in which I stayed because of the abundance of apparent religious objects, including a rectangular red cloth hung above the main door, a sharp iron knife with a red cloth tied around its handle in the slot of the wooden door, a similar knife on a rafter adjacent to the main entrance and joss papers stuck on every pillar, the rear and side doors and even the wall. There were also joss papers along with bunches of wheat, amaranth flowers and grasses hanging from the ceiling. I wondered about the meaning of these things in the house.

To find the answers to my questions, I aimed to discover how the Hmong perceived their homes as a function of their life in the karst mountains. Understanding a home is one way to learn about the culture of a community or an ethnic group (Bailey, 1990; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Rapoport, 2000; Waterson, 1991). A house's architecture, layout and used spaces can reflect multiple dimensions of human life, including nature, environment, ideology,

economy and cultural and social rules and practices (Bailey, 1990; Bourdieu, 1977; Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995; Rakoff, 1977; Rapoport, 2000; Waterson, 1991).

The previous chapter discussed the Hmong's sense of belonging to the rocky landscape expressed through their knowledge and collaborative practices of landscaping. This chapter discusses the sense of belonging manifested in how the Hmong set up and use the spaces in their homes. As an ecological anthropologist, I sought to examine how the environment—in this case, the limestone mountain landscape—has shaped the ways in which the Hmong people live within their homes; in other words, how they have adapted to the mountain environment through their architecture and use of space in their homes. This might include also the everyday activities performed within the house as well as social and cultural relations among family members.

Although they contain some similarities to houses around the world, Hmong houses have unique characteristics arising from the need to respond to the specific mountainous landscape and the Hmong kinship structure and belief systems. This uniqueness arises not only from their adaptation to the physical landscape but also from the requirements and principles of Hmong kinship. The emphasis of the Hmong kinship system on a modular family structure means that while people cohabit in the same house, members of a household can easily leave or return without breaking continuity of the household. Thus, there is both exclusivity and inclusivity and a certain autonomy within each family unit (and subunit) in a Hmong home. The Hmong house is not only a house—there is significant meaning in its combination of physical and invisible objects, which play an important role in protecting and promoting family health, reproduction, luck and prosperity. The house is a place of witnessing and the continuous cycle of life. People are born, raised, marry, have children, die and are reincarnated in their homes. All aspects of nature, life, social relations, culture and beliefs are expressed in the Hmong house (Doan, 2013; Cu and Hoang, 1994; S.H. Tran, 1996, Vuong, 2005).

5.1 Elements of the Hmong House

Every Hmong house is based on fundamental principles arising from the Hmong's adaptation to their landscape and environment, their ongoing migration and the principles of Hmong

kinship. Houses are built on stone platforms that are recessed into the slope of the mountain at the back and rest on a mound of stone and earth at the front. The platform is covered with materials such as earth or cement to create a floor. Houses comprise basic and symbolic units that have multiple meanings related to the functions of the house and kin relations within the home. Figure 5.1 shows the basic and symbolic units within the simple thatch house (tsev nyom) of Mr Mùa S. P.

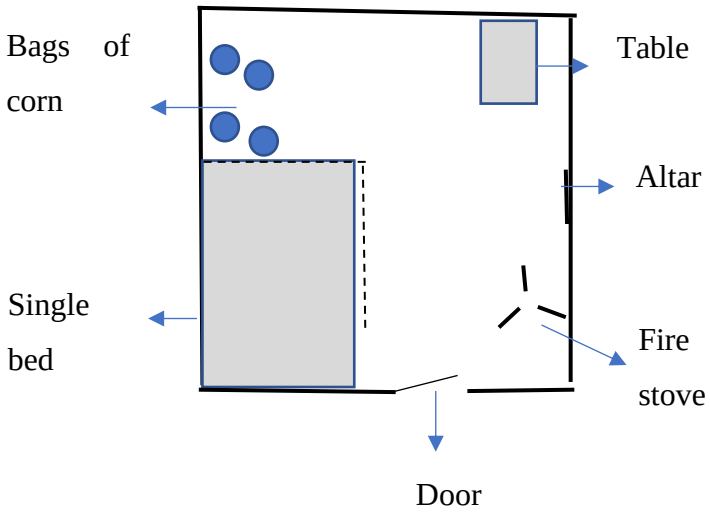

Figure 5.1: Layout and used space in the *tsev nyom* of Mr Mùa S. P.

Mr P. was 67 years old. His wife had died many years before. Because he was poor, he had never remarried, and he lived alone. His thatch house was small, approximately 10 m2, with a door but no windows. The interior of the house appeared to be divided into five distinct areas. To the left of the entrance was Mr P.'s sleeping area. It, comprised a small single bed surrounded by a screen of short bamboo stems, giving privacy and shielding the sleeping area from the cold wind. Opposite the bed was a wood stove, which was used for cooking as well as heating in the cold winters. This area was also used for eating meals. Because he was alone, Mr P. cooked only once every few days. The area behind the bed and fire was used for storage—a few bags of corn had been stacked in the corner of the house. Next to this was a small table holding some water containers, pots, plastic bowls and aluminium spoons. This table was also where meals were prepared. On the wall between the wood stove and the table was the house altar (*xwm kaz*), comprising some joss papers with three chicken feathers stuck to them. Hmong families of the Mùa clan typically place the altar in the middle of the back

wall, but Mr P., who was usually intoxicated, appeared to have paid little attention to the location of the altar and had simply hung it where it was convenient.

Mr P.'s house was small and contained only basic household items, but it satisfied the requirements of a Hmong home. It included a bed for sleeping, a stove for cooking and heating, an area for food storage, an area for food preparation and a sacred place for worship. Simple though it was, it had a subdivision, a small, screened compound within the house, containing Mr P.'s bed.

For families with two or more couples from different generations, a greater number of subdivisions could be observed. In addition to the common food preparation and storage areas, each couple (along with their children) and other adult family members had their own bed and fire. The number of beds was equivalent to the number of fires. Figure 5.2 illustrates the layout and used spaces in the home of my host, Giàng M. C., in which each bed was warmed by a different fire.

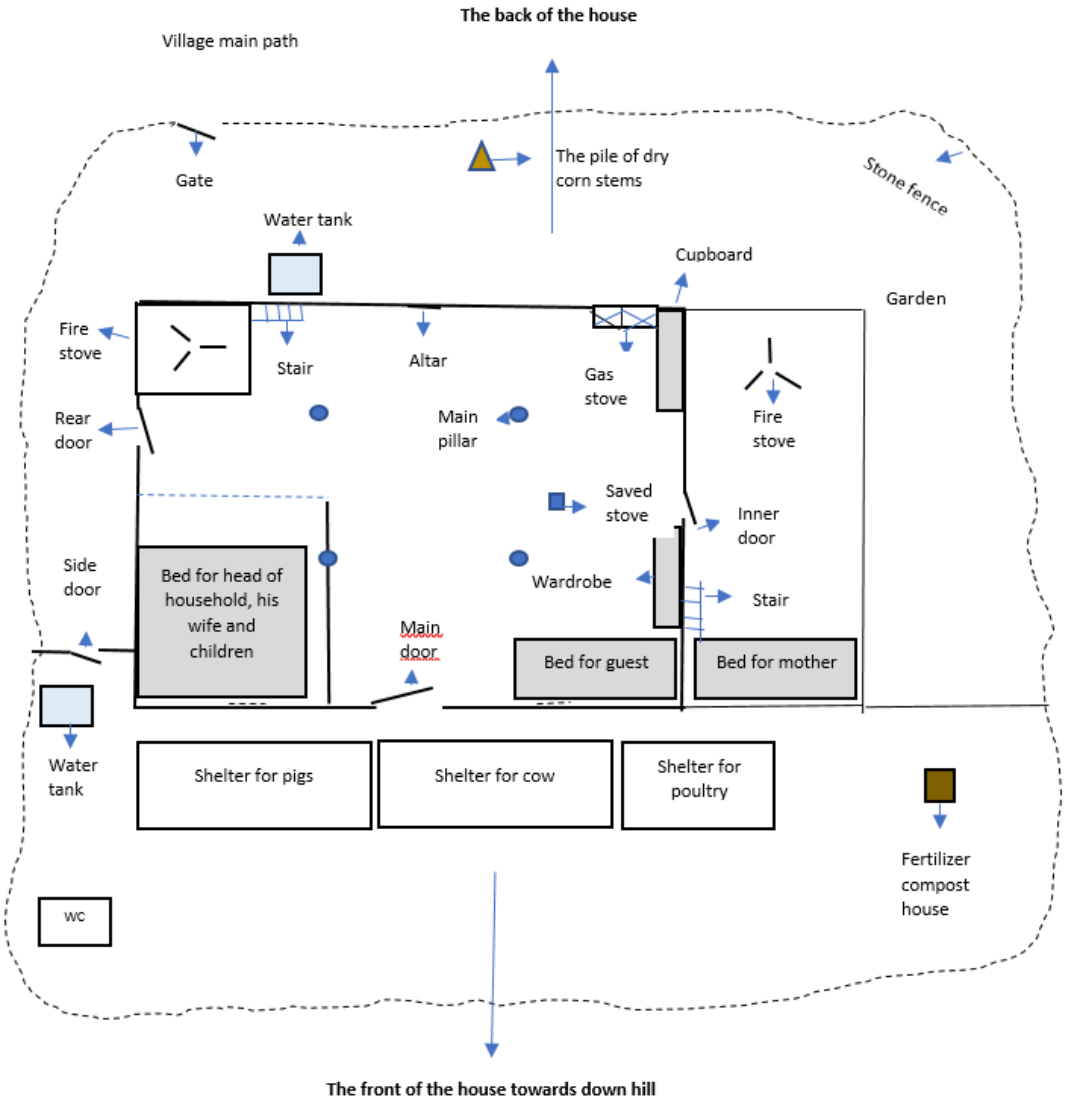

Figure 5.2: Layout and used spaces in the house of Mr Giàng M. C.

Giàng M. C.'s[30] family comprised six people, including his spouse, two daughters, mother and younger brother. After his father died from a traffic accident on his way to work, C. had become the head of the family. His mother and his younger brother had gone to China to work as hired labourers, rarely returning home. Therefore, only C., his wife and his two children currently lived in the house.

Built in 2015, the new stone brick house was surrounded by an exterior stone wall with an entrance off the main road of the village. Within the stone walls, adjacent to the house, were cattle and poultry stables, two water tanks, a toilet, a small garden, a composting area and a pile of dry cornstalks to light the fires. Several bundles of dry wood used as fuel in the winter

[30]Giàng M. C. was from the Giàng (B) clan.

were arranged around the house. The livestock holding area was located close to the house, facing the main door. Although animal excrement causes an odour that can make a home unsanitary, this arrangement improved the safety of cattle and poultry. This type of architecture, known as defensive architecture, was popular in the Hmong villages of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau because it helped protect the people living in remote and isolated mountainous areas from theft and robbery.

The house had a two-roofed architectural design. The main house was made of stone bricks and was connected to the old wooden house, which was used by C.'s mother as a place to cook and sleep. The wood stove in the old house was used to warm bathwater for family members and to cook in the event of rituals or visiting guests. Because C.'s mother was working in China and rarely returned home, the single bed in the old house was used infrequently and became my bed for the duration of my fieldwork.

The main house had several doors, including one main entrance and three side doors—one leading into the old house, another giving access to the main door and the third being the exit to the gate in the stone wall. This arrangement of multiple entries was useful because the main door was convenient for accessing the house but not for going out or accessing the fields. The rear door was more convenient for entering and exiting the house and would help the Hmong escape in the event of the house being attacked by robbers[31].

Although there were no partitions, the house appeared to be divided into two spaces: the area from the main door to the middle of the house, which was used as the sleeping area for family members, and the area from the centre of the house to the back wall, which was used for rituals, cooking, and other family activities.

The main door and two windows were located in the south-facing wall of the house. However, the two windows were sealed with old sacks to prevent the cold wind from entering the bedrooms, which were also located on the south side of the house. Moreover, the head of household explained that sealing the windows helped to capture wealth, which was believed to enter the house through the main door and prevent it from escaping.

[31] In the past, due to living in a remote and solitary place, Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng village sometimes were attacked by neighbouring Hmong robbers who tried to rob their opium and cattle.

The couple and their two children slept in an area to the left of the main door. This sleeping area was separated from the other spaces by a wooden wall between the bed and the main entrance and a curtain at the foot of the bed. The sleeping area was fitted with a double bed and a wooden clothes chest. Above the bed, close to the ceiling, hung a wild vegetable nut, symbolising proliferation, and a bowl of water, which was placed there on the shaman's advice to stop the first daughter crying at night. The water in the bowl was changed by the head of the household on the eighth and twenty-fourth days of each month.

To the right of the main door was a single bed for guests and the younger brother on his return home. Beside the bed was a wardrobe with an empty compartment allocated for a television. Not far from the guest bed was a shallow hole in the floor that had originally been used for a small fire for guests to cook and stay warm in the winter. Because the cooking area had been relocated to the old house, the owner no longer used this hole for fires. Instead, in accordance with Hmong beliefs, it was being used as a shelter for the kitchen god and a place to burn incense during family rituals.

Close to this fireplace was the main pillar of the house, known as the 'pillar for health', which was thought to bring stability to the house and promote the health of household members. In the past, when a male child was born, his placenta would be buried at the foot of this pillar in the hope that the baby would be healthy and protected. Today, the placentae of both baby boys and girls are often buried at crossroads leading to the fields. The Hmong believe that because crossroads contain many paths, any evil forces that could harm the baby will become confused and, therefore, harmless.

The corner of the house formed by the back wall and the old house contained a small cupboard, a gas stove and an electric rice cooker. The gas stove was used daily to cook for family members. Cooking salt and spices were also kept in this area. At the opposite corner of the house, facing the bed of the head of the household, was another wood stove built of brick, approximately a metre square and half a metre high. An enormous cast iron pan used to cook food for pigs and poultry always sat on this stove. This wood stove was a symbol of the family's wealth—the bigger the stove, the greater the number of livestock and the wealthier the family.

The area between the two stoves, close to the back wall and facing the main door, was the most formal area for the family. The altar was located here as a place to worship the spirits of the house and the family's ancestors as well as for ritual performances and offerings. This was also the family's dining area. According to Hmong culture, the male head of the family always sat closest to the altar, while his wife and children sat further away. If guests were present, the seats closest to the altar were reserved for the family head and any male guests, while the wife and female guests sat further from the altar. If there were too many guests for one table, they were separated into two tables—the men dined in the middle of the house near the altar, with the older men sitting closer to the altar and the younger men sitting further away, while the women's dining tables were placed in the corner of the house.

The vertical space in Hmong houses is also divided into lower and upper parts, which are connected by a bamboo or wooden ladder. The lower part is used as the family's living area, while the upper part is an attic used for food storage and other family rituals. C.'s house had an attic comprising long wooden planks joined together. After being dried in the field in its husk, the year's newly harvested corn would be stored on wooden shelves in the part of the attic above the wood stove used for cooking food for livestock. The smoke and heat from the fire below helped to dry the corn and reduce damage from termites. Hanging next to these wooden shelves were bunches of dried wheat or amaranth—types of seedy plants—in the belief that this would make the corn edible and yield plenty of grain.

If the harvested corn exceeded the storage capacity of the part of the attic above the wood stove, the excess corn would be stored in an adjacent area above the main door. Corn that was not sufficiently dry would also be dried on a plastic sheet in this area. Corn was used as daily food for the family as well as for making alcohol. Another corner of the attic was reserved for drying and storing hemp. The old house also had a loft used to store the previous season's corn that had been eaten by beetles to feed the pigs and poultry (see Figure 5.3).

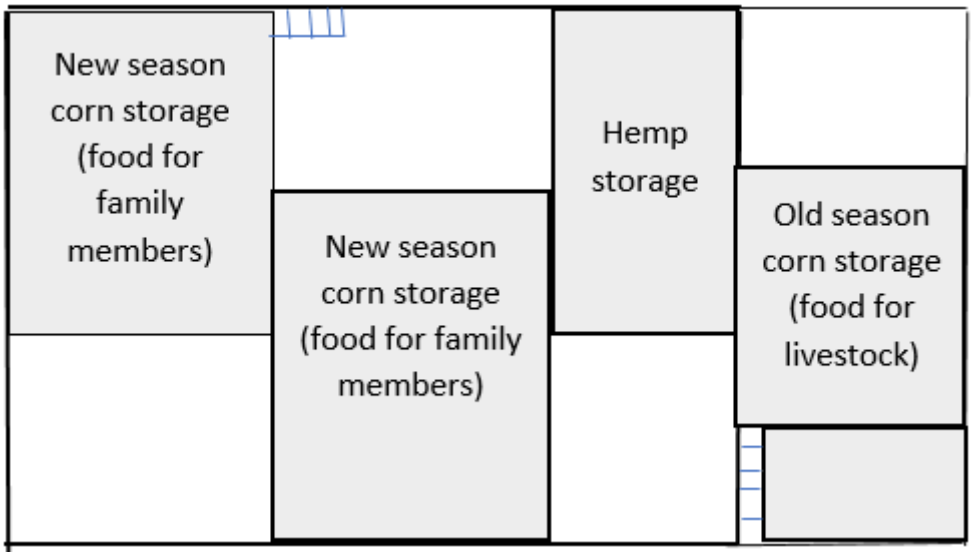

Figure 5.3: The used spaces in the Mr Giàng M. C.'s attic.

The loft was cleaned twice a year. The first occasion was at the end of September to prepare for the corn harvest. Similar to other mountainous ethnic groups of Vietnam, the Hmong believe that cleaning the place where the harvest is stored will increase the yield of the next crop. In contrast, leaving the corn store dirty will incite the spirit of the corn plant to leave, causing the following year's crop to fail. The second occasion was New Year's Eve day, during which the whole house was cleaned to wash away the hazards and bad luck of the old year and to prepare for the new year. This cleaning job was the responsibility of the head of the family. His wife only accessed the attic a few times a week to retrieve corn with which to feed household members and domestic animals.

When a family comprised two couples and their children—for example, when a couple lived with their married son and his wife as well as their other younger children—the areas to the left and right of the main door were separated into two bedrooms, respectively. The bedroom on the left was always reserved for the head of the household, his wife and their children, while the bedroom on the right was reserved for their married son, his wife and their children. The Hmong believed that the bedroom on the left was important because it was the dwelling place of the spirit of the room (*dab trongx*)[32], who presides over the reproduction of humans and animals. On the second day of the first month of the year, the Hmong conducted a ritual in this bedroom to worship the spirit of the room. This ritual was also known as the 'pig spirit'

[32] This word is written in the form of Vietnamese Hmong

ritual (*dab npua*) because the sacrifice is a black sow. This bedroom also played a vital role in the ritual of washing the door (*cxiex menhx*)[33], a ceremony performed to expel demons from the door and welcome the spirits of luck, money and health into the house. This ritual was usually conducted on the last day of the year.

All family members had access to the attic except for the daughter-in-law. It was believed that if the daughter-in-law went upstairs, her parents-in-law would become blind. Only when she and her husband lived separately from her parents-in-law or in the event of her father-in-law's death, when her husband would become head of the family, could she access the attic to retrieve food for the family's daily meals.

The Hmong house may be likened to a machine that uses fire as its source of energy. Fire provided energy to both family members and the house. It transformed fresh food into cooked food for household members' survival. Through the elimination of humidity and flow of dry air up into the loft, the heat of the fire helped with preservation of food. Along with doors and windows, stoves helped with the continuous circulation of air. The prevalent wet, cool airflows of the karst mountains entered through the doors of the house and were transformed by the heat of the fire to dry, hot air, which escaped through gaps beneath the roof and the doors in a process comparable to animal and human respiration. The house breathes, becoming a living entity.

Hmong houses in Mã Pì Lèng observed specific cultural rules in terms of layout and use of space. The houses were simple and appropriate for the narrow landscapes and cold climates of the high rocky mountainous area. They also reflected the observed hierarchy of Hmong families and society, which attach importance to sons and elders and the role and power of the head of the family in family management and property distribution. The family head's wife was considered the head's representative and exercised the right to distribute property, specifically food. In refraining from going to the attic, the daughter-in-law showed respect for her mother-in-law's authority to distribute the wealth.

Hmong household principles are evident in the great house of the Hmong King. Although the Hmong were not fully responsible for its design, the palace is a well-known tourist site in the

[33] This word is written in the form of Vietnamese Hmong

karst plateau. Built in the early years of the twentieth century by Vương Chính Đức, who was known as the Lord of the Mèo, the palace is located on a large and relatively flat land area of 3,000 m2 in Sà Phìn commune in Đồng Văn district (Institute of Anthropology [Vietnam], 2009a; Viet Tuan, 2018).

Unlike the architecture of traditional Hmong houses, Vương's house integrates various cultures and architecture styles typical of the integrated architecture of South China, resulting in a magnificent and majestic—but not inappropriate or fanciful—house suited to the regional landscape. Almost all parts of the house, including crossbeams and pillars, are made of wood, which is intricately carved with supernatural creatures and plants such as dragons, phoenixes, poppies and other flowers, symbolising prosperity and immortality. Two magnificent gables with different layers in a fin arrangement serve as rain shelters. The stone foundation contains mortices and joints to fortify the palace. The 40–60 cm-thick walls are made of dirt, and inside the castle, the partitions and floors are made of valuable timbers. The stone steps leading to the palace are carved into unique shapes that represent the power of the respected family during that period. Within the castle, there are storage areas that were used for food, poppies, weapons and household appliances. On the left side of the palace, on the first and second floors, there are corridors outside of the rooms; however, inside the walls, there are secret passageways connecting the rooms. Day and night, the palace was guarded by soldiers situated at two of its corners (Institute of Anthropology [Vietnam], 2009b; Quoc Dat, 2019).

In addition to the palace's main section are water wells, wood reserves and animal cages. A small family cemetery, which is carved as carefully as other parts of the palace, is located nearby. Surrounding the palace is a green stone wall consisting of stone blocks with an average dimension of 25 x 25 x 40 cm. The walls are approximately 1.8–2.2 m high. Along the walls are loopholes, providing a strong defence against outside forces. Pine trees are planted outside the gate and in front of and surrounding the palace, providing a protective shield (Quoc Dat, 2019).

Vương's house can be divided into three compounds, with four horizontal two-storey blocks and six vertical two-storey blocks, separated by a small yard. It has a total of 64 rooms with connecting doors, resulting in a close lifestyle. The first compound, known as the front house, served as the living quarters for the family of Vương Chính Đức's second son, Vương Chí Sình,

in its centre as well as the sleeping areas for the maids, grooms and guards at each side. The second compound—the middle house—served as the living quarters for Vương Chính Đức's third son and his wife and children at its centre and the sleeping area for visitors and guests at each side. The third compound—the back house—served as the working and living areas for Vương Chính Đức, his three wives and his unmarried children (Quoc Dat, 2019; Viet Tuan, 2018). Before his death in 1947, Vương Chính Đức assigned the management and use of the house to his three descendants. The front house was allocated to Vương Quỳnh Sơn, his oldest grandson; the middle house was assigned to Vương Chí Chu, his third son; and the back house was given to Vương Chí Sình, his second son (Viet Tuan, 2018).

In 'ordinary' Hmong households as well, in keeping with the compartmentalisation of the overall family, there are also subdivisions within the house. The house precisely reflects the modular principles of the Hmong kinship system. The core unit of Hmong kinship is the bed or bedroom. Carsten (1997) regarded people who cook together, eat together, sleep together and warm themselves by the same fire as a family. Family members who share the same bed or bedroom are more intimate than those who sleep in different beds, even though they share the same house. This is a way of maintaining freedom or autonomy. In Hmong houses, the number of fires is equivalent to the number of beds, promoting autonomy. The Hmong people attempted to promote autonomy over collectivism. Although the Hmong family included me in their home, I was excluded to the extent that I had my own sleeping area and was required to provide my own stove.

In general, there was a complexity within the Hmong houses that responded to the modular, subdivided or compartmental nature of Hmong kinship, providing a means of separation—even though people lived together, they were separated from each other within the house through individual bedrooms and hearths. This stove–bed pairing is a fundamental unit of Hmong kinship, and up to three or four of these may be found in every house in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau regardless of whether they are rich or poor. The Vương's house was much more complex, containing multiple subunits similar to a whole village inside one house; yet it retained the core Hmong concept of divisibility of family and houses.

5.2 House Materials

The materials used in the building of the houses reflected the people's understanding of their environment and the available resources from the region (Rapoport, 2000). Every Hmong house in Mã Pì Lèng village was constructed from local materials, including stone, bamboo, thatch, wood and dirt.

Given that all the houses are built on a slope, an important prerequisite is to create a large flat surface for both the house and the compound. Most of the material used in building a house is found beneath it. The first thing that all Hmong houses have in common is a floor. Specific materials and techniques are needed to create a flat surface for the floor of the house for sleeping. Enormous time and effort were devoted to mixing together stone and earth to create a platform, a feature of all Hmong houses, on top of which a floor was laid. In the past, floors were made of earth, but now they are mostly made of cement.

With respect to the main building materials used in Mã Pì Lèng village, there are four different types of house. The first is the thatch house (*tsev nyom*), which constitutes a small narrow area of approximately 10 m2 that can be used by just one or two people. Those who lived in this type of house were either older widowed people or recently married couples. This type of house is built with natural materials such as small wooden pillars, bamboo walls and earth floors, and the roof is usually covered with thatch or fibrocement tiles.

Older widowed people continued to live in *tsev nyom* houses until they died. Thus, their houses were constructed with thicker bamboo walls to be relatively sturdy. In contrast, newly married couples lived temporarily in *tsev nyom* for months or years until they had accumulated enough building materials and money to construct a brick house. Thus, they devoted little attention, effort or money in making the *tsev nyom* secure. Consequently, their homes were often poorly constructed with fragile bamboo walls lined with nylon sheets to protect them from the wind.

People living in a *tsev nyom* in a commune and who have been on a list of the poor may be allocated a new concrete house that is fully subsidised by the government. In Mã Pì Lèng village, this opportunity was relatively rare because there were only three of these temporary dwellings. The village is close to the national highway and tourist destinations, thus attracting

many visitors. Therefore, local authorities were concerned about these visitors, which sometimes included district, provincial or central leaders, discovering that these temporary houses had not been completed, and they frequently gave preference to Hmong families in non-permanent houses to receive financial support, sometimes up to 20 million VND, to build homes. This support came from state funds for disadvantaged people, individuals or firms. In the village, two households had received houses with the help of the Minister of Public Security of Vietnam, and one family had received a home with the support of the VietinBank. A plan was in place to build a house the following year from a fund for the poor provided by the Vietnamese government.

Simple non-permanent houses like these were also the first to be built by the Hmong when they first migrated to the area. When migrating to new areas, the Hmong carry only the necessary items for survival such as food, clothing, seedlings, domestic animals and pets. They use the materials available to them in the new land to quickly build non-permanent houses in which to stay until they have accumulated enough materials to build permanent houses. Moreover, non-permanent houses are built next to fields far from home so that the people can utilise them to protect their crops from wild animals or thieves.

The second type of house found in Mã Pì Lèng village is the wooden house (*tsev ntoo*). Apart for the fibrocement roof and the cement floor, wooden houses are built almost entirely of timber, which is used for the frame, walls and doors. This house is considered a permanent house because it can last for several years. The dry weather in the high mountain region and the smoke from fires inside the house protects the wood from damage for a long period.

In the early years of the twentieth century, when the high mountains of the Vietnam–China border were still mostly covered in forest, wood was a readily available resource. Therefore, most Hmong families in the village, after accumulating materials for a few years, built wooden houses in which to live. However, because of extensive deforestation, timber for building new homes is now limited, and today people rarely build wooden houses. Moreover, some Hmong households moved away from the village during the 1979 border war, and during the 1984 transition, wooden houses were either removed or moved to new places close to the old site. Therefore, at present, only four to five wooden houses remain in Mã Pì Lèng village.

Another type of permanent house in Mã Pì Lèng village is the dirt house (*tsev av*), which is common to the Đồng Văn – Mèo Vạc region. The Hmong who migrated from the Đồng Văn area to Mã Pì Lèng village in Mèo Vạc typically built this type of house—believed to have been adopted from the Chinese (Waterson, 1991)—which is suitable for helping mountainous ethnic groups resist the cold weather of mountainous areas. *Tsev av* are built with wooden frames, thatched or fibrocement roofs and dirt walls approximately 20 cm thick. The dirt used to make the walls is yellowish-brown Ferralsol mixed with water to become solid mud. The Hmong people described dirt houses as 'very comfortable' and able to 'make the summer very cool and keep warm in the winter'.

To adapt to the limited soil materials in Mã Pì Lèng village, Hmong houses were similar to those in the Đồng Văn region, although built lower in height to reduce the amount of dirt required.[34] In addition to the limited resources, more human resources were required for the construction of dirt houses than for other types of dwellings, meaning that construction costs were high. Therefore, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village no longer built dirt houses. Only one dirt house, which in fact was only half dirt and half stone bricks, remained in the village, belonging to a household of the Ly clan.

The final type of house in Mã Pì Lèng village is the stone brick house (*tsev cib*), which was the favoured type of dwelling in the village. These houses were built with wooden frames, fibrocement roofs and stone brick walls. The bricks used for wall construction were small non-fired limestone bricks mixed with cement additives and pressed into blocks. Although the Hmong people could make this type of brick, they typically bought it from Kinh brick workshops in Đồng Văn district. Once agreement was made on the price and quantity of blocks to be purchased, the Kinh workshop owner transported the bricks by truck to the village gate. The Hmong then took the bricks to their homes by motorcycle or in a bamboo basket on their backs. Brick houses were quicker and easier for the Hmong people to build and were more durable than the three aforementioned house types. The general trend of housing in Mã Pì

[34] *Tsev av* houses are more common in valleys and lower-lying areas of Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc districts owing to the greater abundance of soil eroded from the mountains.

Lèng village implies that the Hmong people will gradually eliminate bamboo, wooden and earth houses and move towards brick houses.[35]

However, the classification of Hmong houses based on materials is somewhat arbitrary because Hmong houses were not built from only one material but from a combination of several materials to form a viable structure. Materials were often selected based on their ability to meet the people's needs, including being easy to source and use, offering protection for people, household items and domestic animals, and fulfilling cultural beliefs.

5.3 The House as Protection

Living in the remote and isolated high karst mountains, the Hmong face a number of threats and dangers arising from three main sources: nature, people and supernatural forces (often referred to by the Hmong as dab, meaning 'spirit'[36]), as mentioned in Chapter 3. The Hmong people designed, built and set up their houses in ways that assisted them to reduce these threats and dangers.

Figure 5.2 illustrates that the Hmong houses consisted of a series of three walls: the innermost wall, enclosing the bedroom; the middle wall, enclosing the house itself; and the outermost wall, enclosing the entire compound. The protection level gradually increased from the inside to the outside and can be seen in the materials used to build the walls.

[35]When studying the traditional Hmong houses in Lao Cai province, Doan (2013) categorised houses into two types based on residential characteristics: nomadic houses and settlement houses. Nomadic houses are typically made of flimsy materials such as grass, bamboo or leaves and are mainly built as temporary dwellings before migrating to other places. In contrast, settlement houses are built of more durable materials such as wood or soil for long-term settlement purposes. This classification based on the type of residence is somewhat inaccurate. Similar to the Đồng Văn plateau area, most Hmong villages have settled permanently since the 1960s following the policy of mobilising the sedentary state of Vietnam. However, bamboo and leaf houses still exist, and their owners have no intention of migrating to other places. The sole reason for the failure to build permanent housing is the economic conditions or they failure to accumulate enough money. Therefore, I relied on construction materials to classify the homes of Hmong people. Interestingly, although I categorised Hmong housing into four types, it is possible to categorise it into two types: organic and mineral. Organic houses are those built from plant-based construction materials such as wood, bamboo and grasses. Mineral houses are those built from mineral-based building materials such as soil, stone and bricks. It is also possible to categorise Hmong houses by the form of construction: self-made houses and those built with purchased materials. Self-made homes include cottages, wooden houses and dirt houses, while homes built with materials obtained from the market include brick houses.

[36] *Dab* is the Hmong word referring to several common spirits in Hmong belief. However, the Hmong people also have specific words for various types of spirits or supernatural beings. For example, they use *ntsuj plig* to indicate their ancestral spirits. Other supernatural beings believed to live in mountains, forests, valleys, and other natural geographical places are as *nyus vais, em ntoo, thwv tim, tim tswv, poj ntxoog, koos koim,* and *dab ntxang*. See Vue (2018) for further information about these supernatural beings and spirits.

The lowest level of protection was provided by the innermost wall, which enclosed the bedroom. The materials used in this area were wood, bamboo and fabric. The walls of the house were constructed using more rugged materials such as bamboo, wood, dirt and bricks, providing a medium level of protection. The outer enclosure wall was the first to be exposed to outside threats and dangers and offered the highest level of protection for the house and the people inhabiting it. Therefore, it was built to be strong and stable. Outer walls were constructed of limestone, which is readily available (see Figure 5.4). Enormous limestone boulders were drilled or smashed with hammers into rocks of various sizes. Two or three large stones, approximately 40 x 30 x 20 cm, were used to form the width of the foot of the wall. Smaller stones were stacked on top of the large stones to form the upper part of the wall. Wall heights could reach 1.5–2 m, and the length of the wall was sufficient to surround the property. Although these walls did not use any adhesive materials such as cement or mortar, they were solid and impenetrable. These concentric walls helped protect inhabitants from rolling stones, falling trees, landslides, dust, wind, rain, insects, wild animals and disreputable people common in the karst mountain area[37].

Figure 5.4: A newly built house surrounded by a stone wall in Mã Pì Lèng village.

[37] This method of foundation making, and house construction can be seen in several ethnic groups in the North of Vietnam. I think this idea is common knowledge shared by people living in the mountainous areas. It also is influenced by the Fengshui of the Han Chinese, in seeing mountainsides as natural protection walls for houses and people. However, the Hmong in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau are famous for their techniques and skills in making walls and foundations from limestone. In Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc districts, Kinh and Tày people sometimes hire Hmong men to make the stone walls for them.

The outer wall surrounded not only the house but other supplementary structures, including shelters for domestic animals[38] such as cows, pigs and poultry, water tanks, gardens, fuel storage areas, food and hemp processing areas and toilets, which also had to be protected from the wind, falling stones, wild animals and thieves.

The location and orientation of houses also offered some protection. As mentioned previously, most Hmong houses were built on steep slopes, recessed into the hill at the back and resting on a platform of mounded stone and earth at the front, as shown in Figure 5.5. There were usually no doors at the back of the house, which faced uphill.

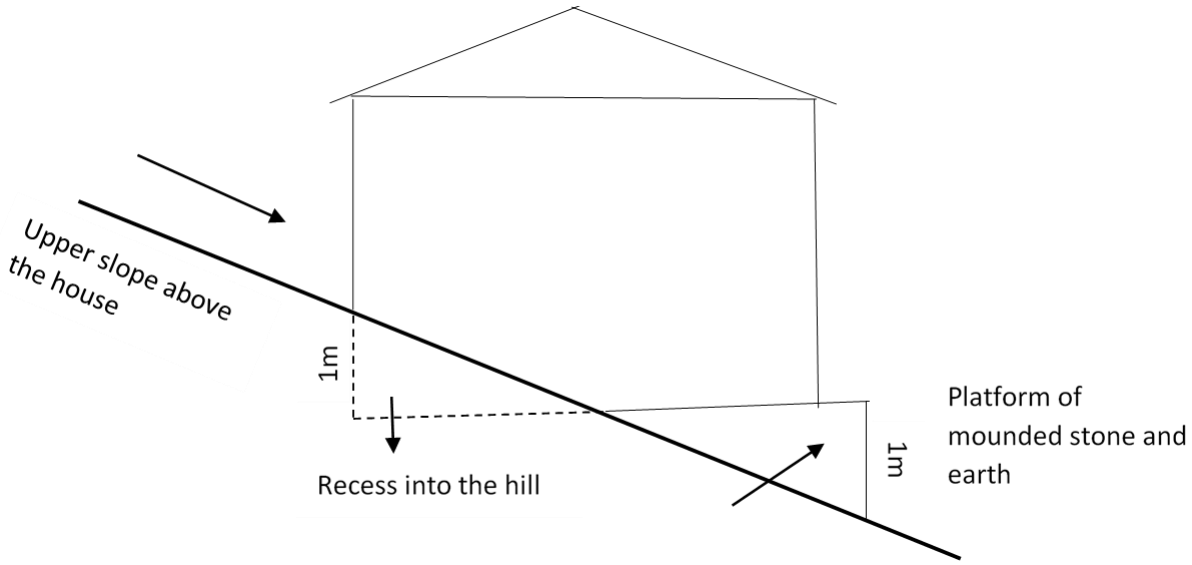

Figure 5.5: The orientation of the Hmong house on the hill.

The back wall facing into the cliff face helped to block the wind and prevented small stones, dirt and rubbish from entering the house. The roof helped shelter the inhabitants from rain. Stables were built close to the door, both to protect cattle from wild animals and thieves and to prevent animal waste from entering the house. Indoor fire stoves were used to heat homes,

[38]Domestic animals, especially cows, are highly valued by the Hmong and represent their savings, which are used on essential rituals such as funerals or in-house rituals or are sold to build houses or purchase furniture. They are easily stolen by addicts and thieves from neighbouring Hmong villages. Therefore, the protection of cows is essential, and they are treated as humans. Stables are built with materials similar to those used to construct houses. When building a cowshed, Hmong people perform the same rituals as those used when building houses for protection and fertility of the cows. Additionally, the Hmong hang a water bottle above the doorway of the cowshed when a cow is giving birth to protect the mother, her calves and the milk source. Following the birth of a calf, women are not permitted to pass the cowshed's doorway or touch the bottle. If they violate that taboo, it is believed that the cow would lose its milk source.

cook food and protect people from insects and wildlife. More importantly, the fire acted as a transformer, transforming objects and people from the wet to the dry state. Wet represents softness, weakness and sickness, while dry represents stability, hardness and health. This is exemplified by the custom of placing a Hmong woman next to the fire with her newborn baby for a month after she gives birth. Postpartum women and newborn babies are considered weak and humid and must lie next to the fire daily to warm and dry their bodies, making them strong and healthy.

The front of the house typically faced downwards, meaning one had to walk uphill to enter the house through the front door. There was usually no door at the back of the house, which faced uphill, making it difficult for wild animals and strangers to gain access to the house. People had to climb a ramp to enter the house. For houses on relatively flat land close to a main road, doors were not directly connected to the road—rather, they were usually separated from the road by a passage so that household members could see people approaching from a distance and either welcome them if they were friends or defend their home against thieves.

Throughout history, the Hmong have suffered oppression by lowland peoples, especially the Han. This oppression caused the Hmong to rebel against the Chinese feudal government, leading to their migration from the lower regions to the high mountains of South-East Asia (Michaud & Culas, 2000). During their relocation to mountainous areas, especially in the mountainous area of Mèo Vạc, the Hmong were frequently robbed or kidnapped, including by the Hmong from neighbouring villages. Therefore, they needed protection from others. To meet this need for protection, a defensive type of architecture similar to that seen in Giàng M. C.'s home was necessary. It would be difficult for strangers to enter such an enclosed campus, and in the case of an attack, the inhabitants would be able to retain items essential for survival such as food, water and fuel.

Today, the mountainous areas are no longer isolated because many people from lowland areas have moved there. Hmong villages have also ceased fighting and stealing from each other. The Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng village, who used to be isolated from each other, now reside close to each other for increased safety. Therefore, land for housing construction is limited.

Defensive houses have diminished because of limited land area and the reduced need for protection.

The religious beliefs of the Hmong people include the existence of supernatural forces. The Hmong believe in polytheism and that everything in the world has its own god or spirit. These gods or spirits may exert a positive or negative influence, blessing people with health or money or causing illness or death. All diseases, accidents and unusual deaths were thought to be caused by people who had attracted the attention of or violated the gods or spirits, intentionally or unintentionally. This could be simply someone with a beautiful face or voice or a talent for playing Hmong instruments passing through the uninhabited rocky mountain areas. It was also believed that the spirits who live on rocky cliffs may take pleasure in causing illness, accidents or death.

My Hmong host and neighbours believed that spirits can follow people home and affect other household members. Thus, they needed to protect the house against these evil spirits who may harm the health of humans and pets. Simultaneously, there was a need to receive the blessings of benevolent spirits for the development of the family. The Hmong relied on the house and the spirits in the house to ward off bad spirits and demons and welcome benevolent spirits into the home.

The Hmong believe that spirits who wished to enter the house must do so by the main door—thus, blocking or receiving spirits had to be done at the main door. To do this, the Hmong would hang a rectangular red cloth (*liab daim ntaub*), 30 x 50 cm in size, above the door and ask the spirit of the door to be the guard by performing the ritual of washing the door (*cxiex menhx*). As well as the red cloth, some families also attached a few kernels of red corn or grass strings tied with a wooden or metal knife and a red cloth. Red, the colour of blood, is an intense colour believed to have the power to ward off evil spirits. The Hmong were careful not to damage the red cloth because if it was defaced, it would no longer be able to protect the family and may even put the family in danger.

Mr Giàng Mí Pó, the former chair of the People's Committee of Pải Lủng commune, prepared the following case account of a conflict relating to the red cloth:

> Family conflict in Sình Thị Dính's family, Thào Lủng village, in 1998. Recently, Mrs Dính's elderly mother [-in-law] died. During the funeral, there was a conflict between family members and their relatives. Vàng Sào Sính, Vàng Mí Dính A and Vàng Chà Tủa (father's brother) beat Vàng Mí Dính B (a son of Mrs Sình Thị Dính). This man was beaten badly. After that, these three men destroyed the house of Mrs Dính and ripped the red cloth which was stuck on the main door of Dính's house. Tủa took a piece of the red cloth to his house and declared that he would put this piece of the red cloth on his altar for one year and all members of Sình Thị Dính's family would die or get a mental illness.

Unfortunately, Pó died in a traffic accident in 2003 during a work trip before he could record how the authority dealt with the conflict in Dính's family. The Hmong believed that from the moment the cloth was taken down until the end of the year, the house was not adequately protected. It was only when the new fabric was hung at the end of the year that the members of that house were safe.

In addition to the rituals performed at home, the Hmong also performed a ritual known as *thi su* to pray for the protection and safety of all family members of a clan. In the Giàng (A) clan, *thi su* was held every nine or 12 years by the oldest and youngest brothers of the oldest generation of the family to eliminate bad luck and pray for the safety and health of the whole clan, especially for all male members of the family.

The *thi su* ritual organised for the year of this study was held by Giàng M. Gi., nine years since the previous *thi su* ritual. All households belonging to the Giàng (A) clan, including family members who had migrated to other places, participated in the ritual. They contributed money for the purchase of a goat to sacrifice for the ceremony, while the host family supplied chickens. I was told that the Hmong people used to use two goats in this ritual—one was sacrificed at the ritual itself, while the other was led by the shaman to every household of members of the clan. Thus, the ceremony could last for three days or more depending on the number of homes belonging to the clan.

In this ritual, the male members of the clan used *Imperata* grass to make several long strings and cut small pieces of wood into sharp knives. These wooden knives were tied to the grass strings along with the red cloths, and the strings were delivered to each household in the clan.

The heads of the families hung them on the main door to prevent other wild spirits from entering the house.

5.4 The House of Spirits

Similar to people, spirits can come and go and must be fed. The Hmong have three concepts for household spirits: The first is that the house itself and every element of the house, including the door, the pillars, the bedroom and the fire, is ruled by spirits. These spirits include the spirit of the house (*dab xwm kaz*), the spirit of the door (*dab roog*), the spirit of the pillar (*dab ncej or dab tru*), the spirit of the room (*dab chav*), the spirit of the cooking fire (*dab qhovcub*) and the spirit of the fire for cooking pig food (*dab qhovtxos*). Ancestors (*dab txwvkoob or ntsuj plig*) were also counted as spirits of the house.

Second, the house is a home in which spirits live and care for the house. The spirit of the house was believed to reside in the wall altar (*xwm kaz*), the spirit of the door lived in the red cloth hanging above the doorway and the spirit of the pillar lived in the main pillar of the house, which was close to the cooking fire and altar and was believed to be the residing place for ancestors. The spirit of the room lived in the bedroom of the head of the household. The spirit of the cooking fire resided in the cooking fireplace and the spirit of the fire for preparing food for domestic pets resides in the fireplace used to cook food for domestic animals. Each of these spirits was responsible for the security of the house and its members, the health of the family and domestic pets and wealth of the family. If treated well, the spirits may bless the family, but they could also bring illness or death to family members or livestock and make their crops fail. Therefore, to receive blessings from the spirits, the Hmong observed strict rituals.

The spirit of the house governs the entire house and is considered the symbol of wealth (Vuong, 2005). He is believed to reside in the altar (*xwm kaz*) in the middle of the back wall. The house worshipping ceremony was held on the last day of each year. First, the head of the household cleaned the main house, attic and adjacent house. He then gathered supplies to make the altar. Twelve joss papers, each representing a month of the year, were purchased from the market and stuck to another set of joss papers. A hammer and small chisel were used to create the shapes of coins on the joss paper pad, and the blood from the comb of a rooster

was also applied. Three bunches of feathers were plucked from the neck of the same chicken, dipped into chicken blood and stuck onto the triangle top of the joss paper pad. Once the altar was complete, the household head hung it in the middle of the back wall. The chicken was then slaughtered and, together with pork, steamed corn flour and alcohol, became an offering for the spirit of the house. The household head thanked the spirit of the house for protecting his family during the past year and prayed that the spirit would continue to bless them in the new year. In addition to this worshipping ceremony, the Hmong also invited the spirit of the house to witness funerals, marriages and new homes. The *xwm kaz* had to be kept clean because the Hmong believe that if it becomes dirty or covered in cobwebs, the head of the family would suffer eye pain.

The spirit of the door stands at the main entrance and protects the house by preventing the entry of evil spirits that may cause illness or even death for family members. At the end of the year, the Hmong hold a ceremony to worship the spirit of the door. This involves hanging a rectangular red cloth (*liab daim ntaub*), 30 x 50 cm in size, above the doorway and asking the spirit of the door to be on guard when performing the ritual of washing the door.

An example of this ceremony could be seen in the door washing ritual performed at Sùng M. C.'s newly built home, which involved eight people, mostly men. The only woman present at the ceremony was C's wife, who was the landlady. The ritual was hosted by Hmong villagers who belonged to the Giàng (A), Giàng (B) and Ly clans. The offering for the ritual was a red cloth, a coin-decorated joss paper, three metal coins in a red plastic water-filled basin, one piece of paper, four cups, a bottle of wine and a rooster. All except the rooster were placed on a small wooden bench next to the main door. The rooster was left outside the main entrance. Two men stood outside the door, while the rest stood in the house behind a long wooden bench. The men standing outside touched the door and roof with two small stalks, which was believed to bring stability to the house. One of them then took a piece of paper that had been soaked in water and wiped it around the door. They both then sat in front of the door and poured two cups of wine along the doorstep—this was to ensure that the door would always be clean. The man on the right stood up and shone a torch for the man on the left, who remained seated to prepare the red cloth for hanging on the wall. He used his hand to measure the length of the red fabric before cutting the required length with scissors. Once he had finished preparing the red cloth, he placed the coin-decorated joss paper beneath it

and hung it above the door with the fabric facing outside and the joss paper facing inside. To secure the cloth, he hammered three metal coins along its length. The red cloth is believed to play a role in preventing malevolent spirits from entering the house, while the joss paper is believed to bring wealth to the family.

After hanging the red cloth, the man on the left sat down holding the rooster, which the Hmong believe represents the door spirit. According to Vuong (2005), the Hmong chose the rooster as the spirit of the door because, through its crowing, it has extraordinary power that can control the moon and the sun. Holding the rooster, the man invited the door spirit to stand in his place at the main door. At the same time, C., the head of the family, approached the main entrance. With his hands behind his back, he stooped to allow the man outside the door to place the rooster on his back. Still stooping, he carried the rooster to the master bed on the left side of the main entrance. He dropped the chicken under the bed and prevented it from running away. The rooster was now the embodiment of the door spirit. The Hmong believe that any unusual crowing from this rooster will inform the head of the family of an imminent disaster so that he may take measures to prevent it. The rooster will not be slaughtered or used as a sacrifice in other rituals.

The spirit of the bedroom is responsible for the health of the children and reproduction of humans and cattle. The ritual for worshipping the spirit of the bedroom is practised once a year on the second night of a month, preferably the second month of the year, to ask for the development of people and livestock. In this ritual, the household members close both the main and side doors, sacrifice and cook a small black pig and place its meat into bowls. The number of bowls used in this ritual vary depending on the rules of the specific clan. The bowls are placed onto the head couple's bed. After being offered to the spirit, the pork bowls are distributed to participants for eating. A unique aspect of this ritual is that during the process of sacrificing, cooking, conducting the ritual and eating, those who participate in the ritual cannot talk loudly or speak any languages other than Hmong. The waste and remains such as blood, urine, dung, pig fur, bones and the wastewater from cleaning the pork must not be discarded outside but are buried inside the house or thrown onto the fire. The Hmong people explained that in the past, the Hmong were so poor they had to steal pigs from the wealthier Han people to practise the ritual, which had to be done in secret to avoid being caught. Over time, this has become the Hmong custom when sacrificing a pig for the gods.

According to the Hmong, ancestors are the souls of deceased family members from the previous three generations. The worshipping place for ancestors is close to the back wall. For all important family events, including Hmong New Year, funerals, weddings, childbirth, the naming of children, calling the souls ceremonies, harvesting of new crops, brewing of new wine or the completion of new houses or cowsheds, the Hmong invite their ancestors to witness and receive offerings, providing an opportunity for the descendants to express gratitude, ask for support, offer an apology or request forgiveness or compensation from the deceased. The names of all those who have died in the last three generations may be called during these rituals. The spirits of the pillar and fire stove rule over the health of family members and pets and represent the family's fertility and wealth.

The third Hmong concept about house spirits is that the house provides the gates through which spirits come and go. One of these gates is the front door, while the other is the altar. The front door represents the physical doorway through which spirits pass. Although humans and spirits share the same doorway, they use a different door. While the human door is made of bamboo, wood or other materials, the spirit door is represented by the red cloth hanging above the doorway. When a door is open, one can pass through it, but when it is closed, one cannot. The red cloth serves exactly the same function as the physical door—when the red cloth is present, the spirits are unable to pass through it because they cannot move the cloth in the same way as a door can be opened. However, because the spirit door is made of fabric instead of hard materials, the spirits can sneak into the house somehow through the spirit door. Thus, the red cloth serves as a spirit door.

The second gateway through which spirits may enter the house is the altar. For almost all rituals, the shaman, household head or host of the ritual must stand in front of the altar and ask the spirits to enter. Offerings, representing food for the spirits, are placed on a table close to the altar. Unlike humans, the spirits have no physical body and cannot eat meat, rice or sweets—rather, they must be supplied with spiritual foods. The main type of spiritual food for Hmong (and among other groups in Vietnam as well) is that which can be transformed from one state to another (e.g. from solids or liquids to smoke, vapour or fumes). Thus, spiritual foods include joss paper, water, wine, incense or flowers, which emit a scent but cannot be seen. Such items, embodying both substantive and ethereal qualities provide a symbolic bridge between humans and spirits. Although spirits are immaterial, people can provide

offerings to them via processes or technologies that can transform physical things into immaterial things. The Hmong use joss paper because it can be burned and represents a bridge to the spirit world, while water or wine of themselves evaporate when placed in an open container before an altar. Such approaches can be found in all Hmong households, including the simple thatched house inhabited by Mr P., described earlier in this chapter. Although his house was simple, Mr P. had created a structure for himself in the form of his bed and a technology for interacting with the house spirit in the form of an altar, allowing the spirit to be fed, with incense or, at times, food.

5.5 Conclusion

The Hmong house is not only a place in which to live but also has multiple functions that assist the Hmong to adapt to and transform their mountainous environment. Hmong houses in Mã Pì Lèng reflect their culture, beliefs and customs as well as their understanding of the landscape, climate and social context of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Their adaptation to and harmony with the environment can be seen in the house whose physical and symbolic structures align with Hmong knowledge of the natural world and their culture, social structure and cosmology. The constitution of the Hmong house has arisen from the continual accumulation of knowledge of the environment, society and culture over time. Hmong houses are a repository for elegant features, conceptions and techniques that have enabled Hmong to cope, thrive and find security in an otherwise inhospitable mountainous region, and to materially and symbolically transform the rugged limestone slopes into home.

At a fundamental level, household members exist under the same roof and in the same space, sharing the protection offered by the house. However, at the sub-household level, they are distinct. A feature of the modular structure of kinship is that while members of the same multi-generational family may live together in a household, benefitting in common from its floor, walls and roof, significant household items such as beds and fires are allocated to different family subunits, forming distinct household subunits. A common household subunit in Mã Pì Lèng is the ‘bedroom and fire’ group, which represents those who share the same hearth. These intimate units are similar to atoms that cannot be divided while the children are young and must live with their parents. They can only be divided once the children have grown up and have their own families.

The Hmong regard their homes as private places that may only be shared by siblings. They have a saying that they can die at the home of any of their relatives of the same clan. The Hmong believe that if they die in strange places, the death will be terrible, and their souls will not be able to live with departed ancestors. The family who owns the house in which a stranger die would get bad luck, illness and even death. However, if they die in the house of those from the same clan, their departed ancestors will recognise them and welcome their souls to live with them and nothing worse happen to the house owners

My status as a stranger was a reason for my host's reluctance to allow me to stay in his home during my fieldwork. The appearance of a stranger made my host's family feel unsafe because strangers do not share their ancestors or culture and do not belong to the land on which they live. They fear that evil spirits may follow a stranger into the house and harm family members. My host even set a date for me to leave the home while his wife was giving birth to their second child. However, after living with the family for some time, the host began to treat me as a family member, even stating, 'you are like my mother', which showed his acceptance of me living with them long term as a family member. Despite this, I could not become a member of the family because this would have entailed being accepted by the spirits living in the house.

Chapter 6: Women of the Mountains: Body, Nurturance, and Role in Transition

Fifteen-year-old Mùa Th. M. married her first husband at the age of 13. She had travelled to the home of her mother's cousin to help harvest the corn but had been retained at the house, where she was asked if she would marry her cousin's oldest son. Although she had disagreed and called her parents to bring her home, they refused on the grounds that 'that is the tradition'. For the next three days, she was detained in the bedroom of the house of her mother's cousin. Her new husband remained with her for the entire time, following her everywhere, even to the toilet, to prevent her from escaping. After three days, she had become the true wife of her mother's cousin's son, and her soul was believed to have transferred from the Mùa clan to the Giàng (B) clan. Her husband's family visited M.'s parents at their home to discuss the bride price, which was settled at 30 million VND. M.'s parents kept the money and organised the wedding. Following the wedding, M. lived at her husband's house, but after several months, she could no longer bear him. She called her mother in tears, saying, 'I want to die. I want to kill myself with poisonous leaves.' Her mother calmly replied, 'Do not think stupidly. You do not need to die. If you cannot stay with your husband, you can return home'. M. separated from her husband, moved back into her family home and returned to the Pải Lủng secondary school to study eighth grade. She also helped her parents with housework and farming. Every Sunday, she travelled to the Đồng Văn market to work as a kitchen hand for a small Kinh restaurant, earning 50,000 VND. Her husband and his family returned to her parent's house twice to ask her to come back and live with him. She refused, meaning that they were now divorced. Some months later, she married a man from the neighbouring Pả Vi commune. Although they were happy in the initial months of marriage, they had several disagreements, and M. divorced a second time, marrying her third husband some months later.

This story prompted me to consider the existing debates about the status of Hmong women. A prominent view in the literature is that Hmong women play an inferior role in the family and society. They often stand behind their husbands in family, lineage and societal relationships. Hmong women are often described as silent because they appear to have no voice in a society

that values men—as Symonds (2004a) comments, 'maleness is Hmong' (p. 8). Hmong society is patriarchal and emphasises the role of sons in maintaining the race, taking care of parents and worshipping ancestors. Women are seen as secondary, ranking after men in the gender hierarchy (Liamputtong Rice, 2000; Symonds, 2004a; Tapp, 1989). When a Hmong man marries a non-Hmong woman, his children are considered Hmong; however, when a Hmong woman marries a non-Hmong man, her children can never be Hmong (Symonds, 2004a, 2004b; Tapp, 1989). In development discourse, Hmong women are viewed as subordinate to and dependant on men, the family and the lineage. Women belong to their husbands and to the patriarchal clan (H. A. Dang, 2010; UNICEF Viet Nam & UNFPA Viet Nam, 2017; World Bank, 2019).

When I arrived at Mã Pì Lèng village, I imagined that the Hmong women would be similar to those portrayed by other Hmong researchers. The first women I met in the village spoke quietly and observed me curiously, smiling and saying '*tsi pau*' (meaning 'I don't know') when I wished to talk to them. Even my host's wife typically used a low voice when talking to her husband and others around her. After one or two weeks had passed, I suddenly realised that they were not as quiet as I had thought. They were no longer cautious or apprehensive of me and began to return to their daily lives. They became alive, vivacious and sometimes talkative.

I found Hmong women to be liberal, deliberate and generous. When entering a Kinh family's home, the husband typically receives the guests, while the wife remains in the bedroom or kitchen to work. In contrast, when visiting a Hmong family, both the husband and wife welcomed the guests. The husband would happily invite guests to share a bottle of wine with both him and his wife. Some women even admonished their husbands for poor behaviour or passed comment on their husbands' businesses.

While exploring issues of fertility, male and female body differences, marriage, gender-based division of housework and opportunities for learning and employment for Hmong women, my observations of the status of Hmong women differed from that described in previous studies. While in some ways Hmong women were subordinate to men and the male clan (e.g., through marriage by capture and the attitudes of the husbands' families towards new brides), they assumed more power in matters of reproduction, household finances and sharing of housework. This paradox may has its roots in the harsh rocky environment of Hà Giang, which

differs from that of other Hmong groups. In Hà Giang, it takes effort and adaptability to survive, and in this environment, women are indispensable. Moreover, socialism has led to some changes in Hà Giang Hmong gender relations—women are educated and may have income sources of their own, making them more self-reliant and powerful and less subordinate to Hmong men.

6.1 Perceptions of Body Composition Differences Between Men and Women and Young and Old

Hmong perceptions of differences between men and women are shaped by their cosmology and cultural beliefs. With respect to biology, the Hmong people believe that in the beginning their flesh was made of soil and their bones of stone and metal, creating a strong human body. However, humans had exchanged their flesh and bones with the ghosts, whose flesh was made of animal flesh and whose bones were made from hemp and sugarcane. From then on, humans were not as strong as they had been, their flesh and bones becoming similar to that of animals (Doan, 1974).

Although male and female bodies have the same composition, men are often perceived as being stronger and firmer, while women are considered weaker. Hmong men are likened to a tree's roots, trunk or branches, which are hard and strong, while women are likened to the leaves and flowers, which are soft and weak. When describing the beauty of a Hmong girl, it may be said that she is 'like a flower blooming on the rock' (M. T. Nguyen, 2014). Because they are stronger, Hmong men are always considered the core of the family (Symonds, 2004a; Tapp, 1989).

In the Hmong legend of the great flood, almost all the world's humans and animals were eliminated; the only ones to survive were an older brother and younger sister, who married and brought the humans back (Doan, 1974). In this motif, the man is older and, therefore, higher in the gender hierarchy of the Hmong, while the woman is younger and lower in the hierarchy.

Among the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village, gender hierarchy could be seen in the home's seating arrangements. The men always sat closest to the altar and main pillar close to the spirits and ancestors. This area was considered the centre of the house and the seating arrangement

illustrated the man's status in the house as its head. If there was more than one male in the family, this position was reserved for the oldest. Although a woman could share the table with the men, she sat further away from the altar and main pillar. If the household had visiting guests or relatives, the table in the centre of the house was reserved for the men, while the women kept to the back of the house.

Another manifestation of the gender hierarchy could be seen in the right to be involved in rituals. While female shamans occasionally worship spirits in Hmong rituals, ordinary Hmong women rarely performed household rituals. The Hmong men explained that because the ancestors of the house are paternal, the women do not know their names and, thus, cannot worship them. Some rituals—for example, clan rituals or sacrificing animals on crossroads—were only ever conducted by men, and women were forbidden to participate at all.

However, a woman's position in a Hmong family is not always lower than that of the men. One Hmong poem reveals that in the past, Hmong women ruled the family. The poem tells the story of a newly married couple who went to reside in the home of the woman, who acted as the 'husband', while the man acted as her 'wife'. One day, the couple's house had become so dilapidated that it needed to be repaired. The female 'husband' went to the forest to cut down a tree for the maintenance work but was too weak to do so and did not have the skill to sharpen the axe. The male 'wife', who was stronger than the woman and was skilled in sharpening the axe, had to do this work for her. Thus, the 'husband' woman asked if she could swap roles with the 'wife' man because he was strong enough to be the 'main pillar' of their family (Doan, 1974, pp. 93–95). This poem not only reflects the matriarchy that used to exist in the history of the Hmong (Doan, 1974) but also illustrates the Hmong perceptions of men and women. Men are thought to be strong and skilful, while women are considered weak and less skilful. Consequently, men rule the family, while women must follow.[39] Mai Na Lee (2015)

[39]Symonds (2004a) illustrates the Thai Hmong perceptions of the role of males in the legend of the king and the queen as follows:

> Long, long ago there was a Hmong queen who had seven husbands. There was also a Hmong king who had seven wives. There was a struggle between these two groups of people as to who should rule the world. The queen and the king decided to go to Yawm Saub and ask him who should rule the world. Yawm Saub said, 'Each one of you will be given a test, and when it is completed, I will give you an answer to your question. You come back tomorrow', he said to the king, 'and you, Queen, come back in a few days'. The next day the king went back to see Yawm Saub. 'This is your test. I want you to go back to your wives, cut off their heads and bring them to me' said Suab. The king went back to his home. He saw his wives all

also has spoken about how the Hmong were actually a female dominated society in the past, but that Chinese influence changed things to be male dominated.

The Hmong people, especially the women, often compared themselves to animals. For example, the married Hmong women often compared themselves to cows to describe the hard work they did living in their husbands' homes. One Hmong man told me that the way a Hmong man assesses a woman's fertility is similar to the way in which he chooses domestic animals to buy. Thus, Hmong men—and even the women—regarded women as being lower in the hierarchy.

Although there is some disparity between men and women in the hierarchy of family and society, the Hmong do not choose to be male or female. Choice of gender is believed to take place during reincarnation. Following death, Hmong men and women are considered equal and the souls of the departed live with their ancestors in another world while awaiting reincarnation. At that point, the soul is neutral and genderless. Depending on people's actions in their previous lives, souls are reincarnated as either men, women or animals. For instance, a man who makes poor choices in his previous life may be born into the body of an unhealthy baby and die early. An unmarried girl will be reborn into the same family she had in her previous life (Lunet de Lajonquière, 1904). The souls of both men or women who have killed themselves cannot enter their ancestors' world and are reborn as animals or insects. My host, C., believed that the untimely death of his older son would bring him bad luck that would see him have only daughters and no sons. Indeed, his children were all daughters.

When a baby is born, he or she is perceived to be weak in both body and soul. The baby must be placed near the fire for warmth and to make its body stronger. Following birth, a ritual was performed to protect the baby's soul and to prevent strangers from entering the house. The baby's parents invited a shaman to perform the 'calling in the soul' ritual (*hu plig*), during which the infant's soul was called into his or her body with the intention of keeping it stable

sitting together in the house, breastfeeding his children. He thought about the test, and he knew he could not do as he has been told. He went back to Yawm Saub and said, 'Saub, I could not do as you ask. My wives are feeding our children milk. If I kill them and bring their heads to you, my children will have no food, and they will die'. Saub nodded his head and told him to come back in a few days. After two days, the queen arrived at the place of Yawm Saub. 'This is your test. I want you to go back to your husbands, cut off their heads and bring them to me', said Saub. The queen went back to her husbands, cut off their heads and carried them back to Yawm Saub. Saub called the king and the queen together and said to them, 'the king shall rule the world, for he knows the meaning of life'. (p. 37)

within the body. The Hmong believed that the souls of strangers could harm a baby's soul and hung a bunch of grass on the gate or outside the doors of the house to signify that a newborn was present and that strangers were not welcome. People also avoided touching the heads of children, which is believed to threaten their souls and make them sick. As children age, their bodies and souls become stronger. Once girls have reached the age of 13 to 15 years and boys have reached the age of 15 to 17 years, they are believed to be mature enough to marry. The hardships arising from life in the stone mountains mean that Hmong people cannot perform difficult work once they are old. Therefore, they marry and have children early. One Hmong man shared the following:

> I got married when I was young because at that time, I was strong enough to work and support my family. I expected to retire when I was 40 years old. At that age, I would become weaker and could not do heavy work. My children would grow up and have their own children. I would stay home and look after my grandchildren.

6.2 Fertility and Nurturing

For the Hmong, life is not static but is in constant motion, a continuous arriving and departing. To live is to be in passage: from birth to death, from death to the living, from young to old, from unmarried to married, and into and out of the house.

Having children is a basic necessity for Hmong families. Children not only provide labour for the family but, more importantly, they are a continuation of life, an extension of the patriarchal clan and an aid to the fortune of the Hmong people in their living and ancestral worlds. The conditions in the rocky mountains, where livelihoods are hard-won and risks and accidents are commonplace, mean that families require a large labour force to survive. The more children a family has, the more certain the survival and development of the family, the clan and the ethnic group. The birth of a child is also believed to be the transformation of a soul from the ancestral world to the living world. Male children are considered the beneficiaries of their fathers' clan and would inherit the family's property, take care of their parents and grandparents and make sacrificial offerings to their ancestors.

The Hmong people always attempt to have at least one son. However, the infant and child mortality rate is relatively high in Hmong communities because of the steepness and

sharpness of the karst landscape, maternal and child malnutrition, the need for pregnant women to work in harsh conditions, and difficulty accessing healthcare and accidents during delivery (Tran, 1996; UNFPA, 2011). As a result, Hmong people I know aimed to have four or five children for security and extension of the family and lineage. One Hmong man in Mã Pì Lèng village expressed his expectation of the number of children as follows:

> I would like to have at least four children, two boys and two girls. Two boys for me because they will be the continuance of my family and my clan and they take care of me when I get old. One boy is also good, but it is not secure because I cannot guarantee that he will grow up safety. My oldest boy died because of respiratory failure when he was only four years old [sad voice]. Several families in this village also lost their children because of illness and accidents on the mountains. The more boys, the more secure our future. Two girls for my wife. They will help their mother in doing housework and will share with her the happy and sad stories and events during her life.

This Hmong man also said that he was happy to have a daughter because she would contribute to the labour force when growing up as well and bring benefits to the family through the bride price when getting married. However, her membership in the clan would be flexible and changeable. As long as she was at home with her parents, she would be a member of her father's clan, but as soon as she was married, she would assume her husband's clan. Because of the transient nature of female clan membership, Hmong women appeared to have less voice in their natal families and clans compared with that of their brothers (Lee and Tapp, 2010).

Nevertheless, a Hmong woman continues to maintain her position in her natal family, even after marriage. She may contribute ideas for important family events such as discussing the bride price, her brothers' weddings and the rules, steps and offerings for her parents' and brothers' funerals. Simultaneously, her brothers also contribute to her wedding, life and funeral. Tapp (1989) and Symonds (2004a) have termed this a 'brother–sister relationship'. Among the Hmong in Vietnam, Hmong women not only take care of their brothers' life events but may also intervene and monitor the execution of rituals and customs among members of their natal clan (Vuong, 2005).

A Hmong woman's parents and brothers will support her in her married life by assisting her with agricultural work, making wine, weaving linen and building the house as well as participating in her husband's family rituals. Because it helps meet the demand for labour in the karst area, assistance provided by the girl's family improves her position in her husband's family and helps to establish a close and intimate relationship between the two families. If her husband's family is in trouble, her parents can support her by giving her a calf. When the calf grows and gives birth, she and her husband are obliged to return a cow to her parents. However, unless they are extremely poor, the Hmong do not typically welcome this kind of support because the cow will always be counted as a debt that must be repaid to the girl's biological parents. In the event of the parents' death, the debt is doubled—in other words, the girl and her husband are obliged to contribute two cows to be slaughtered at her parents' funeral.

From the perspective of Hmong men, the most valuable attribute of a Hmong woman is her fertility. Women are considered at fault for the inability to have children and are often made to divorce or accept her husband's marriage to a second wife. Even when it is the men's fault, women are blamed when male children are not born. A middle-aged man of the Mùa clan stated:

> We [were] married for several years; however, my wife only delivered for me four girls. It was sad for both of us. My wife told me that she had plan to divorce me so that I would marry another woman who might have a son for me. I said to her that I would want to marry another woman if she could agree to be my second wife and lived together with me and my first wife in the same house. However, we are lucky people, my wife had birth two times after that, and they are two boys. We are very happy.

He laughed happily, and his wife, who was sitting near the fire stove, nodded her head in agreement.

Therefore, for Hmong men, the first step of marriage is to assess the fertility of his potential wife because it is considered the primary criteria of a 'good' wife. Hmong men assess the fertility of Hmong women from her appearance and by touching certain parts of her body. Hmong men believe that the appearance and the body of a Hmong woman indicate her strength as well as how easily she will become pregnant and deliver a baby. A Hmong woman

is said to be healthy if her body weight is moderate—not too fat and not too thin. Because Hmong men believe that woman will become slimmer after giving birth, a slightly overweight woman may be chosen. In addition, women must have large, strong calves to help them travel easily and quickly on the rocky mountain. A woman with weak calves will be unable to work in the stone fields and may become too thin after childbirth.

Hmong girls wrapped long cloths around their feet to help maintain the strength of their leg muscles, enabling them to stay strong when walking and creating fields in the stony mountains. Light skin and red cheeks also indicate that a woman is strong. Women with slender waists and large buttocks are considered fertile. Hmong women often wore at least three layers of skirts, making it difficult for men to see their buttocks. Thus, it was imperative for a man to feel a woman's behind to measure its size. Hmong men legitimised this by turning it into a custom on Hmong New Year's Days known as *taub tsum*, meaning 'patting the butt'. On Hmong New Year's Day, Hmong men and women wore new clothes and gathered in group on the street. A Hmong man could wrap his arms around a Hmong woman's waist or clap her on the bottom without her protesting. Women could only avoid this by running away from the men. Westerners may view this behaviour as harassment, but the Vietnamese consider it a poetic act—a confession of love between a man and a woman. However, the Hmong men said that in this way they could tell if a Hmong woman was fertile. Indeed, numerous married Hmong men admitted with a coy smile that they had taken advantage of this opportunity to harass Hmong girls and women.

Having a child was an opportunity for a married woman to become more attached to and become a full member of her husband's family and clan. A childless wife was thought to be more likely to leave her husband to marry another man. Therefore, women were often treated gently or as if they were guests by their parents-in-law and other family members. They were rarely scolded or assigned to heavy or excessive work. Once a wife was pregnant or had produced a child, she would not easily find another husband and was more likely to remain in her husband's house. Thus, she became a firm member of her husband's family and clan. She was asked to be involved in the work of her husband's family, even if the work was strenuous. If she behaved poorly or was disrespectful of her parents-in-law or other family members, she may be disciplined. Hmong wives were expected to sacrifice their lives to their children and their husbands' families.

A pregnant Hmong woman is considered magical and powerful. She determines the continuity of the life cycle by providing 'the vessels to which souls of the lineage can return and continue the cycle of life' (Symonds, 2004a, p. 76). The souls of the departed may be regenerated and reborn in the uterus of the woman. She is the gate of arrival or the gate to the living. As such, pregnant women are believed to have a magical energy that can heal those who have been injured by the stony landscape. For example, the Hmong people believed that a pregnant woman could cure someone who had sustained a leg injury in the stony landscape by stroking his or her leg from the knee to heel several times. Pregnant women were also forbidden to pass by the stables because it was believed they would steal milk from the cows.

Hmong women rarely gave birth in hospital, preferring to labour at home with the support of their mothers or sisters. In the past, the placenta of a boy would be buried at the foot of the main house pillar in the hopes that he will be healthy and become the pillar of the family when he grows up. Meanwhile, the placenta of a girl would be buried at a crossroads far from the house.[40] Nowadays, the placentae of both boys and girls are buried at a crossroads in the belief that evil spirits will not be able to find and harm the baby. Following birth, the mother and child are placed next to a fire and kept warm throughout the day until the end of the month. Indoor fire stoves are used to heat homes and people, cook food and protect people from insects and wildlife. However, more importantly, the fire stove acts as a transformer, transforming objects and people from a wet status to a dry status. Wet represents softness, weakness and illness, while dry represents stability, hardness and health. Postpartum women and newborn babies are considered weak and humid. They must lie next to the fire daily to warm and dry their bodies, making them stronger and healthier.

In the month following childbirth, Hmong women would rest near the fireplace and follow a strict diet for recovery. American Hmong people call this diet the 'chicken diet' because of the inclusion of chicken meat with herbs each day for Hmong women in the postpartum period. This diet is believed to enable Hmong women to recover quickly and reduce the risk of disease following birth and as they age (Jambunathan & Stewart, 1995). In Mã Pì Lèng village, the daily diet for Hmong women following birth primarily included steamed corn flour (*mèn mén)*, a large aluminium spoonful of salt and a small bowl of unsalted vegetables or pumpkin soup.

[40]The Hmong in Lao Cai bury the placenta of a girl on the ground beneath the bed in the main bedroom to ensure that the girl will be fertile and perform the housework well (Tran, 1996).

They ate chicken every three days, which is more frequent than usual. Children were primarily breastfed for the first few months, before being weaned onto solid foods. Such a postpartum diet often caused a decline in the woman's health as well as infant malnutrition. Hmong women rarely attended healthcare centres for pregnancy examinations or when unwell. When they were ill, they simply waited for the illness to pass or took local herbs. If they believed that a devil had caused their illness, they would ask a shaman to help rid them of the devil spirit. For example, sixteen-year-old Giàng Th. M. had never taken pharmaceutical medicine when sick. After the birth of her child, her infant was unable to breastfeed, but M. did not take her to the doctor and she had died. M. believed that her daughter had been captured by a devil spirit who had followed M. before she was married when she went out of her family home to play with her friends. She had invited a shaman from a nearby village to help her expel the devil spirit and prevent it from capturing her future children.

Children are nurtured and taught as they grow and are fed with food stored in the home. They learnt from the actions and words of their parents according to gender—boys were taught by their fathers to work in the fields, while girls were taught by their mothers to look after their younger brothers and sisters, do housework and make clothes. They observed and imitated the behaviours of their parents and followed their parents' instructions. Their parents allocated them tasks appropriate to their age and health, beginning with jobs such as cleaning the house, washing dishes and removing corn kernels from the cob and moving to more substantial jobs such as collecting grass for the cows, harvesting beans and chopping firewood. When they were strong enough, they participated in farming and family activities. They also observed and learnt how to communicate with family members, clans and villages through everyday family activities and rituals. Incidentally, they enriched their knowledge about earning an income, the cultures of their ethnic groups and the hierarchy of family and community members.

6.3 Marriage

Several types of marriage are performed among the Hmong of the northern mountains. The first is arranged marriage, which is primarily arranged by the parents of both the groom and bride. The most popular choice of relationship for arranged marriages is that between a man and one of his mother's close relatives. Hmong people believe that this kind of relationship

deepens the ties between a person's natal and maternal clan, which was described by one of my interlocutors as 'making the relationship more and more close'. In such marriages, the groom and bride are both forced to marry without consent. Couples accept this type of marriage because as 'good children' they are expected to obey their parents' decisions. In the past, even if neither the man nor the woman wished to marry the other, they did so anyway and lived together without separating, as was the case for Mrs X. and her husband.

> Mrs VừTh. X., 98 years old, was one of the first brides of Mã Pì Lèng village when the village was established, marrying at the age of 12 or 13 in a marriage arranged by her parents and her husband's grandfather. Her husband had been the grandchild of Mr Giàng Chá Tòng, whose family was the first to migrate Phố Bảng village. Her mother was the younger sister of Mr Giàng Chá Tòng's brother-in-law. Her parents forced her to marry Giàng Chá Tòng's grandchild against her will to 'have a way to make the relationship close'. After she had wed, she only visited her birth parents once a year, and following the death of her parents, she no longer returned to their home. She did not remember the name of the village in which her parents lived but only knew it was in Lùng Táo commune, Đồng Văn district. The main tasks she undertook at her husband's house were farming, childbirth, childcare and housework. She said: 'I only stayed at my husband's house and worked in the field. The field was so large that we had to work hard to cultivate on it. I rarely went out of the village. I even did not recognise days and months. Only the Hmong New Year's festival reminded me that one year had passed'. She gave birth to eight children, two of whom died of neonatal illnesses. At the time of this study, only three of the eight children were still alive, including two daughters and a son. Both daughters were married and living in neighbouring villages. Mrs Xia lived with her youngest son's family in Mã Pì Lèng village.

Nowadays, marriages of this type often fail after just a few months. In these circumstances, both the man and the woman return to their natal house and may remarry once they have found someone suitable.

The second type of marriage is bride catching (*ntel/truz poj niam*), also known as bride kidnapping (*cxangr poj niam)* or bride pulling (*zij poj niam)*. This is the most popular type of

marriage in the mountains[41], and the Hmong consider it a tradition (*kev cai)*. and the Hmong consider it a tradition (*kev cai)*. They explained that because of the remoteness of the area in which they live, young men and women had few opportunities to meet and fall in love. Consequently, for the Hmong to sustain their existence and ongoing development, young Hmong men, with or without the help of friends or relatives, had to use their physical strength to 'catch' young Hmong women and force them to be their wives. Ly Th. M. offers an example of bride catching in Mã Pì Lèng village.

> Sixteen-year-old Ly Th. M. was a beautiful woman living in Mã Pì Lèng village. As a young girl, she had been pursued by several young Hmong men from both inside and outside the village. At the age of 13, a young Hmong boy from Thượng Phùng commune proposed to her, but she rejected him because of the vast fields owned by the boy's family. She was afraid of becoming exhausted if she was made to work in those fields. At the next Hmong New Year's festival, she was playing on the road with her friends and relatives when she was kidnapped by a young Hmong man of Giàng (A) clan who lived close to her house. He grasped her hands and attempted to pull her towards his house, but she cried out and struggled to free herself. Her mother, who did not approve of this destitute man marrying her daughter, attempted to help her. The man persisted, declaring that he only would let her go if he was killed. The struggle lasted for five hours, but because the young man was stronger, M. and her mother eventually became tired and gave up. M. was kept at the groom's house for three days and was prevented from leaving. She telephoned her mother, begging her to come and rescue her. However, M.'s mother convinced her to accept the situation because if she were to come back home, she would never be able to remarry. After the three days, M. continued to live with her husband in his mother's house but was unhappy. She lamented, 'My mother-in-law and my sister-in-law hated me. They did not let me eat good food but asked me to wake up very early to work. I even had to wake up from 3 am to do housework. They decried that I was lazy. M.'s mother-in-law did not give me any money when she sold our pigs. She only bought new cloths for her daughter but not for me'. She and her husband decided to live separately from his mother, building a thatch house close to his mother's house. M. delivered a girl baby, who died after only one month.

[41] Bride pulling is done a lot in Vietnam, but is not known in Thailand, and it is rare in Laos.

According to some Hmong interviewees, this form of marriage is fading away. Mr Ma Khái Sò, a Hmong scholar in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, identified three levels of this type of marriage. The first level is 'bride pulling' in which the couple love each other and arrange the ceremony themselves. This tradition suggests that it not easy for the prospective groom to marry, and it enhances the position of the prospective bride, implying that she is a reputable girl who would not simply follow the man without hesitation. The second level is 'bride catching' in which the boy and girl know each other but have not developed a mutual attraction or love. In this case, the boy forces the girl to be his wife against her will. The third level is 'bride kidnapping' in which a man forcefully kidnaps a girl who does not wish to be his wife or who is in love with somebody else. In some cases, a man may seduce a married woman. According to Mr Sò, only bride pulling continues to exist, while the more coercive bride catching and bride kidnapping no longer occur among the Hmong in the Đồng Văn plateau.

Figure 6.1: Bride catching in Mã Pì Lèng village during the 2017 Hmong New Year's festival.

(Photo: Tung Tran)

Nevertheless, according to other interviewees and my own observations, the more coercive forms of marriage can still occur in two scenarios. The first occurs when a man and woman like each other. The young man will make a date with his girlfriend to go sightseeing or to the town market but change the schedule without notifying her, instead taking her to his house where his parents and relatives are waiting to conduct the ritual for accepting a bride. To persuade the woman to become his wife, the prospective groom states the following: 'You

have to get married anyway at your age. You also still have to work the stone fields no matter who you marry. Thus, marry me, please?'. The girl is compelled to accept, even if she is unwilling, because she is alone among the friends and relatives of her boyfriend and has no way to escape.

The second scenario occurs when a man likes a girl, but she does not return his affections. She may be a neighbour of the man or his relatives or even a beautiful stranger he has met at the Sunday market. He will take any opportunity to catch her for his wife—for example, keeping her at his house when she comes to labour at harvest time, as in the case of Mùa Th. M., or kidnapping her from the market or the Hmong New Year's festival, as in the case of Ly Th. M. In the case of bride kidnapping on market days or during the Hmong New Year's festival, the girl is typically not alone but with friends or relatives, making it difficult for the boy to pull her to his house. The struggle may last for several hours. If he successfully takes the girl to his house, he will have a wife; if not, he must compensate the girl up to 5 million VND for the damage he has caused to her clothing during the bride catching.

The forceful behaviour continues after marriage. The marriage ceremony begins with a ceremony for the spirit of the house to receive new members. The couple will stand at the main door of the husband's house, while an older man, usually the father of the groom or a prestigious member of his family, holds a rooster—symbolising the spirit of the door—above the heads of the couple for some time. Following this, the couple enter the bedroom, where the girl will be kept for three days. If she needs to go anywhere, even to the toilet, her groom will accompany her to prevent her from running away. After three days, the girl is recognised as a member of the family and be protected by the spirit of the house.

Bride pulling typically applies to first marriages. From the perspective of girls, it is a forced marriage. Figure 6.2 shows the different reactions of a groom and bride following a marriage observed in Mã Pì Lèng in 2017. The young man appears happy and victorious while the young girl expresses despair and sadness, illustrating the low position of women in the Hmong community. This woman had no say in the marriage—when she was dragged into the groom's house, her parents could not intervene to rescue her because 'it is tradition'. All they could do was stay at home and wait for the groom's family to come and negotiate the bride price.

Figure 6.2: The new couple in the groom's house. **(Photo: Tung Tran)**

The bride price is the money paid by the groom's family to the bride's parents to express their gratitude to them for caring for the bride. Some Hmong men believed that the bride price represents the cost of purchasing a woman. The bride price was determined by representatives of both the groom's and the bride's families, and the amount depended on the distance between the groom's house and the bride's house—as the distance increased, the bride price decreased. If a couple both lived in Mã Pì Lèng or one lived in another nearby village, the bride price could range from 30 to 40 million VND. If the woman lived far from the man's village (e.g. 10 to 20 km away), the bride price may be reduced to 5 million VND. One young Hmong man pointed out that if he married a girl who lived in Đồng Văn town (10 km from Mã Pì Lèng village), he would have to visit his parents-in-law by motorcycle two or three times a year and pay for the fuel to visit them. If he was unlucky, his motorcycle may break down and he would have to pay even more to fix it. Moreover, the distance would mean that his in-laws would not be able to help him with the harvest or building a house.

If a couple divorces and the woman reweds before her ex-husband does, the bride price must be returned to her ex-husband's family. However, this is paid by her new husband rather than by her parents because both her body and soul now belong to her new husband's family. The bride price is less than that originally paid to compensate for the work contributed by the woman to her ex-husband's family. Each day the woman had resided in her ex-husband's home was equivalent to 10,000 VND. In contrast, when a man remarries before his ex-wife,

he is considered at fault. Consequently, when the woman remarries, her new husband is not required to return the bride price to her ex-husband but instead must make a payment to the woman's parents. The price will be lower than the initial bride price paid because the woman is considered 'returned goods'. One middle-aged man of Mùa clan described this as follows:

> It looks like when you raise a pig and you sell it. The first time you sell the pig in the market, you will receive the high price. However, when the buyer returns your pig because he does not like it, the price should be down for the second purchase.

Some couples hold a wedding only a few days after the door god ritual at the groom's house and the bride's parents' receipt of the dowry, while others hold their wedding only after the birth of their first child. It is believed that the period from the bride's ritual induction into the husband's house to the birth of the first child is sufficient to save enough money for a wedding. Additionally, having a child helps to ensure that the woman remains at her husband's house and does not return to her natal home or marry another man. Indeed, the majority of Hmong brides remained with their husbands and rarely divorced because it could be difficult for both men and women to find another spouse. Those who had never been married would not wed people who had previously been married. Following a divorce, Hmong men and women typically married only other divorcees.

The third type of marriage among the Hmong is voluntary marriage, which takes place mostly for couples who have been divorced, as in the case of G. and D. In this case, the man made a request and the woman voluntarily married him after he had paid a dowry to her parents.

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Mrs Giàng Th. D., 40 years old, was the third wife of Mr Mùa M. G. They both lived in Mã Pì Lèng village. D. had two ex-husbands, both of whom lived in neighbouring villages. In each of her previous marriages, she had run away from her husband's home and returned to her parents' home because she did not wish to live so far from her parents. Her current husband, G., was the son of an impoverished family in Mã Pì Lèng village. His father was addicted to opium and had died when he was eight years old. His mother had remarried and lived with her second husband in a village of Đồng Văn district. G. had also been married twice before. He married his first wife when he was 13 years old, five years after his father had died. After just one week, his first wife refused to live with him, returning to her parent's house. A year later, he married his second wife, who lived with him for three months before running away and remarrying someone else because she was could not cope with the hard work needed in the sloped stone fields. At the age of 20, G. travelled to D.'s family home and asked her if she would like to live with him. She agreed, and G. paid her parents 1.2 million VND for the bride price. D. moved to G.'s house, and they eventually had six children—four girls and two boys.

Another example is when a married woman offers to divorce her husband and leave her children with him so that she can marry another man. One Hmong woman in Mã Pì Lèng village had a husband and four children, but she left them to live with her husband's close friend following the death of that man's wife. These types of cases typically received criticism from villagers. It is unclear what type of marriage made the Hmong women feel happier. Even when they voluntarily accepted a marriage, women often entered into it only because they were required to marry and bear children. Many Hmong women felt more comfortable in family life if they lived separately from their husband's family, where they could escape the many social constraints governing the relationship with their in-laws. For example, a woman could freely travel around the house and not be prohibited from going upstairs or into the room of her parents-in-law, and she could be more proactive in managing and using the family's assets and food. The husband would often give his wife the money he earnt, exchange information and talk about farming and housework with his wife. She could also scold her husband if he mistreated her or behaved badly.

Wives often felt uncomfortable living with their parents-in-law because of oppression, in particular from the mother-in-law. It is no coincidence that many Hmong songs and poems

express the suffering of Hmong women living with their parents-in-law (Doan, 1974; M. T. Nguyen, 2014). One Hmong woman shared with me that her parents-in-law had treated her well for only a short period after the wedding. Once she had given birth to her first child and it was certain she would not leave, they began to treat her badly, scolding her and forcing her to do more work. Another woman told me that she had no voice in her husband's family and had to obey her parents-in-law. Her husband also did not talk to her about what he wanted to do or give her his money. Rather, he gave most of his income to his mother, keeping just a small amount in his pocket. When he wanted to do something, he discussed it with his parents.

In case a Hmong woman could not stand being in her husband's house, she would easily divorce her husband and come back to live temporary in her natal home until she remarried. However, she is not recognized as a member of her natal family or clan because her spirit does not belong to her natal family or clan since she married. She can work, eat, sleep at her parent home but cannot involve in any ritual in the house. She is not allowed to deliver her baby or die in her parent house because it is strictly taboo in Hmong society (Vuong, 2005; Lee and Tapp, 2010; Leepreecha, 2016). The divorced Hmong woman herself does not want to stay longer in her parent house because she cannot find the feeling of spiritual safety there. Mùa Th. M. said:

> After divorcing my ex-husband, I quickly found another Hmong man to remarry. One reason is that I wanted my ex-husband to be able to get the bride price back from my current husband. My ex-husband had paid a lot of money to my parents. If I remarried after him, he would lose that money. The more important reason is that after divorcing, I always dreamed that my spirit had to go around but could find nowhere to stay; sometimes my spirit fell from the high cliff to the bottom. I was unsafe and so scared.

It is unfortunate for women when their husbands die at a young age. For the Kinh people, widowed women are praised if they continue to raise their children to maturity. However, the Hmong preferred widowed women to leave their children and find another husband. Although a woman leaving children under the age of 10 to pursue her own happiness may seem cruel, the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng believed that a widowed woman who continued to live with her children would be a burden. The husband's funeral will have exhausted the family's assets, and life in the mountains is not easy or secure. If the widowed woman becomes disabled or dies, her children will not be able to afford her medical or funeral expenses, will be forced to

transfer their land and will no longer be able to make a living. However, if their mother remarries, her children will not have to pay her expenses. Moreover, she will be in a position to support her children financially when they marry or build a house and can send them food if they are hungry. Thus, the majority of widowed women in Mã Pì Lèng village would remarry months or years following their husband's death. Those too old to marry typically lived with their son or, if they did not have a son, lived alone.

6.4 Gender Roles Within the Home

For the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village, housework comprised activities that took place within and outside the home to meet the needs of both household members and domestic animals.[42] These activities included housekeeping (e.g. cleaning, tidying, dishwashing and laundry), preparing and cooking food, caring for babies and young children (e.g. feeding, bathing, changing and washing dirty clothes, playing, teaching and putting them to bed), making and buying clothes and feeding domestic animals (e.g. collecting and cutting vegetables and grasses, cooking food and feeding livestock).

I did not observe any conflicts about housework among the Hmong people. Housework was done through voluntary cooperation and according to gender, age, social and cultural norms and the landscape. Most family members cooperated in the housework. The Hmong people have a saying: '*Pox niex jos nhoz chax tus; tsir nenhx jos nhoz xuz pus*[43]', which means 'The strength of women is in the butt; the strength of men is in the shoulders' (Le, 1994, p. 18). This implies that women are strong in reproduction; thus, their primary jobs are to give birth, care for children, cook, make clothes and care for domestic animal and pets. Meanwhile, men have stronger muscles and work on difficult and dangerous jobs, those requiring special skills

[42]For the Hmong in this village, domestic animals (e.g. poultry, pigs, goats, cows and dogs) were used not only as food and goods but for multiple purposes, including as offerings to gods and ancestors during rituals and feasts, as a source of labour (e.g. cows) and as assets and savings. Domestic animals were one criterion by which to measure the wealth of a family and were treated as family members. The Hmong people reserved a special area in their homes for a stove by which to prepare food for animals. Larger stoves implied a large number of domestic animals and the greater wealth of the family. On Hmong New Year's Day, similar to the rituals performed for the house, joss papers were placed on animal cages and sheds to guard them from evil spirits and animals were given delicious foods such as sticky rice cakes or corn cakes. New sheds were constructed with similar rituals as those of new houses.

[43] This saying is written in Vietnamese Hmong form.

such as house and electrical maintenance and activities culturally forbidden to women such as holding rituals or sacrificing animals.

Housework was shared between husbands and wives and between parents and children.[44] For example, women appeared to be entirely responsible for preparing and cooking food for the whole family, often rising at 5 am (or 4 am if they also needed to work in the fields) to light the woodfired stoves and prepare meals for family members and domestic animals. Corn was the staple food for both humans and domestic animals—*mèn mén*, which is made from minced and twice-steamed corn, was a popular dish for humans, while corn cooked with water, salt and vegetables was fed to domestic animals.

The corn used for cooking was matured, dried and hung on a shelf or placed in a sack in the loft above the kitchen to prevent mould. In the house in which I stayed, to make *mèn mén*, the wife would retrieve corn from the loft and remove the kernels using a hand-operated machine. A shallow bamboo basket was used to remove any sand or insects before the corn was ground in an electric mill. The following morning, the wife would cook the corn flour in a two-part pot. The lower part, made of aluminium, would be filled with approximately 2 L of water. The upper part was made of wood with a perforated base to allow the passage of steam from the boiling water in the lower pot. Once the corn flour had steamed for approximately 10 minutes, the cooked cornmeal would be poured into a bamboo scoop. The woman would use her hands to remove the corn flour, and corn flour that was tightly glued to the scoop would be picked off. The corn flour in the scoop would be mixed with cold water, poured into the steamer for a second time and steamed for the same length of time.

This pot of corn flour pot would last for the whole day, but for households with only one or two people, this pot could last for two to three days. After cooking the *mèn mén*, the wife would cook a large pot of vegetables (e.g. green beans or pumpkin) with water (and no salt) to make soup. Thus, the entire day's food for this Hmong family would be prepared and ready to serve. *Mèn mén* and unsalted vegetable soup were the main dishes of most Hmong families in Mã Pì Lèng village. However, some households had introduced rice into their diets. *Mèn mén* only needs to be cooked once per day, but rice is usually cooked twice—once in the

[44]Division of housework occurs in families with two or more members. For households with only one member (e.g. an elderly or widowed person), all the work must be done by that person with no outside help.

morning for breakfast and lunch and once in the evening. My host family had switched to eating rice because their two-year-old daughter often choked on the steamed corn flour. However, during corn planting season, the family ate steamed corn flour because it was digested more slowly and was more satiating than rice.

The Hmong families frequently gathered around small tables for meals. The large bowls of steamed corn flour and soup would be placed on the table, but there were no individual bowls for family members, who would eat the *mèn mén* and soup using a large aluminium spoon. If the meal contained pork, beef or goat meat, the same spoon was used, but if the meal contained chicken, people would use their hands to eat. The parts not eaten were placed directly on the table.

The Hmong women only cooked only once a day, in the morning, to provide the day's meals because of the limited firewood available in the limestone mountains. Cornstalks and husks were used for cooking and heating in the cold winters to conserve firewood and save money on fuel.

Although Hmong women were responsible for cooking the family meals, they were forbidden to slaughter animals or cook meat dishes either for daily meals (a rare occurrence) or rituals, which was considered the job of men. The Hmong men explained that the main function of a woman was to have children, and the killing of animals and cooking of meat would affect their fertility. During ritual offerings or Hmong New Year holidays, the male members of a Hmong household would gather to cut the meat, prepare the spices and salt and cook the meat dishes.

The Hmong women did eat meat apart from that offered to the ancestors or at the calling in the soul ceremony for pregnant women. For most types of meat, women and men would eat the same parts. However, the distribution of chicken differed for women, men, elderly people and children. Elderly family members were given the organs such as the liver, intestines, gizzards and heart (except for members of the Giàng clan, who do not eat heart). Children were given the drumsticks, which were kept aside for them when they were not at home. Men were given the breast and thighs. Women were only permitted to eat the head, neck, wings and feet of the chicken—the parts with less meat and more bones.

This division of chicken meat may have arisen from the characteristics and requirements of age and sex. The internal organs are softer and easier to chew, making them more suitable for older people with weaker teeth. Children are in the developmental stages and need nutrients. Men often worked hard and needed additional nutrients to maintain their health. Moreover, once the meat had been eaten, the head of the household used the chicken thighbones to divine the family's future and make appropriate decisions. Bones with heads equal in size signified that the family was lucky and doing well. If one bone had a large head and the other had a small head or if either of the bones contained a hole, this meant that the family would encounter bad luck such as an accident or crop failure. Once they had been used for fortune-telling, the bones were sometimes placed in front of the house to protect the house from evil spirits. Women were supposed to do only light work, which required less energy than that of men, meaning that they did not need additional nutrients.

With respect to the preparation of food for family members and livestock, while the women were responsible for many tasks, including retrieving food from the loft, separating corn kernels from the cob and harvesting, cleaning, milling and chopping vegetables, men were responsible for maintaining the corn grinder and vegetable cutter. In the past, when machines such as corn huskers, corn grinders and vegetable cutters were not used in Hmong families, the women had to do these tasks by hands. Gathering grass for cattle was mostly done by women and children, but if the grassland was far and sloping, Hmong men were willing to volunteer their help.

Hmong men were willing to share in caring for their children. When their wives were busy cooking, cleaning, washing clothes or helping other families, the men would feed and bathe their children, change their clothes, play with them or carry them in their arms or on their backs (for children too young to look after themselves). Children were taught how to do housework from a young age—they watched and learned from their parents before being assigned their own tasks, such as cutting grass or harvesting vegetables or beans. These tasks were done after school hours.

One job not done by the men was making fabric. Hmong men helped their wives by choosing the most fertile fields for cultivation of hemp and by harvesting and drying the hemp, but they did not strip the hemp strings from the hemp plant, produce linen, dye yarns or weave fabrics,

arguing that only women had the patience and skill to make hemp fabric. After the hemp had been harvested, from July to October, Hmong women were often seen with hemp rolls around their bodies, regardless of where they were or what they were doing. Whenever they had free time, they stripped and wrapped hemp string—even when carrying firewood on their backs, their hands could be seen constantly making hemp strings. The hemp strings were bleached and woven after October.

People from outside of the home, including those of the same clan and those living in the same village, also helped with housework. The Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng village cooperated in the housework. Women and children gathered together to collect firewood and cut grass for cattle. Working together helps the Hmong of this area to avoid the hazards that may be found in the environment, learn from each other and grow closer. Limestone mountains are not favourable for plant growth—most plants grow on slopes with rock niches that can hold soil. To collect plants, the women and children had to climb steep cliffs, finding rock niches in which to place their feet. In these harsh conditions, accidents could easily happen if people were careless. A boy had died falling from the cliff while cutting grass for the family cow, and a woman had also fallen from the cliff and died while collecting water. Working together meant the people could stop others from doing something dangerous, support each other or return to the village to call for help. In the process of working together, small children observed the behaviours of older children and imitated them. After their work was complete, the children did not immediately go home but played with each other until late in the day before bringing home what they had gathered. The women talked and shared their life experiences, helping them to empathise with each other and tighten their ties.

6.5 Women on Post-Traditional Journeys: Studying/Working Away

Middle-aged women typically had similar lives to those of their mothers and grandmothers. They worked in the fields, wove cloth and did housework, rarely leaving the village except on Sunday mornings to shop at the district market, where they met friends, drank alcohol, ate different kinds of food and bought groceries for family meals. Every Sunday, just outside the central market areas of Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc towns, simple bars were erected using only a tarpaulin, a small wooden table, a few chairs, a wine can and a dozen or more small cups. Each bar could hold 10 or 15 people, both men and women, who came from several Hmong villages

near these towns. Men often sat apart from women to drink their wine, but in many cases, women and men drank together.

Drinking alcohol was egalitarian. If a man was offered a cup of wine, a woman sitting at the same table would also be offered a cup. They would drink, laugh and share stories about farming, other jobs and housework. The Hmong people believed that drinking in the market was a way to make friends and strengthen social relations. The ability to drink alcohol indicated that both men and women knew how to communicate with others and were open in their relationships. This was helpful for when their families needed to mobilise a large workforce for tasks such as planting, harvesting or building houses. Hence, on Sunday market days, it was not unusual to see an intoxicated man sleeping on the roadside beside his motorcycle while his wife waited patiently. She could stand for hours waiting for her husband to wake up so they could go home. If it was hot, she would use an umbrella to shield her husband from the sun. This image was often pointed out to me as an example of how much women love their husbands and how dependent they are on them.

Young women and girls today have more opportunities than did previous generations. Hmong children receive free education, subsidised by the government, at all levels, from kindergarten to junior high school. Pre-schoolers are provided with lunch at school, while children at higher levels receive rice when they attend school. Therefore, Hmong parents in Mã Pì Lèng often allowed both their sons and daughters to complete Grade 9 so that they would receive rice. Some girls who had managed to escape from bride catching had returned to school to continue their studies.

However, few parents permitted their daughters to continue on to upper secondary and higher education levels. Apart from one girl who was enrolled at boarding school, no other girls in Mã Pì Lèng village had studied past Grade 10. Parents felt uncomfortable about their daughters going to high school because it was located in the district centre, 10 km from the village. They were afraid that their daughters would be kidnapped or dragged into marriage with a Hmong boy. One 15-year-old Hmong girl said:

> I am about to finish ninth grade. I want to continue going to school but my father does not allow it. Dad said I should stay at home to do housework and farming. Dad was afraid of me being kidnapped on the way to school.

She left school after completing junior high school and was married a few months later.

Besides studying, five girls aged between 13 and 15 years went to the Đồng Văn weekly market to work as kitchen hands at small restaurants. They would often go to Đồng Văn town on Saturday afternoon, rent a room in which to sleep and wake up early Sunday morning. Their work began at 5 am and finished around 1 pm. Their jobs included bringing food to customers, cleaning tables and washing dishes, and they earnt around 50,000 VND per day, allowing them to buy clothes and accessories. Walking as a group to and from work each week on the more than 10 km-long road into town helped these girls feel safer.

People who were healthy, young men and women who were no longer in school and those who needed money for costly ventures such as building houses or getting married often travelled to China to find jobs at farms or local companies. Some would stay in China for a number of years, while others travelled there as seasonal labour migrants for only a few months after sowing time. The Hmong who travelled to China to seek work often crossed the border using narrow mountain trails rather than the main road. On these deserted mountain trails, which have little shade, Hmong jobseekers frequently encounter hazards such as kidnapping and robbery. To avoid these situations, they often travelled in groups of a few to a dozen people. They helped each other along the way, introducing each other to jobs when they arrived and transferring money to the family when someone returns.

Young women who travelled to China for work often returned home at the beginning of the year to attend the Hmong New Year celebration. Hmong New Year celebrations were also an opportunity for women to find husbands. Once married, young women would stay at home and no longer cross the border to work. Some Hmong women from Mã Pì Lèng had married Chinese men they had met when working on farms in China.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined the notion of belonging from the perspective of women. Previous scholars have argued that Hmong patriarchy is the principal reason for the low status and lesser power of Hmong women. The promotion of sons in maintaining families, clans and ethnicity has created a gender hierarchy in which women are placed in low positions. Patriarchy also promotes the values of men as stronger, more knowledgeable, skilful and

decisive. Meanwhile, women are considered weaker, less knowledgeable, unskilled and submissive (Symonds, 2004a, 2004b; Tapp, 1989). Vietnamese development discourse clearly considers Hmong women as subordinate to and dependent on Hmong men and their families and clans (H. A. Dang, 2010; UNICEF Viet Nam & UNFPA Viet Nam, 2017; World Bank, 2019). The notion of belonging may be interpreted as that of being subordinate and dependent.

In my research I found considerable evidence to support this view. For example, I described the phenomenon of marriage by capture and the demanding attitudes Hmong husbands and their families have towards new brides. Mitigating against such coercive and tough practices are the acceptance of divorce, and the reality of a woman's ability to win influence and respect in her new household. Investigating the role of women in household operations and finances, I found an equal division of labour between genders and an emphasis on gender complementarity. I also discussed the roles of women in birth, life and death. Hmong women are recognised as potent, generative and nurturing, and their contributions to the household and the lineage are valued as indispensable, which casts doubt on the notion that Hmong women are undervalued or subordinate to men. In the karst mountains of Vietnam's north, Hmong women's identity power and value are tied up in their centrality to the maintenance of families, households and lineages, as well as wider community and social networks. They partake of multiple scales of belonging and, within environmental, social, cultural and biological constraints, have scope to influence the course of their lives.

Chapter 7: Dwelling in the Nation: How Hmong People of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Make Vietnam Home

One Hmong informant, Mr Ma Khái Sò,[45] an 87-year-old former official from the Đồng Văn Plateau, criticised his ethnic group as follows:

> Hmong people focus only on their ethnic identity, not national identity. They want to live in freedom; therefore, they would rather stay in the mountains and forests than in the lowlands. That is why they migrated from China to the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and Hà Giang. These lands used to lie beyond the real rule of both the Chinese and Vietnam feudatory governments. They also do not want to communicate or have contact with other ethnic groups. Even among members of the Hmong ethnic group themselves, they are not well united.

The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, located on the Vietnam–China border, typifies the region of Zomia, a vast 'non-state' upland area into which people from various parts of South-East Asia areas are said to have fled to seek sanctuary from oppressive lowland regimes (Scott, 2009). Scott (2009) argues that Miao (Hmong) people were forced to flee to South-East Asia after centuries of attempting to rebel against Han sovereignty and assimilation. They settled in a land known as Zomia, or the Southeast Asian Massif, a 'non-state space' where, 'at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters', people lived beyond the reach of lowland states. Here they remained stateless, retaining their autonomy and identity and feeling safer (Scott, 2009). Miao scholars have termed these people 'raw Miao' or 'Miao-Miao' to distinguish them from those known as 'cooked' or 'Chinese' Miao who stayed in the Han state, accepted Chinese governance and absorbed Chinese culture (Culas & Michaud, 2004; Heinz & Murray, 2018; Olson, 1998; Tapp, 1990; 2010).

The Đồng Văn limestone plateau in today's Hà Giang province is home to some 160,000 Hmong people, whose ancestors began migrating from China 300 years ago. Until recently,

[45]Since 1945, Mr Ma Khái Sò had worked for the Vietnamese government as a teacher and official at the communal, district and provincial levels. He became involved in administration, eliminating illiteracy, quashing rebellions and banning opium in Hà Giang province generally and Đồng Văn plateau in particular. After his retirement, he became a Hmong folk artisan in his homeland in Thái An commune, Quản Bạ district. He contributed to preserving and distributing 360 songs written for the *queej*, a bamboo flute-like instrument that is played at funerals and other special occasions among Hmong communities in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau.

they had maintained a tenuous connection to Vietnam's lowland power centres. Since the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the mid-1940s, Đồng Văn has been brought into the state of Vietnam through active road building, agricultural management, subsidised social services and the development of tourism enterprises. Similar programs elsewhere have been described as a form of 'internal colonialism' (Evans, 1992, p. 274), leading to a loss of autonomy, identity and security.

Scholars have debated the nature of Hmong–state relations in the contemporary era and the degree of authority and control the state exercises over the Hmong. Some scholars contend that Zomia-like conditions remain, and the Hmong in several nation states strive for, or enjoy, a degree of autonomy. For instance, Michaud (2012) argues that contemporary Hmong people have managed to evade the negative effects of state rule by relying on their own cultural resources such as planting traditional varieties, wearing traditional clothes, watching Hmong movies and experiencing cultural education at home. Other scholars have argued that minorities such as the Hmong have responded to the oppressive policies of lowland states through rebellion or millenarian revolts (Lee, 2015; Rumsby, 2018). Ngo (2010, 2011) has described how the Hmong in Vietnam have responded autonomously to the pressures of state modernisation and secularisation by converting to Protestantism. The state rules Hmong areas, but, according to this vein of analysis, the Hmong do not comfortably belong as citizens in cultural or ideological terms and continue to resist or evade state rule.

A different perspective views the Hmong as particularly problematic subjects of development because they 'lag behind' (Swinkels & Tuck, 2006, as cited in H. A. Dang, 2010), are recalcitrant and consistently fail to meet developmental targets. It is sometimes argued that the Hmong do not have the cultural capacity or understanding to satisfactorily participate in education or government programs (e.g. credit programs) for their own benefit. Despite the numerous assertive programs of the past decades, it is widely believed that the Hmong have not yet caught up to other ethnic groups in Vietnam. Several reports from international organisations have ranked the Hmong in the lowest categories for development, literacy, growth, wealth, remoteness and nutrition (H. A. Dang, 2001; Mbuya, Atwood, & Huynh, 2019; UNICEF Viet Nam & UNFPA Viet Nam, 2017; World Bank, 2019). Hmong people are believed to be the most superstitious, the least sceptical and the most likely to be vulnerable to the schemes of foreign groups or enemies wishing to undermine their unity and security (N. V. Dang, 1998; Hoang,

2000; Vuong, 2005). The sense exists that the underdevelopment of the Hmong is a critical factor in the nation's vulnerability and that the Hmong strain the limits of Vietnam's paradigm of ethnic minority governance (Taylor, 2008). Thus, what is the interaction of the Hmong with the Vietnamese state? More importantly, how do the Hmong in Đồng Văn characterise this relationship?

This chapter explores the notion of political belonging. It asks if and how the Hmong of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau experience a sense of belonging to the nation state of Vietnam. It analyses Hmong responses to the following four state-initiated programs: the construction of an access highway from 1959 to 1965, opium eradication, poverty alleviation and the development of heritage-related tourism. These initiatives can be described as an attempt to transform 'Zomia' into a state-ruled region, ensure national security and development in a frontier area, and draw the Hmong people into the national community. In the following, focussing on Hmong experiences of governance, I examine to what extent these objectives have been achieved.

7.1 The Happy Road

According to the Hmong calendar, the first day of 2017 was 25 January. Like the Vietnamese and Chinese calendars, the Hmong calendar is lunar; however, the Hmong New Year arrives roughly one month earlier. On Hmong New Year's Day in 2017, the Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng did not work, instead going to Highway 4C to parade their best dresses and celebrate the new year by playing folk games and taking part in courting activities. Hmong women wore their most beautiful and colourful traditional dresses. They either walked around or stood or sat in groups along the path, chatting with and teasing each other. Young men and some middle-aged men watched the women and young girls on the road. Some passed by the women, reaching for their hips or patting the bottoms of the girls they liked. Teenage boys mimicked the actions of older men. Nobody stopped these teasing behaviours, and everyone, including both men and women, laughed happily. If he was lucky, a young Hmong man may find a wife at the Hmong New Year's Day's gathering on Highway 4C. Men and women, the elderly and children all look delighted, and the smiles were abundant on people's faces.

Gathering along the road for the New Year's festival is an annual occurrence for the Hmong in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. The road on which they meet to play and exhibit their costumes is the only highway running through the four districts of the Đồng Văn plateau, connecting them to Hà Giang town. This highway is known as Highway 4C or 4C Road. It is well known in the Vietnamese media as *Đường Hạnh phúc*, meaning the 'Happy Road'. It was initially named the Hà Giang–Đồng Văn Road, with construction starting on 10 September 1959. In a documentary film made by Vietnam Television in 2015, the filmmakers drew on the recollections of some former Young Volunteers, who suggested that the Hà Giang–Đồng Văn Road had first been named the Happy Road by a volunteer who had died during its construction.[46] Irrespective of how it obtained this name, the 4C Road is known as the Happy Road, not only by the Kinh people of Hà Giang town but also among older Hmong people. Young people called it the 4C Road and did not know it was called the Happy Road.

Before the Happy Road was constructed, there were no accessible routes for motor vehicles from Hà Giang town to the Đồng Văn plateau, just earth and stone paths. An old Hmong woman from Mã Pì Lèng village recalled what transport was like in the past:

> Before the road was constructed, it was so hard to get to the market. There was no asphalted road but only small earth paths running along the mountain slopes. Wealthy people could ride a horse to go to the market. The poor people like us had to walk on foot. We even came to the marketplace one night in advance and slept there so we could go shopping or sell our products the next morning.

During this period, Đồng Văn Karst Plateau was isolated from the lowlands, making it truly an exemplar of Zomia. High karst mountains form a natural barrier between the plateau and the Vietnamese lowlands, breached only by natural features known as 'heaven gates' (*Cổng trời*). These 'gates' refer to the high passes and narrow valleys formed between mountains standing between the Đồng Văn plateau and Hà Giang town. There are two heaven gates in Quản Bạ district—the first district reached when travelling from Hà Giang town to the Đồng Văn

[46] It is difficult to determine who named it the Happy Road and when or why they did so. In the film, the filmmakers stated that Ho Chi Minh had named it the Happy Road during his visit to Hà Giang in March 1961, a claim repeated by some in the Vietnamese press. However, in Ho Chi Minh's speech to the people of Hà Giang, which was published in Issue 2566 of *Nhan Dan*, the official daily newspaper of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, on 30 March 1961, I was unable to find any evidence of Ho Chi Minh naming the Hà Giang–Đồng Văn Road the Happy Road.

plateau—these are known as the Quản Bạ heaven gate and the Cán Tỷ heaven gate. In both gates, a thick wooden door was constructed that was closed during the rebellion of Vương Chính Đức against the French in the 1930s and again in 1959 when several Hmong organised bandit troops '*phỉ*'[47] of the Đồng Văn plateau attempted to stop the reach of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Closing these doors shut off the connection between the uplands and the state in the Vietnamese lowlands. Otherwise, the plateau was open to Yunnan and southern China, which share the same karst topography.

Mr Sò, the man mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, recalled the following:

> The Hmong in Hà Giang believe that they created their own kingdom here 300 years ago with the proclamation of the King of Sùng Chứ Đà in Đường Thượng. This king controlled the Hà Giang area for 25 years before he was beaten by the Chinese. In 1886, the French started to invade Hà Giang province and specified the border marks between Vietnam and China. After much effort to dominate this land, the French were forced to compromise with ethnic leaders by signing the French–Mèo Treaty in 1913. According to that treaty, France withdrew its troops from Đồng Văn, giving autonomy to Hmong people and cooperating with them in opium trading.
>
> From then on, the entire Đồng Văn Karst Plateau was under the control of the Hmong and was divided into four main areas. The Hạng (Ham) clan led four communes of Quản Bạ (Mô Phủ, Thanh Vân, Cán Tỷ and Thái An) and other parts of Hà Giang, which were not part of the Đồng Văn plateau. This clan also controlled the Hmong communities in Yunnan. The Vàng (Vaj) clan managed two communes in Quản Bạ (Tùng Vài and Lao Chải). The remaining communes in Quản Bạ, Yên Minh and Đồng Văn districts were under the supervision of the Vương (Vaj) clan. Mèo Vạc district was run by the Dương (Yang) clan. These four forces of the Hmong competed in expanding influence among the Hmong communities and managing the opium trade by seeking support from outside forces.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the mountainous areas in the south of China and the Đồng Văn plateau have been used as shelter for political troops, including the Black, White, Red and Yellow Flags, who had failed in their rebellion against the Chinese imperial government. Many

[47] Hmong organized bandit troops were referred to by the government of Democratic Republic of Vietnam as *Phỉ*. There were different Hmong forces, led by some powerful Hmong clans in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Some of them may have had Chinese advisors or soldiers who had lost in the Chinese Revolution in 1949 and had to escape to the mountains of Yunnan and the North of Vietnam.

Hmong people followed these troops to Vietnam and other Indochinese countries (Michaud & Culas, 2000). The exodus of Hmong and military groups opposing the Chinese government into the Đồng Văn plateau continued following the Chinese revolution and into the 1960s. The Đồng Văn region became extremely volatile, with territorial rivalry between several Hmong groups and looting and trafficking by large armed and organised bandit groups (Michaud & Culas, 2000).

According to Mr Sò, by early 1947, the Vương clan in Đồng Văn, with the support of the Việt Minh, had successfully extended their power across the entire Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Other families who had been protected by Chinese troops from Guangdong, had failed and attempted to flee from the karst plateau. Vương Chí Sình, a called Hmong lord from the Vương clan, was a congressman in Vietnam's National Assembly from 1946 until his death in 1962. Vương Chí Sình also became the state-nominated chairman of the Đồng Văn area until 1955, when he resettled in Hanoi. Prior to his departure, Vương Chí Sình's power in Đồng Văn had already greatly diminished. The government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam sent several experts and officials to Đồng Văn to assist Vương Chí Sình in residential management, judicial assistance and crime prevention:

> The period from 1949 to 1963 was somewhat chaotic in the Đồng Văn plateau. The People's Republic of China, born under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, pushed opposing forces to remote, mountainous areas bordering other countries, including Vietnam. These forces stationed in the border area decided to expand their sphere of influence to the surrounding areas, including the Đồng Văn plateau. In 1959, they cooperated with ex-leaders of Hmong to block roads from Hà Giang to Đồng Văn, attacked government officials and raided stores (Interview of Mr Ma Khái Sò, 2017).

The Happy Road was constructed under these chaotic circumstances. It was hoped such a route would reduce the isolation of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and connect it to the lowland. The government aimed to 'bring the mountains on par with the lowland' (*đưa miền núi tiến kịp miền xuôi)* and improve the lives of the local people. Lieutenant General Chu Văn Tấn, secretary of the Việt Bắc Military Zone and chairman of the Việt Bắc Autonomous Region Administrative Committee, spoke at the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1960 on how to bring equity to the highlands:

> The mountains and the plains have close ties in all aspects of politics, economy and culture, if the mountains progress slowly, it will affect the lowland and affect the development progress of the North [of Vietnam]. The mountainous area is lower in all aspects than the lowland, so the mountains have to speed up as faster than the lowland in order to catch up with the lowland, it is necessary to have positive measures to take the mountain to make great leaps and steps to advance smoothly towards socialism together with the lowland. It is necessary to strengthen and develop the movement of cooperation and continually improve new production relations in the mountains. Paying attention to the expansion of industry and transportation. On that basis, promoting all aspects of agricultural production [...] and promoting trade, culture, health, and strengthening national defence. (Chu, V.T., 1960)

The Happy Road is 185 km long and winds through four mountainous districts of the Đồng Văn plateau, connecting this area with the lowlands of the Hà Giang and Cao Bằng provinces. It was constructed from 1959 to 1965 by the Vietnam's Young Volunteer force and local people. The people of Mã Pì Lèng village were proud of their participation in the construction of the 4C Road as well as their contributions of food to the road construction teams. Mrs Sùng Thị Chí, 75 years old, who along with her husband had participated in the construction of the road, had been the leader of the Hmong team working on the Happy Road. She informed me that each Hmong house was allowed to retain approximately 2 *sinh*[48] of corn for daily consumption, while the rest of their corn was paid to the government. If a household had no corn to offer, the owners had to pay approximately 4 *đồng*, which would have been enough to purchase 13 kg of corn.

Besides contributing food, each village was assigned to the building of one or two kilometres of road each year. This could involve either the main road or the small paths connecting the main road with other sites. Mrs Chí remembered:

> In 1961, there were 20 families in this village. Each family had to send one principal labourer to make the road. It was harsh and dangerous work due to the steep slope. We created a shortcut through Séo Sà Lủng village to Mèo Vạc town and connected to Khâu Vai village. The route ran relatively parallel with the present-day Happy Road. This shortcut was necessary at that time because the Happy Road was stuck at Mã Pì Lèng Pass where

[48] *Sinh* is the measurement unit of the Hmong, equivalent to 13 kg in Mèo Vạc and 15 kg in Đồng Văn.

> constructors had to spend 11 months to dig into the rock to make it through. Several Kinh people died there, but there were no Hmong casualties. One time, a Hmong person nearly fell into the abyss; however, a Kinh working nearby grabbed his hand just in time, and this Kinh person fell instead while the Hmong survived. The Kinh constructors lived separate from the Hmong; however, the Hmong in the village could sell water for them—each can of water would sell for five coins, which equated to a bowl of noodles. Only impoverished Hmong family had to sell water because water is rare in the mountains and it is hard to collect water here.

The construction of the Happy Road coincided with a vigorous anti-bandit campaign in the Đồng Văn plateau. Being an inaccessible opium-growing territory bordering China, the plateau was prone to banditry. The opening of the road gave security forces better access to the area. Hmong militia were recruited and, together with military officers from the central government, attempted to suppress the organised bandits. By 1962, the Đồng Văn plateau had been secured, and thousands of bandits had been prosecuted. By 1965, when the Happy Road was completed, the last bandit of Đồng Văn was arrested. Along with this came the official end of the autonomous period of the Hmong in the Đồng Văn plateau (Mr Ma Khái Sò, personal communication, 2017).

Thus, the Happy Road was built to meet the initial purpose of connecting the highland with the lowland, ensuring national security and defence. The Hmong from Mã Pì Lèng and neighbouring villages also participated in the construction of the road. Hmong elders viewed the road positively and as a part of their historical heritage. Today, the road is a part of the Hmong people's culture and provides the venue for each Hmong New Year's Day celebration.

The Hmong also benefited from the Happy Road in other ways. Those living in Mã Pì Lèng village could travel to the markets in nearby Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc towns quickly and easily, taking about an hour to walk or 15 minutes by motorcycle to the Đồng Văn market, where they could sell their produce and buy goods. Even if they could not travel to the market, the road helped them sell their produce at home. Kinh traders followed the road to the village to buy corn and livestock such as cows, chickens and pigs from Hmong households. The prices were slightly lower than market prices, but the Hmong were happy because they did not have to transport their produce. Trucks were used to transport construction materials directly from production sites, mainly in Đồng Văn or Mèo Vạc towns, to the village gate; from there, people

were able to easily transport materials by motorcycle or on their shoulders to construction sites. Therefore, workloads and construction times were minimised.

Hence, Highway 4C has benefited not only the Vietnamese government but also the Hmong people. With the construction of the Happy Road, the Vietnamese government has achieved several goals: border pacification, security and defence, administrative consolidation and economic development. Yet, as discussed, it has also had significance for the Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng as an important component of their social, cultural and economic infrastructure, bringing vitality to their lives.

7.2 Opium Eradication

The opium poppy was once a significant plant for the Hmong on the Đồng Văn plateau, being as essential as corn. While corn is an indispensable food in the daily diet, opium brought a high income to help meet the people's religious needs. The Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng call the opium poppy *yam yeeb*, meaning the herb of the French. This indicates that the cultivation of opium by the Hmong people in this area is associated with the era of French rule.

Prior to the construction of the connecting road between the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau and the Vietnamese lowlands, all opium produced by the Hmong in Đồng Văn was traded with China through the Phố Bảng border gate. Phố Bảng town became the trade centre of the plateau—here, opium was exported to China, while linen, horses and donkeys were imported from Yunnan and rice, salt and sugar from Guangxi. Chinese traders actively competed with the French for the opium trade. Eventually, to control the opium for domestic consumption, the French had to open a road connecting Phố Bảng with the lowlands (Huyền thoại trên cao nguyên đá: Sống chết với Đồng Văn, 2011).

Accurate data on when the Hmong in Đồng Văn began cultivating opium is lacking, but from the French archives, some researchers believe that opium was grown in the Đồng Văn plateau from the beginning of the twentieth century (Culas, 2000; Lentz, 2017). The first Hmong to migrate to Mã Pì Lèng village from the Phố Bảng area in the first decade of the twentieth century carried opium seeds with them. No other crop has brought as many economic benefits to the Hmong. Vương's palace in Sà Phìn, Đồng Văn, which was built on the profits of the

opium trade, contains many etchings of poppies—decorations on the house columns appear to be the opium fruit—and one room inside the palace was used for storage of opium.

It is believed that at the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately 70,000 Hmong people were living in the Đồng Văn region, and most of them planted opium poppies, selling opium to their leaders. The leaders also planted opium poppies on their own land, bought opium from the local people and sold it to the Chinese, French and others. A Hmong leader of Đồng Văn, Vương Chí Sình, offers an example. According to a story relayed by his grandson to a Vietnamese newspaper, Vương Chí Sình had been educated in Yunnan, China. After returning home, he purchased opium and traded it with China through the Phố Bảng border gate in Đồng Văn from 1903. He also sold opium to the French and others in Hanoi and Hải Phòng (Trieu, 2018).

In the past, most families in Mã Pì Lèng had at least one piece of land with the highest-quality soil dedicated to growing opium. Opium was mainly grown in relatively flat fields. Although the stone slopes were also used to grow opium poppies, the yield was lower than that from poppies cultivated in flat fields. The cultivation of opium was the work of individuals rather than the everyday work of the household. Husbands and wives grew opium on two separate pieces of land, and the income from opium was considered private property.

Hmong farmers in Mã Pì Lèng village could still recall the detailed process of opium cultivation in this village. According to them, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village planted opium poppies as well as beans in October following the corn harvest. It took more effort to cultivate opium than it did to grow corn. After the poppy seeds were sown, the people had to frequently visit the opium fields to extract weeds and prune weak seedlings. One month after the seed was sown, the poppy flowers bloomed and the fruit matured, and after another month, the opium resin was ready to harvest. A small knife was used to make tiny cuts in the poppy fruit, through which the opium resin exuded. The opium resin was then collected and sold. The opium harvest took place over three weeks—when it was complete, the Hmong would cut off the opium fruits and soak them in alcohol. They would also prune the top of the opium plant. After another six weeks, the poppy would bloom and fruit once again, providing a second harvest. After the second harvest, corn would be planted in the same fields—the Hmong had

discovered that corn planted on land that had previously been cultivated with opium poppies had a higher yield than that grown on non-opium land.

Mr Sò recalled that opium was first banned in Đồng Văn between 1964 and 1979. The Happy Road had been completed and was used by local Hmong leaders to mobilise people to remove opium from their fields. The government introduced alternative herbal medicinal crops to the Hmong people for cultivation, including *xuyên khung* (*Ligusticum striatum*), *huyền sâm* (*Scrophularia nodosa*) and *đương quy* (*Angelica sinensis*), all of which could be used to treat fever. However, after these medicinal plants had been cultivated, the government failed to purchase the post-harvest products, and the Hmong people did not know where to sell them. In 1965, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng asked Vietnamese state-owned companies to purchase all medicinal plants grown by the Hmong. However, the income from these medicinal plants was low compared with that from opium. After a few years, the cultivation of alternative medicinal plants was not sufficient. The Vietnamese government introduced another new crop, bamboo, which also failed following a two-year trial because the rocky terrain was not suitable for bamboo cultivation and people had no knowledge of bamboo cultivation techniques. Thus, the bamboo was small and weak, failing to bring an income to the people.

In 1980, because there was no suitable alternative crop for the rocky plateau, the Vietnamese government permitted the people to replant opium. Post-harvest opium was sold to state-owned cooperatives for use as medicine. One elderly Hmong woman recalled, ‘My oldest son and my oldest daughter used to be the opium collectors for the Pải Lủng cooperative. They went to every house in the village to weigh opium on scales and pay money to the villagers’. The cultivation of opium during this period brought a high income to the people of Mã Pì Lèng. The Hmong woman went on to tell me that in one year of opium cultivation, she could harvest 6 ounces of opium, selling it to the cooperatives for 18 *đồng*, which was equivalent to the cost of three mature cows. A Hmong man seated next to her said, ‘The income her family derived from poppy plants was normal here. Some opium producers in the village became rich because they owned more fields for growing opium’. This man immediately gave the example of Giàng Chá Sò’s family, which had become the wealthiest family in the village from selling opium:

> Mr Sò's family planted several opium fields, which covered half of a mountain outside the village; therefore, his annual income was very high. He used money from opium to buy more than a dozen cows, horses and pigs. Each year he paid taxes up to 240 *đồng* for the state, while the average household in the village only paid three *đồng*.

Despite the high profitability of opium, the Hmong people also acknowledged that since growing opium, the number of opium addicts in the village had increased. Mr Sò claimed that the rise of Hmong opium addicts was the result of lenient management by the state-owned cooperative—if the cooperative had purchased all the opium produced by the Hmong people, there would have been none left for the people to use. Opium addiction led to poverty for addicts and their families, and there was not enough opium produced annually for addicts' needs. As a result, they would sell their family assets to purchase opium from other households. One middle-aged Hmong man relayed the following:

> My father was an opium addict. All year round, he was lying in bed and smoking opium. We were very poor at that time, no money and no property. After a few years of smoking opium, he died; we even did not have any money to make a funeral for him. We had to sell half of the land to get money for holding a funeral for my father. Sometime later, my mother went to get married elsewhere.

Looting of high-income opium families also began. A wealthy woman had been shot dead by her brother-in-law so that he could steal her opium and her opium fields, and several families had experienced stolen livestock and household items.

In the early 1990s, the Vietnamese state encouraged people to gradually reduce the size of their opium fields and begin to eliminate the cultivation of opium poppies. According to the Hà Giang Department of Statistics, from 1991 to 1993, the area of land used to grow poppies crops decreased each year, particularly in the Đồng Văn district (see Table 7.1).

Table 7.1: Land area (ha) for opium crops in Hà Giang province by district

ID	District	1990–1991	1991–1992	1992–1993	Percentage of opium in 1993 compared with 1990 levels
1	Bắc Quang				
2	Vị Xuyên				
3	Bắc Mê	12.290	12.210	9.030	73.47%
4	Hoàng Su Phì	22.876	22.705	21.705	94.88%
5	Xín Mần	70.010	35.444	22.434	32.04%
6	Quản Bạ	262.980	228.702	238.800	90.80%
7	Yên Minh	233.840	186.947	391.440	167.39%
8	Đồng Văn	1,602.840	1,205.220	355.289	22.17%
9	Mèo Vạc	451.000	417.000	408.500	90.57%
10	Hà Giang town				
	Total	2,655.226	2,108.228	1,447.202	54.50%

Source: Hà Giang Department of Statistics 1994 (cited in Diep, 1998, p. 124).

Table 7.1 shows that most of Hà Giang's opium-growing area was located in four districts belonging to the Đồng Văn stone plateau: Quản Bạ, Yên Minh, Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc. The local authorities were under great pressure to reduce opium production. Of the four districts in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, Đồng Văn district had the sharpest declines in the area under opium production, while the other three districts still retained a large area under opium three years after the opium ban. In Yên Minh district, the area of opium increased 167.39% in 1993 compared with that of 1990. These figures show the difficult and complicated situation of implementation of the opium ban in Vietnam. Poppy farmers in Đồng Văn Karst plateau were not only ordinary Hmong people but also Hmong local officials. These local officials were the first group convinced to stop poppy cultivation, next came ordinary Hmong people. The Vietnamese government issued a program to support Hmong families transfer poppy cultivation to other alternative crops. The first few years of the 1990s was a period of mobilisation for people to voluntarily abandon poppy cultivation, followed by a period of forced opium withdrawal. Local Hmong officials went to the fields to remove the opium poppies.

There is no evidence of conflicts arising in the fields between policymakers and poppy farmers. However, the reaction of the local people to the ban on growing opium poppies is illustrated by the following narrative from Mr Sò:

> After I went to the field to get rid of opium, there was an addict who brought his wife and three children to the People's Committee office, intending to hand them over to me, giving the reason: 'you took away my opium, which means I no longer have food to feed my family'. He also smashed the committee headquarters. Finally, we gave him some kilograms of rice to encourage him to take his wife and children back home. Another group of addicts wanted to kill me. They handed a piece of red cloth to a member of the group to tie it to his head and asked him to find me and kill me by knife. That group member was too scared to kill someone, so he fled to the committee headquarters to report to me.

By 1997, the elimination of opium in Hà Giang in general, and Đồng Văn plateau in particular, was complete (Mr. Ma Khái Sò personal interview and local people interviews). Since then, the income for local families has declined, especially for those who had primarily relied on growing opium. One man said, 'We have become poorer. We did not have any alternative crops'. Local authorities have instructed people to plant canola as an alternative; however, like the cultivation of medicinal plants, the people were unable to sell canola after harvesting because no businesses were interested in buying it. Hence, the Hmong had to abandon canola and now only cultivate corn and raise small-scale livestock and poultry.

Following the ban on opium, a detoxification program was organised. Serious addicts were sent to a concentrated detoxification centre in Hà Giang town. However, this centre could accommodate only about 100 people, while, according to the 1994 statistics, there was a total of 2,608 addicts in Hà Giang and 1,820 addicts in the Đồng Văn plateau (Diep, 1998). Light addicts were allowed to stay at home under the supervision of local authorities. Today, in Mã Pì Lèng village, the majority of opium addicts have died.

In the past, opium was an important component of the Hmong economy. Even though the ban on opium cultivation has been enforced for over 20 years, many of the Hmong people became emotional when asked about opium. They excitedly recalled how opium had enriched some households and felt sad that they could no longer cultivate poppies. The majority of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng complied with Vietnamese policies and stated that they would not grow

opium without permission. They also explained that they could not grow opium because they no longer had poppy seeds in storage. In other Hmong villages in Đồng Văn, there may still be some who surreptitiously grow opium. In 2018, Hà Giang border guards removed more than 1,000 poppy plants cultivated by two Hmong households in Lũng Cú commune (Xuan Oanh, 2018).

7.3 Poverty Alleviation

In poverty assessment reports issued by Vietnamese and international agencies, the Hmong are consistently ranked as the poorest ethnic group in Vietnam. The rate of poor Hmong households is almost three times higher than that of other ethnic minorities (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, 2018; UNFPA, 2011; World Bank, 2019). The Hmong themselves did not deny their poverty but used it as an explanation for some of their cultural rituals. For example, the Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng explained that members of the Giàng (A) clan did not have a house altar because they were poor and could not prepare roosters for offerings. The ritual of the pig sacrifice for the bedroom gods had to be done in the evening with the doors closed. The sacrificial pig had to be slaughtered, cooked and eaten in the house, and the wastewater and inedible parts of the animal were buried indoors. The Hmong people explained that the poor had to steal pigs from the Han Chinese to make offerings and thus had to conduct the ritual discreetly to hide it from the Han Chinese.

In the past, Vietnamese government representatives from the lowlands had to make visits to the mountainous regions because of the Hmong's isolation, autonomy, rebellions and opium. More recently, the Hmong have obtained assistance from the Vietnamese government to alleviate their poverty. The Vietnamese state is obliged to address the issue of poverty among the Hmong for a number of reasons. First, the state aims to make the Hmong and other ethnic groups of Vietnam's mountainous areas equal to the lowland Kinh, as described in section 7.1. Therefore, the state must improve the living conditions of the Hmong as well as change their culture and rituals (McElwee, 2004). Second, it is believed that poverty is a major reason for the Hmong being easily enticed by opposing and enemy groups outside of Vietnam to migrate, rebel, join the millenarian movement or convert to other religions (N. V. Dang, 1998; Hoang, 2000; Thao, 2009; Vuong, 2005). Eliminating poverty and narrowing the developmental gaps in the economy and culture of ethnic groups in Vietnam are thus deemed key for the unity

and security of the Vietnamese nation (Thao, 2009). Third, the Vietnamese state must reduce the rate of poverty to improve Vietnam's ranking in the United Nations Human Development Index. In 2018, Vietnam was ranked 116 of 189 countries and territories in the United Nations Development Programme (2018).

A number of state development projects are focused on improving quality of life and eradicating poverty for people in the Đồng Văn plateau. Notable programs include Programme 135 (socioeconomic development for the most vulnerable communes in ethnic minority and mountainous areas), which began in 1998; Programme 134 (provision of productive and residential land, housing and running water for poor ethnic minorities and people with difficult lives), which began in 2004; and Programme 30A (fast and sustainable poverty reduction program for 64 poor districts), which began in 2008.

The Happy Road provides critical infrastructure for development programs in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau. Several roads coming off the Happy Road have been constructed and sealed with concrete to connect villages, communes and districts with each other. The road has been necessary for the transport and trade of goods between all locations in the Đồng Văn plateau and the lowlands to develop the market economy.

The Vietnamese government's poverty reduction and development programs are focused on infrastructure, including electricity (*điện*), transportation (*đường*), schools (*trường*), health clinics (*trạm)* and water; developing and diversifying activities to support agricultural and non-agricultural production; human resource development; and providing financial support to the poor, including the provision of residential and productive land, financial support for the construction of houses, animal sheds, toilets and water tanks and the annual provision of rice and household utensils to poor households.

However, despite the efforts of the Vietnamese government and international development organisations, the poverty rate of the Hmong has persisted. The poverty rate has decreased from 76.5% in 2012 to 65.9% in 2016 but is still almost three times higher than that of other ethnic minorities (Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, 2018). Other reports show disadvantages in areas such as education, growth and life expectancy (World Bank, 2019).

One reason the poverty rate among the Hmong remains so high is the changes in the method for calculating the rate of poverty. A 2009 socioeconomic report of the Geopark project indicates that, at the time of the research, 67.3% of Hmong households in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau had insufficient food for 1–6 months per year (Institute of Anthropology (Vietnam), 2009a). In 2011, the rate of poor households in the four districts of Đồng Văn plateau was 53.4% higher than that of any other district in Hà Giang province (Hà Giang Statistics Office, 2016). For the next four years, the rate of poor households in the Đồng Văn plateau decreased sharply—by 2015, the rate of poor households in the region had nearly halved, falling to 28.56%,[49] arguably showing the beneficial effects of poverty alleviation programs. However, since 2016, the percentage of poor households in the region has paradoxically increased. This is because at the beginning of 2016, poverty was calculated differently. According to the new multidimensional poverty criteria,[50] by the end of 2015, the percentage of poor households in the Đồng Văn plateau had increased sharply to 64,03% (Pham,V.P., 2016). In Mã Pì Lèng village in 2016, 25 households were identified as poor, representing 43.9% of the total population.

It is instructive to examine the Hmong people's definition of poverty, which is different from both the income and multidimensional poverty criteria used by the Vietnamese government and non-government organisations who assess household poverty. Hmong assessments of poverty and wealth focus on factors that make a critical difference to life and wellbeing in the mountainous environment. A person is said to be poor when he has little land to cultivate, which may be because he has had to subdivide it for inheritance purposes or has sold it to pay for other critical needs. Land area is linked to food availability, and limited land means that people are unable to grow sufficient maize for the consumption. However, the quality of the land is also important because a rocky field is considered much less valuable than one with soil. The quantity of soil, availability of water and location of the land are also important.

Perhaps an even more significant measure of poverty among the Hmong is the amount of labour available to the household. A family may own a large field, but if they lack hands to till the soil, they cannot cultivate it to their advantage. Large families are considered beneficial,

[49]Calculated according to the poverty line applied for the 2011–2015 term of the Vietnamese government. Accordingly, rural households with incomes of 400,000 VND/month or less are considered poor households.
[50]Multidimensional poverty lines are defined based on criteria such as income, assets, access to social services, access to information, etc.

and the wealthiest families are those with the largest number of household members or those able to procure hired labour. Given that stone field cultivation is highly labour intensive, many household members make it possible for a family to produce more. A family with many members can diversify its livelihoods, including participating in-migrant labour, cultivation, animal herding, weaving and food processing. If there are many household members, one member can participate in a labour exchange with other village households, increasing the number of people available to work in the stone fields or to build houses. Apart from drug addicts, people living in poverty in Mã Pì Lèng village are mostly single older adults and young couples separated from their parents' families.

Wealthier families in Mã Pì Lèng village were mostly extended families with many members. Households were also ranked according to the number of cows they own. Having no cows not only reflected that the family had no savings but also meant they did not have sufficient ability to plough the land. In contrast, the wealthier were those who owned several cows and large areas of land for cultivation. Other reasons given for a household being poor included the fact that there were no local jobs, the lack of crops apart from corn, the low number of labourers migrating elsewhere for wages, illness, drug addiction and the high cost of rituals and funerals. These factors are all contextually relevant and relate to the capacity and opportunities for working in the mountains.

Some researchers in Vietnam and China have argued that poverty stems from geophysical constraints. Minot, Baulch and Epprecht (2006) included terrain and soil quality as among the factors contributing to poverty. In a study of the causes of poverty related to geographic regions in China, Tian, Wang, Zhao, Jiang and Guo (2018) argued that the cause of poverty in the karst landscape comes from its topography, leading to soil and water scarcity:

> Our findings show that tertiary factor karst topography is the main cause of poverty. We visited the area to confirm that the karst geomorphologic types caused serious seepage of surface water. In some areas, the groundwater was buried deeply; the soil was red soil or brick red soil. The soil suitable for planting was generally poor, and the stone teeth and stone mounds were exposed and decreased that effective planting area. Therefore, the potential for agricultural production is low and the economic development is largely constrained. (p. 13)

The Hmong also identified geophysical factors as being among those causing them difficulties in life. A characteristic of limestone mountains is water scarcity. In the dry season, people often do not have sufficient water for daily activities and must travel long distances to obtain it. Tragic deaths caused by sliding down the mountain while obtaining water have taken place. In response, the government has undertaken a systematic exploration of water sources in the Đồng Văn plateau and has constructed water reservoirs as an important part of the region's infrastructure. Surveys to explore groundwater sources and water caves have been conducted for several years in many localities on the Đồng Văn plateau. However, none has yielded satisfactory results. Therefore, rainwater reservoir systems are considered the most effective solution. Because of the reservoir built in 2010 at the village gate, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng have had enough water all year. Some Hmong households in Mã Pì Lèng village had received support from UNICEF to build water tanks, while others had received allowances from state programs to build brick houses, cattle sheds, toilets and water tanks. In 2017, 15 households in the village received rice (50 kg per household) and warm blankets from the government's poverty reduction program.

Although the Hmong people were grateful for state assistance, they were selective in their adoption of such assistance. One example pertains to human resource development. Both the Hmong people and the state have stressed that an essential factor in poverty alleviation is the development of human resources. However, the views of Hmong people and the state on human resources differ. For the Hmong, the human workforce pertains to the number of male labourers available in a family or clan. These labourers must be strong and knowledgeable about the environment in which they live and the practices of Hmong culture. In contrast, the state perceives the human workforce as the number of people of working age, meaning 15–60 years of age for men and 15–55 years of age for women. People must be literate in Vietnamese, and those who can speak Vietnamese fluently can obtain higher education certificates, helping them to be literate and educated and preventing them from falling under the influence of enemy forces, which would increase the possibility of Vietnam becoming insecure and disunited (Thao, 2009). This also provides opportunities for job training or working in the state management system.

To facilitate the development of Vietnamese education, school infrastructure has been built comprehensively according to administrative levels. Kindergartens and primary schools have

been built in each village. Junior high schools (Level 2) have been built at the commune level, while high schools (Level 3) have been built at the district level. The districts each have a boarding school for ethnic minority students. Children who attend school from kindergarten to middle school are supported with a monthly allocation of rice. Hmong people who wish to obtain a higher degree can do so by meeting a quota (*cử tuyển)* or passing entrance exams to universities in Hanoi or other provinces.

Hmong cadres that support Vietnamese education are those who have participated in managing the plateau since Vietnamese independence in 1945. Hmong people make up more than 60% of the population of the entire highland area and more than 90% in some districts, including Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc. Therefore, Hmong people are a key component of the people's administration at all levels, especially at the village, commune and district levels. According to Mr Sò:

> The administrative work of the people's administration in the rocky plateau is done by the Hmong, including the elimination of rebellion forces in the 1950s and early 1960s. Kinh officials were only supporters, not participants. We carried out literacy for local Hmong people and use appropriate people to manage at all levels.

The next generation of Hmong cadres, including people like Mr Sò, have been sent to study for higher qualifications and then have returned to continue their fathers' work. Participation in the local levels of government provides these Hmong families with a stable and higher income stream than those who only work in agricultural jobs.

Ordinary Hmong people paid little attention to education because they did not believe that the Vietnamese language was relevant to their lives. Most people in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau communicated in the Hmong dialect, which was also the main language used in the market. When Hmong people had to contact local authorities, they spoke with Hmong cadres, who also served as translators, or cadres from other ethnic groups who could understand Hmong dialect. When local authorities needed to inform villagers about Vietnamese policies, a translator or the head of village who could speak the Hmong dialect had to be present. Hmong villagers rarely watched Vietnamese television channels because they were unable understand what was being said and perceived the programs to be irrelevant to their lives, preferring instead to watch videos of films and music made by Hmong people of China, Laos

and America. Because these films and music reflect Hmong culture, the Hmong could relate to them more easily. The most important reason for Vietnamese language being irrelevant to the lives of Hmong people in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau is that it is forbidden to speak in Hmong rituals. For the Hmong, Vietnamese is a foreign language—if it is spoken in any Hmong ritual, their ancestor's souls will not be able to understand it when their descendants recall them and may believe they have returned to an unknown family, clan or community. Consequently, they will not take care of or bestow luck or wealth to their families, clans and communities.[51]

Nevertheless, the Hmong people continued to send their children to school up to Grade 9 because they had been told by local authorities and Vietnamese teachers that it was required and that their children would bring home a few kilograms of rice monthly. However, because they cared little for the Vietnamese education system, parents often kept their children home from school, sometimes for days, when they needed their children to work in the fields or participate in rituals. Moreover, parents did not help their children with homework.

Most schoolteachers in Vietnam are Kinh—some can speak a little Hmong, but many cannot. The school curriculum is the same as that nationally, and there is no special curriculum for Hmong children or a bilingual curriculum. As a result, many of the Hmong children who had finished Grade 9 were unable to speak fluent Vietnamese, making it difficult for them to study at higher levels. Girls were mostly expected to stay home once they had completed Grade 9 because they were now of marriageable age. Hmong parents attempted to protect their daughters from bride kidnapping by asking them to leave school. Boys were free to choose whether to leave school or continue on to higher education. However, most chose the former to work in the fields or seek a job in China.

The Hmong people knew that some households had members who worked for the commune or village authorities from which they earned a state salary, enabling them to have a better life than those who worked in agriculture. Thus, earning additional money from sources other

[51]The Hmong believe that only three languages can be used in Hmong rituals—Han Chinese, Dao (The Dao called themselves Iu Mien. Dao is the Vietnamese name for these people. In China, they are Yao) and Hmong. These languages are thought to have supernatural powers that can expel evil spirits. Han Chinese and Dao are more powerful than Hmong because they contain written characters. Han people are also wealthier and more powerful than Hmong people, while Dao people have abundant knowledge about performing rituals. Han shamans and Dao shamans are welcome to practise Hmong rituals in Hmong homes and villages.

than agriculture was also considered a contribution to the wealth of the family. However, only a limited number of Hmong people could work for local or higher authorities because most did not have the necessary educational qualifications. As mentioned previously, one reason for this is the relatively poor-quality education received at school, making it difficult for students to advance to the higher levels needed for administrative work. Another reason is the limited enrolment quotas for boarding schools, where children are provided food and subsidised education, and universities. Enrolment places are generally reserved for children whose parents work for the state management system rather than those from agricultural families.

Another example of how the Hmong chose to receive state support to reduce poverty was through agricultural subsidies. With the aim of increasing crop yields and income for the local people, the state has provided them with hybrid seedlings. However, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng and other nearby villages did not cultivate alternative plants introduced by the state because their land was unsuitable. A new variety of corn seed had also been introduced. One elderly Hmong man stated: 'The new corn seed provided by the state is very good seed. It brings a high yield of corn to us. We do not face the hunger at all'. Another Hmong man commented:

> I agree that the new corn seed has a high yield, but it cannot be stored as long as our traditional corn seeds. After only a few months of storage in the warehouse, the corn was termite infested and mouldy. At that time, we could not eat it but only used it as food for pigs. In addition, the new corn does not taste as good as the traditional corn.

In addition to new plant varieties, training courses on agricultural and animal husbandry techniques were offered each year, providing local people with techniques for cultivation and care of plants and animals. Information about economic development, cultivation, husbandry, security, new industries and the village social order was also provided via mass media and village meetings.

The local Hmong people were proactive in terms of assessing their needs. They knew that they were entitled to receive state poverty reduction support, and many proactively sought it. During one village meeting, a woman stood up and asked the authorities to build a concrete path to her house because it would facilitate her family's movements. Another was quietly confident that her family would receive financial support to upgrade her house from wood to

brick, not because her family was poor but because the house was situated beside a main road. The local authorities did not want poorly built houses to be located where they could easily be seen because this would imply that they had been ineffective in improving local living conditions.

The number of households in Mã Pì Lèng village living in poverty was higher than that recognised by local authorities. Households officially identified as poor are given a certificate entitling them to government support to alleviate poverty. However, not all poor households were officially recognised. The villagers themselves decided on the households in poverty at the annual village meeting. However, households, even those that were truly impoverished and struggling, were not recognised as poor if any household member was an opium addict.[52]

Because they needed to find additional work, the Hmong people took initiatives in non-agricultural activities. For example, several men with experience in building houses had formed a construction team, working not only in their own village but in other villages in Mèo Vạc district. Another man worked for the telecommunications firm Viettel as the village telecommunications station keeper. Young girls worked at the Đồng Văn market as kitchen hands, while men and women often travelled to China to work as hired labourers in farms and factories. However, these activities only took place in the off-season. During the main planting season, the entire workforce of Mã Pì Lèng village focused on agricultural activities.[53]

7.4 Geopark and the Promotion of Heritage-Related Tourism Development

Another means by which the Vietnamese government is attempting to reduce poverty for ethnic minorities in the region is through geopark conservation and tourism activities. Geoparks are a new initiative, developed in the early 2000s, that have been successfully applied in China. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has

[52]Some years ago, two poor households in Mã Pì Lèng village received charity houses (*nhà tình nghĩa)* from the Ministry of Public Security. However, because one of the household heads was an opium addict who was attending rehabilitation in Hà Giang town, the local authorities transferred the right to use the house to another family in the village whose owner shared the same name as the opium addict.

[53]In some places in Lao Cai province, the Hmong had become wealthy from farming activities. For example, when I travelled to Ban Lau commune (in Muong Khuong district, Lao Cai province) in 2012, I was surprised to find that several Hmong households had incomes of hundreds of thousands to millions of Chinese yuan from growing bananas and pineapples to export to China. These families owned many hills for agricultural cultivation and even hired Kinh and Dao people living in the vicinity to work. However, circumstances were different for the Hmong in Đồng Văn plateau, whose farming land was limited to only what they could produce for their families.

defined geoparks as being protected areas that contain rare, significant and aesthetic geological heritage and that may be used for conservation, education and economic development (Farsani, Coelho, Costa, & de Carvalho, 2012). The Hà Giang provincial government is anticipating that the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark, built in 2010, will attract a large number of tourists, bringing income to the region and improving the lives of local people. Given the beautiful and unique terrain of the limestone landscape, tourism is considered the most effective way to eradicate poverty (Tian et al., 2018).

Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Geopark was established in 2010 and spans an area of 2,356.8 km2, which includes the four rocky districts of Quản Bạ, Yên Minh, Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc. For the Hmong in Đồng Văn in general and Mã Pì Lèng in particular, geoparks were an unfamiliar concept and many of them had never heard of it. When asked about the geopark, most thought it must be a park somewhere far away from where they lived. Even many Kinh people did not know about the geopark.

Although they were not aware of the geopark, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng had noticed that in the previous few years, an increasing number of tourists, both domestic and foreign, had visited the scenic viewpoint at Mã Pì Lèng Pass. The Happy Road has become a tourist road on which hundreds of thousands of domestic and foreign visitors pass annually to see the majestic topography. Tourists arrived by car or motorcycle, stopping at the viewpoint to see and photograph the surrounding mountains and the Nho Quế River flowing around the foot of the mountain. Hmong children eagerly ran along the highway, following the tourists, watching them take pictures and sometimes mumbling answers to their questions. Some children even pulled on the tourists' clothing to ask for sweets. Older Hmong people were calmer than their children, not wishing to greet or become acquainted with foreign tourists, but simply standing on the side of the road, curious to watch them. They did not understand why their homeland had suddenly attracted so many tourists.

Interestingly, the tourism boom on the Đồng Văn plateau did not originate from the limestone landscape but from buckwheat, an herbaceous plant grown by the local people in winter to provide food for humans and cattle. The buckwheat blooms in October, producing small clusters of white flowers that gradually turn dark pink when it is time to harvest the seeds, creating a beautiful carpet of flowers in the rock fields of Đồng Văn plateau. In 2014, a group

of Vietnamese tourists had visited the Đồng Văn geopark and uploaded photographs of the spectacular buckwheat flower fields to Facebook. Since then, travelling to the rocky highlands to see and take pictures of the iconic buckwheat flowers has become a domestic tourism trend.

With increased tourism to the Đồng Văn stone plateau, the local government has provided support to locals who own paddy fields adjacent to the road in the form of buckwheat seeds for planting and 2 million VND for buckwheat cultivation per household per year. A buckwheat flower festival is organised in October each year in the Đồng Văn plateau by the Hà Giang provincial government. Speciality buckwheat products such as wine and pancakes are sold. The locals can earn an income by charging tourists 10,000 VND per person to take souvenir photographs of the buckwheat.

Visitors to the Đồng Văn plateau see that the karst landscape is beautiful, majestic and very different from the landscape in the plains or in urban areas. The winding roads that run along the slopes of the mountains between cliffs and deep abysses challenge tourists to embark on a journey of exploring nature, evoking strong emotions. Younger tourists and foreigners prefer to explore the Đồng Văn plateau by motorcycle (known as đi phượt). They arrive in groups, bringing food, beverages and cameras, stopping along the way to rest and view the beautiful scenery.

Because of buckwheat, the towns of the Đồng Văn geological park have become more urbanised and distinct. There has been an exponential increase in hotels, restaurants and tourist services, bringing great economic benefits to the Kinh, Hoa and Tày people in Hà Giang town and other big cities that have invested in tourism. A significant number of local people living in the towns of the Đồng Văn plateau have also benefited from increased tourism in the rocky plateau, opening restaurants or selling clothing, souvenirs and highland specialties such as wild mint honey, corn wine and medicinal herbs. However, the majority of Hmong people in the Đồng Văn plateau had benefited less from tourism development in the rocky plateau.

The Hmong have had to comply with new regulations issued by the local government and the geopark management board. For instance, people are no longer allowed to take rocks from roadside mountains or cut grass along the roadside with which to feed cows. For the purpose of forest regeneration, there is a limited number of trees along roads and on mountains that

may be cut down. The local authorities have stated that these regulations are to ensure that the landscape remains green and unexploited for the purpose of attracting more visitors. People can be fined up to 7 million VND for violating these regulations. However, no penalties for violating regulations were recorded or known. Local authorities are encouraging ethnic minority communities to attract tourists through cultural activities such as wearing traditional costumes or performing traditional music and dance, recalling L. Schein's (1997) notion of 'internal orientalism', which argues that under the tourist gaze, the Hmong will invariably suffer disempowerment and inequality because they belong to this setting only as objects or exotic curiosities.

The Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village did not participate in such cultural activities and appeared to be on the margins of tourism development. This does not imply that they did not wish to earn an income from tourism but simply that did not know how to begin doing so. They had observed and learnt from the Giáy people living in the valley, who regularly travelled to the tops of mountains to provide tourist services. Each day, Giáy people travelled through Mã Pì Lèng village to Mã Pì Lèng Pass, carrying their produce to sell to visitors. A Giáy and a Tày family had also bought land on the Highway 4C in front of the Mã Pì Lèng village gate to build a grocery store for selling goods to tourists as well as to the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village. Although they were not recognised as Mã Pì Lèng villagers, they earnt a satisfactory income from these trading activities.

After he realised that the Giáy were earning additional income from selling products to visitors, one Hmong man attempted to emulate this activity by buying a piece of sloping land with the aim of establishing a convenience store. The land cost 40 million VND, and the man had to sell his livestock and borrow money from relatives to buy it. Unfortunately, after the land purchase was completed, the local authorities announced that people were no longer permitted to purchase land or build houses along Highway 4C. However, the government has allocated land in the vicinity of Mã Pì Lèng village—a section adjacent to the Mã Pì Lèng Pass where many tourists stop to see the Nho Quế River valley—for a joint tourism business to build homestays. Because this area is the most fertile agricultural land for the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng, the land acquisition has been met with fierce opposition by the people who have been affected by the project. My host family had sold part of their residential land for 400 million VND to a Kinh business based in Hà Giang to open a homestay. The head of the household had

started to learn English to communicate with and serve foreign tourists staying in the homestay. Sometimes he cooked *thắng cố* (a spicy soup made from beef meat, bones and organs) on Sundays and sold it to tourists stopping at Mã Pì Lèng Pass.

Another benefit received by the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village from tourism is charity gifts. In addition to visiting the rocky landscape to take pictures of buckwheat flowers, tourists also visit ethnic roadside villages, inquisitively watching the often-naked Hmong children with their blotchy faces and cheeks flushed red from the cold. Tourists offer sweets to the children, who surround them and answer their questions. Some tourists who had seen the poverty and misery of the Hmong in this area and had been motivated to do something to help had collected donations and later returned to the Hmong villages in the Đồng Văn rock plateau with bags of clothes, blankets, instant noodles, books, notebooks, pens and school bags for students.

In 2016, Mã Pì Lèng village welcomed two tourist charity groups from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, respectively, within the same month. The tourists were satisfied because they felt they had helped improve the impoverished lives of the Hmong in the village. While most of the Hmong were grateful, some felt embarrassed about receiving gifts when they attended the charity meeting at the village meeting house. They asked each other whether they had received all the gifts and whether they could return home. The tourists asked what the villagers had said, and one person translated that the villagers had thanked them. The tourists and villagers both smiled happily. The following day, almost everyone in Mã Pì Lèng village ate instant noodles instead of cornmeal, not because they did not have enough corn to eat but because they wished to try a new food. Blankets were also used immediately to combat the cold of the winter in the mountains. Clothes were hung in the corner to be worn later, but the children were still naked and dirty because, as their parents explained, they were young and not wearing pants was more convenient when they needed to urinate. Children were washed with warm water by their mothers before going to bed.

Although they did not directly benefit financially from tourism, the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng village did not object to tourism activities in the area. In addition to seeing tourists on and off the road, the Hmong approached the development of tourism and modernity through their market activities. Most people in Mã Pì Lèng village eagerly anticipated the Sunday morning

market, which was a weekly necessity for the Hmong. Women rose early to wash and put on their best dresses while their children ran around their feet, waiting as their mothers donned their beautiful clothes. The men would bring their motorcycles into their yards, checking the fuel gauges. Everyone would be excited to get on the road to the marketplace.

Villagers in Mã Pì Lèng village could choose either the Đồng Văn market or the Mèo Vạc market, which are equidistant from Mã Pì Lèng village. Groups of Hmong people, including men, women and children, could be seen walking along the roadside to the marketplace. Men often held chickens or led a piglet or calf by a string, while women carried bags of beans, fruits and vegetables in their backpacks. These people travelled to the marketplace to sell their produce. However, others took nothing and simply wished to shop, meet friends, date or enjoy the delicious food at the market.

On arrival at the market, the Hmong people separated from each other. Men selling domestic animals had to sit in an allocated section at the back of the market, depending on the type of animal being sold—for example, if they were selling chickens, they had to sit with the other chicken sellers. Customers who wished to buy domestic animals had to come to this area. Women selling vegetables went to the section allocated for that purpose. Those with products to sell had to pay a market fee.

The Hmong women liked shopping for new clothes for the men and children or a new dress for themselves. Unlike the Hmong in Sapa, who wear traditional homemade clothing (Michaud, 2012), the Hmong women in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau preferred to wear factory-made clothes, most of which were imported from China. Compared with traditional clothing, the factory-made clothes were significantly cheaper—just 100 000 VND per dress compared with several million VND for a traditional dress—more colourful, lighter and more comfortable to wear at work and at home. However, the Hmong women worked hard to make traditional fabrics for funerals and to sell to tourists.

Once they had sold their goods, the men, women and children reunited in the central catering area of the market where they could find ethnic dishes of the Đồng Văn plateau. The Hmong's favourite dish was *phở* (noodle soup) made and sold by the Kinh, Tày or Giáy people, and they always ate *phở* at the market. They also enjoyed their own specialty dish *thắng cố*. Young people and children liked to eat sweet ices, candy and cakes. Other specialties of the Tày, Giáy

and Dao, such as coloured sticky rice, rice cake and buckwheat cake, were usually taken home. Once they had eaten, the Hmong people moved to the small wine bars at the side of the market where they met their friends to talk and drink wine until noon when the market finished.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how, over the course of some sixty years, the Hmong people of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau have moved from being 'free' and 'raw Hmong' to citizens of Vietnam. The discussion focuses on the effects of four state programs: The Happy Road, opium eradication, poverty alleviation and the development of heritage-related tourism. The Hmong people of Mã Pì Lèng were ambivalent about these programs, with some being unexpectedly supportive and others being perplexed or resigned to them. Simultaneously, these Hmong people have actively drawn the state into their world, giving meaning to state projects and participating in state programs for their own benefit. Although they continue to suffer critical material deprivation, the Hmong enjoy a certain power over the state as an intermediary group, using state programs to supplement their traditional livelihoods and partake in meaningful communal and cosmopolitan engagements. The Hmong people appreciate the state programs and cooperate with the state rather than simply being passive beneficiaries.

The transition from being 'free' or 'non-state' Hmong to 'Vietnamese Hmong' was perhaps inevitable following the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam after World War II. While this state's incorporation of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau has brought about significant material, social and cultural changes to the Hmong way of life, it also posed for them a new challenge, being how to preserve their identity as Hmong and their connections to the limestone mountains they have made their home while also existing as citizens of a nation-state. In the sixty years since the construction of the Happy Road, Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng continue to strive for a balance between deference to time-tested local knowledge and customs of self-reliance and national policy priorities; between tradition and modernity; and between subsisting within a predominantly Hmong cultural sphere of reference and connecting and cohabitating with other ethnic groups in the nation-state that they share.

The findings of this chapter suggest that Hmong in the Đồng Văn plateau have found a sense of belonging to both the karst mountains and the Vietnam nation. When asked where they originally were from, many of the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng responded that their homeland (*quê hương*) was Mèo Vạc, meaning that they were locals, and Vietnamese, rather than Chinese immigrants. Despite the assertion of one Kinh official, who asserted that the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng village only said this because they were afraid that the Vietnamese government would return them to China, I believe that the attachment felt by the Hmong people to Mèo Vạc and Vietnam was real. It reminds me of a Hmong poem published in the book *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam: Northern Provinces* edited by the Institute of Ethnology [Vietnam] (1978). One part of the poem goes as follows:

> Fishes live under the water
> Birds fly on the sky
> We live in the highland
> And birds have their nests
> Our Mèo [Hmong] have our homeland
> Our homeland is Mèo Vạc. (p. 292)

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis addresses a puzzle about how the Hmong of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau in northern Vietnam experience life in the mountains. The Hmong are an ethnic group who live in the highlands of Southeast Asia, including China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. In each of these countries, a majority of Hmong people live in hills which have an attitude of around 1000 meters above sea level. This is true of Vietnam home to over one million Hmong, who mostly live in the mountainous north and northwest of the country. Life for the highlanders of Vietnam is sometimes positively depicted as free, simple and authentic, while also being negatively portrayed as harsh, backward, miserable and deprived. The Đồng Văn Karst Plateau is a particularly remote, high, arid and infertile area, yet it is long-term home to some 160,000 Hmong people. How do the Hmong experience life in such a setting?

We find in the field of Hmong studies two contrasting views about the relationship between the Hmong and the mountains. One is positive, according to which the environment where Hmong people live is depicted as accommodating, familiar and amenable to their will. Savina (1924) was one of the first to articulate this somewhat romantic view of the Hmong relationship to the mountains. For Savina, the Hmong feel at home in the mountains, which for them are a site of refuge from persecution and a safe place to maintain their identity and traditions. They are at their most content when in the mountains. They feel uneasy and out of sorts in the lowlands. The mountains are where they belong. Savina is not only the person to interpret the relationship of the Hmong to the mountains in this way. In the field of economic ecology, Geddes (1976) claimed that the mountains are attractive to the Hmong for they provide ideal conditions for their livelihood as opium cultivators. The soil and the climate of the mountains are very suitable for the growth of opium and this accounts for the Hmong preference for residence in, and migration between, the high mountains of Southeast Asia. Others have spoken of the mountains as a place where the Hmong can realize their dreams of freedom and autonomy (Scott, 2009; Lee, 2015). In brief, it could be said the Hmong are at their best in the mountains and have made the mountains their home.

In contrast to the positive view of the Hmong relationship to the mountains, another view talks about the hardship and difficulties Hmong have faced. The Hmong are portrayed as a

displaced people who had to relocate from their homeland in China to other lands such as Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. They have been subject to repression, ruled by cultural others, caught up in inter-state wars, and subject to official reform policies. They have been represented as poor, deprived and uneducated in accordance with lowland criteria. They have been exposed to modern culture, converted to a new religion and responded with millennial fervor for a new kingdom. In short, the Hmong are not at home in the mountains; in such a setting they are displaced, dissatisfied, oppressed and in conflict; and lack the conditions to determine their own culture, livelihood or religion (Tapp, 1989; Culas, 2000; Culas and Michaud, 2000; 2004; Ngo 2010, 2011).

One way to examine these contrasting points of view is through the concept of belonging. According to the first view, the Hmong belong in the mountains. They are at home in the hills; they thrive there; and they can realize their dreams there. In any other setting it may be hard for Hmong people to realize their identity as Hmong. The other view is that as rebels, displaced people, refugees or marginal citizens of modern states, Hmong people do not experience a feeling of belonging in the mountains. There, their way of life is under assault; and they are expected to reform their ways, economically, culturally and politically. As transnational minority borderlands dwellers, they are deemed "out of place" (Douglas, 1966) and regarded with suspicion by nation-states. In many contexts, Hmong people themselves experience a disorienting sense of being between past and present, tradition and modernity.

In this research I have found that there are elements of truth in both perspectives; in the limestone hills of northern Vietnam, Hmong experience a degree of comfort, security and self-realization, while facing many limitations, and yearning for a different life. Through the notion of landscape and the concept of belonging, this thesis shows the Hmong relationship to the mountains is nuanced, multidimensional and marked by ambivalence. It takes as its case study the Hmong who live in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau in Hà Giang, Vietnam. This vast limestone plateau between Vietnam and China is a geographically inaccessible area with a challenging environment and turbulent history. Addressing the cultural and geo-physical specificities of life in this place, the thesis is an ethnographically detailed analysis of how Hmong people have adapted to a limestone landscape and made this setting their home. I examine the complexity of belonging for the Hmong in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau, looking at their relationship to this place through history, and in the religious, economic, social, gender and political spheres.

This thesis is the result of a year-long anthropological fieldwork study that was undertaken in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau Global Geopark, Hà Giang province, Vietnam, from 2016 to 2017. I collected narratives from Hmong scholars and elders in the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau to understand the value of the mountains to the Hmong and how they had migrated to this plateau. I observed and participated in the daily life activities and rituals of the Hmong in a specific village in Mèo Vạc district to understand the ways in which they have adapted and adjusted to the limestone landscape. I experienced the hardship and difficulties the Hmong face in their life in the mountains by living in and visiting their houses, eating their food, and taking part in a variety of work practices. I travelled with my interlocutors to destinations in and around the village; by walking with them in the mountains, I realised what skill is needed to make one's way though the steep slopes and how hard it is to live in the mountains. I visited and became acquainted with every family in the village and conducted informal and in-depth interviews of Hmong people of all ages, genders and vocations. These interviews helped me to understand Hmong behaviours in their daily lives and towards the limestone landscape.

From the ethnological data collected from the fieldwork, I explore multiple aspects of the relationship of Hmong people to the limestone landscape. I show that the Hmong make the mountains their home and gain a sense of attachment to place through their stories, embodied knowledge, rituals, beliefs, labour cooperation and collaboration in nation building. I also demonstrate that the Hmong encounter severe difficulties staying in the high mountains: lacking adequate water, soil, local livelihood opportunities, and educational and health support, and dealing, for better and for worse, with a nation-state with its own agenda for developing their borderland habitat. The relationship of the Hmong to the mountains is thus multidimensional and tinged with ambivalence. This human-environmental relationship is mutually constitutive for the Hmong both shape the mountains into a viable and desirable home and are, in turn, constrained to adjust their way of life to the realities of the limestone landscape.

8.1 Belonging in the Limestone Hills

This thesis contributes to the anthropological study of belonging. In the introduction I noted that the notion of belonging can be understood through multiple perspectives: socio-political (Yuval-Davis, 2006), place- belongingness (Antonsich, 2010), as a relationship to the

environment (Basso 1996; Ingold, 2000), or in social respects (Gow, 1995; Toren, 1995; De Boeck, 1998; Lovell, 1998; Arhem, 1998; Ottino, 1998; Larsen, 1998). In this thesis, I have shown we can address the issue of the Hmong relationship to the mountain landscape through multiple dimensions of belonging. I see the mountain landscape of the Hmong as a "cultural process" (Ingold, 1994) in which Hmong people interact with the natural elements around them. This process includes the relationship between human and non-human beings in the environment, the relationship between Hmong people and non-human being in their 'milieu' (Descola, 2005). Through this process, Hmong identities and Hmong mountain-belongingness are formed and developed.

Belonging can be understood as knowledge of the landscape via place names and narratives that tie people to places (Basso, 1996). In these regards, I found that Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng deeply understood the terrain, climate and location of the place in which they lived. The names given to their villages showed their intimate knowledge of local conditions, for example, a village's name might mean closeness to a water source; or it could be named according to the quality of the soil, e.g. the *Cuw Av* (Mã Pì Lèng) village. They recognised several types of soil existing in the mountain areas and the plants suitable for those soils. They recognised different kinds of stones and knew how to use those stones in building houses and in their rituals. This understanding pertained not only to a particular location but to the mountains in general. In the settlement narratives told by elderly Hmong people, which related why their ancestors originally had settled the local area, Hmong interlocuters identified key values that acknowledged the benefits offered by the mountains, including shelter, security and arable land. The valued qualities associated with the local landscape demonstrate how the limestone mountains feature in local Hmong identity culture, society and beliefs. They have made the mountain their home—the mountains empowered them—for the mountains provided them with what they needed.

Although Hmong people have become empowered in the mountains, they have also come to greatly respect the influence of the mountains in their lives though their geomancy activities and ritual relations with natural entities such as stones, trees and water, which both protect and threaten them. Similar to Hmong living elsewhere, Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng believed the characteristics of the landscape, including the shape of the mountains and the direction of water flow, could affect their current and future lives (for comparative examples, see Tapp,

2010). A ‘good’ location or position of a house or tomb would bring to them and their descendants good health, good luck and great fortune. The ‘bad’ position or inauspicious location of a house and tomb would cause diseases, accidents, and even death to them and the next generations. Therefore, via geomancy practices, Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng tried to gain ‘good’ land for their houses and their tombs. They acknowledged the value of natural elements such as stones, trees and water to their life as materials for their houses and essential sustenance for people and animals. Also deemed as spiritual entities, these natural elements were simultaneously venerated as protectors for their bodies and their spirits. Those natural entities and forces could damage life in the form of a falling stone, tree, or flood, or the spirits believed to dwell within those natural elements could cause people to be injured. Thus, Hmong people observed taboos and made ritual offerings to such natural elements, wishing them not to harm their life. The stony landscape in which the Hmong people live dramatically demonstrated its ability to give or take life. The boulders that periodically detach themselves from the mountains and hurtle downhill, albeit deadly, have an affinity with certain people or groups. Through their rituals and stories, the Hmong people identify with the stones among which they live and show deference towards and mutual care for the mountain landscape.

The Hmong people have thus developed a mutual relationship with the mountains. They have adapted to the mountains. They have also shaped the mountains, changing them from a place of danger with their sharp and rugged cliffs to one of shelter and security. They have modified and transformed the steep slopes into flat terrain where they can live and be protected. Digging into the limestone slopes they have created stone platforms atop of which they could build their houses. They have made stone paths across rugged cliffs between their houses and their fields, which help them to travel and transport goods in greater comfort and safety. They have solved the problem of the scarcity of arable soil by bringing soil up from the bottom of the mountain and depositing it in crevices in the stone. They add ash and natural fertiliser and build small stone retaining walls to protect the soil from erosion. In doing so, they have transformed the rocky cliffs into arable land on which they can cultivate corn and opium. The modification and transformation of the landscape has required much effort that could not have been achieved by one individual or family but needed a large workforce of labourers. The Hmong have cooperated with each other in their families, their clans and their

communities. By so doing, the Hmong have turned bare stone mountains into a viable habitat through their culture and social relations.

The limestone landscape has also shaped and structured Hmong houses in terms of their materials and layout. Because stones are abundant in the limestone mountains, they have become the primary materials used in building houses. Stones are used to build foundations and fences, flatten the floor, make bricks and join the bricks together. The houses of the Hmong comprise both physical materials and invisible objects, both of which play a role in protecting and promoting health, fertility, luck and prosperity for family members. The layout of a Hmong house in Mã Pì Lèng combines the key components of bedroom and fireplace. Those necessary elements protect, feed and keep warm the members of a family and their shared use defines a set of people as a family subunit. The number of bedrooms and fires in a house can be multiplied by the numbers of couples or unmarried adult members in the wider household. The modular quality of Hmong kinship is reflected in the modular structure of houses which household members can leave and return to easily without disrupting the continuity of a household. The layout of a house manifests both exclusivity and inclusivity as well as a certain autonomy for family subunits. Thus, Hmong houses are built on principles that not only respond to the limestone landscape but are also shaped by Hmong kinship, social and belief systems.

From a female perspective, Hmong women are sometimes considered powerless and inferior to men, hence putting their belonging into question. Under the traditional patriarchal system, women are dependent on men—they belong to men. From this perspective, the concept of belonging may be interpreted as subordination. When unmarried, women belong to their natal families. They work and contribute to the economy of their parents' house but do not have a firm position in the house. Once married, they transfer from their natal house to their husband's house both their body and their spirit. At that time, they belong to their husband's house and lineage. Also, as a subordinate to men, Hmong women are often forced to marriage against their will. They sometimes are mistreated by the members of their husband's family. However, these perceptions and practices are ameliorated by beliefs in women's bodily potency, fertility and nurturing capacity. Once married a Hmong woman accrues power and value through her role in the cycle of life and death, and the reproduction of family and lineage. By giving birth, Hmong women act as mediators to the world of the spirits in bringing

departed ancestors back to life. Through their ability to bear children, they contribute to the development of the family, the lineage and the community. They also contribute to the family economy through housework and labour. Seen through this lens of belonging, Hmong women have value in families and communities as bringers of life and potent guarantors of growth, maintenance and continuity.

With respect to political belonging, I have examined the ways in which Hmong people respond to state policies and projects. The Hmong people of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau live on the border of Vietnam and China. The geopolitical position of this setting allowed the Hmong to control the land. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Hmong built their forces and established their management in the Đồng Văn rocky plateau. With their armed forces, local Hmong resisted the invasion of armed troops from China after the outbreak of peasant uprisings in China. They also refused the management of the French colonial government. They built up this plateau as their autonomous region, grew opium poppy and controlled the trade of opium with China. When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established in 1945, the Hmong gradually accepted its management and became citizens of Vietnam. From their stronghold on the limestone plateau, the Hmong have negotiated and cooperated with the state in nation-building and improving their living conditions. They were involved in the construction of roads, most notably the *Hạnh Phúc* road connecting the Đồng Văn plateau with the lowland. They still use this road to travel, trade goods, and have made it part of their culture for the New Year occasion. They reluctantly accepted the exclusion of opium from their lives, given that they lost a significant income from opium cultivation and trading. They have received subsidies from the state for education, health, infrastructure, and production. Incrementally, they have participated in the tourism development associated with the listing of their homeland as a geological heritage park, which caused them to lose some rights but also gain some benefits, for example modest income from work in the tourism economy. The Hmong are no longer a non-state people. They live in the nation and contribute to nation-building. As they have been drawn into the nation, increasingly they have made the nation their home. State authorities meet them in the mountains and offer aid and education, which is sometimes received with ambivalence. In cooperating with the state, the Hmong people have both lost and gained power, yet in doing so they have consolidated their position in the karst mountains.

8.2 Implications

This thesis has demonstrated the value of ethnographic methods as a way to understand people's relationship to landscape. Living in one area for a long period and learning from local people how to conduct myself in their world made it possible for me to gain an understanding of local perspectives on the landscape, its practical meanings, and its cultural value to the people. This method of research enabled me to become familiar with individual and subgroup dynamics and participate in a range of activities including agriculture, birth, house building, ritual practices and celebratory feasts. Therefore, I was able to interpret the local knowledge and culture through my own experiences, observations and understandings. Although a researcher, I somehow became an insider of the local community and also was helped to avoid a common bias of outsiders, which is seeing the indigenous people as backward and underdeveloped. This approach helped me gain a richer and more multidimensional understanding of the relationships between people and place than would have been available if I had relied on methods such as surveys and interviews alone.

The thesis makes a contribution to the broader field of Hmong studies by examining the specificities of Hmong lifeways in Hà Giang. With permanent houses and fields carved out of rock and a population density that is high for such an infertile area, Hmong of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau are not highly migratory or equipped for mobility and nor do they live light. Their sedentary existence and painstaking investment in local landscape transformation distinguishes them from the Hmong of the ethnographic record in Thailand, Laos and the wider diaspora, who are associated with high intensity and ongoing mobility (Geddes, 1976; Tapp, 1989; Tapp and Lee, 2010; Scott, 2009; Baird, 2010; 2014).[54] Meanwhile, unlike the Hmong communities in Vietnam's northwest who are associated with religious conversions, the Hmong in Đồng Văn Karst Plateau have largely preserved their traditional beliefs and culture (c.f. Ngo, 2011). Most families in Mã Pì Lèng have animist beliefs and still practice a rich array of routine ceremonies and ritual activities, much like their ancestors.

[54] However, their deep investment in permanent landscape modifications such as stone fields, stone retaining walls, stone houses and stone paths, which leave a lasting mark on the landscape and tie Hmong to place, can be compared with the ways that Hmong in Mù Căng Chải district in Yên Bái province and in Sapa in Lào Cai province as well as Honghe district in Yunnan China, have profoundly altered the landscape they live in and have bound themselves to a particular mountainous locality by investing in the construction of a complex system of permanent rice terraces.

The circumstances of the Hmong of the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau differ also from the well-studied Hmong in the Vietnamese province of Lào Cai who can earn extra cash from multiple economic activities relating to the trade between the Vietnam and China and the development of tourism in Sapa (c.f. Turner, Bonnin and Michaud, 2015; Duong, 2006). By contrast, Hmong people in Mã Pì Lèng faced significant economic hardships and limitations owing to their remote location and the unfavourable landscape. With the scarcity of soil and water, the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng could cultivate dry crops only one season a year and hardly found alternative crops or local livelihood options after the ban on opium. Rather, their difficulties are similar to the Hmong who inhabit the vast karst plateau in adjacent Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou in China, and similarly experience entrenched poverty owing to their region's remote, high and arid stone environment (Tian et. al, 2018). Yet in a significant departure from a trend noted in Hmong studies literature, which depicts the Hmong in Southeast Asia as migrants out of China, some of the Hmong in Hà Giang today migrate to China, rather than from it, seeking opportunities for work in plantations and agrarian enterprises in nearly localities across the border. To date this is a seasonal labour migration pattern rather than a permanent movement back to China and most Hmong cross-border labour migrants regularly return to Mã Pì Lèng where they enjoy a variety of benefits.

This is one of the rare studies to explore systematically, using ethnographic methods, a people's relationship to limestone. As such, it answers H. Uhlig's seminal call for research on this topic in Southeast Asia (Uhlig, 1980). In Mã Pì Lèng village, the limestone landscape looms large in every aspect of Hmong people's life. It is drawn into their stories, beliefs and rites; they adapt their farming to it based on in-depth knowledge of the properties of stone and mountain soil and water conditions; they have learnt how to co-operate in converting the inhospitable limestone to housing and have discovered how to cultivate, rocky, waterless infertile soil. The thesis explores how families form and social identities are reproduced in the mountainous setting. It also shows how Hmong have been affected by and involved in a range of nation building activities that have striven to domesticate the limestone plateau of northern Hà Giang to the modern nation-state. This is a multifaceted relationship with limestone and a focus of this thesis has been to illuminate how diverse and mutually interactive human relations may be with karst stone landscapes.

This study examines one of the harshest living environments in Vietnam and reveals the hardships faced in such a setting by one of the country's most disadvantaged groups. The thesis confirms the assessment of development agencies that Hmong people in Vietnam live in great difficulty (World Bank, 2019). In the particular circumstances of Mèo Vạc and Hà Giang, one should include among these hardships a long-term history of displacement from former settlements owing to wars; more recent borderland conflicts and insecurities; the challenge of residing and making a living on steep, stony, arid, soil-poor and infertile land; difficulties of adjustment from opium livelihoods to low-yield and low-income crops; remoteness, isolation and livelihood insecurity; limited off-farm career prospects; child marriage and labour out-migration. These thesis findings qualify the romantic view that travel agencies, tourists and some anthropologists might have about life in the mountains of northern Vietnam, relating the many difficulties and challenges the Hmong face.

The thesis also challenges the discourse that mountainous minorities such as the Hmong are incapable or dependent subjects of development. The Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng are indeed disproportionately poor and experience multi-dimensional poverty. However, rather than see them as incompetent or as victims, the findings enable one to appreciate these Hmong people's remarkable achievements in adapting and adjusting to a harsh landscape. It is no small accomplishment that Hmong people have maintained a settlement on the slopes of Mã Pì Lèng for more than four generations and over a hundred years. In doing so, they have put into play special resources and capacities which deserve to be understood and respected. They have managed to create cornfields on barren limestone slopes, carve houses out of solid karst, adjust psychologically, physically, spiritually and socially to the demanding environment of a high stone plateau and cope with major political, cultural and social transitions as their locality has been drawn into the Vietnamese nation-state. Such accomplishments might well convince observers to be open-minded about the possibilities of development from below, and the capacities of even the most marginal peoples to address, opportunity, adversity and change. The Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng are masters of living on karst mountains; in all likelihood, few people in Vietnam share their capacity to make do, let alone thrive, in such a challenging landscape.

The thesis contributes to understanding Hmong – state relations. The Hmong have been depicted as a group that strives for autonomy from the state and have carved out a way of life

beyond state governance (Scott, 2009). Challenging this perspective, this thesis finds that the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng interact with and cooperate with the state. Notwithstanding a history of instability and conflict in the borderlands, the Đồng Văn Karst Plateau is not a nonstate place and nor is it convincing that the Hmong who live there seek to evade state governance. The modern Vietnamese state has a major presence in Hmong areas of Hà Giang. Policies such as opium eradication, bandit suppression and road construction significantly altered local conditions for the Hmong, yet state authorities are not resented or seen as invasive. Ample examples exist of how the Hmong in Mã Pì Lèng have cooperated with the state, assumed state roles, and taken part in its programs. In some ways, just as Hmong have benefitted from a great variety of state services, the state has benefited from the Hmong presence in the borderlands – and from their facility to live in the limestone mountains – and has modified its mode of operation to adjust to local Hmong ways of life. The state-Hmong relationship in Mã Pì Lèng can be described as one of mutual interdependence, for in the final instance, the Vietnamese state relies on Hmong people to secure and protect the borderland.

Despite being incorporated within the nation-state, and living with the state, the Hmong who live in Hà Giang are not a subjugated people but manifestly have their own ideas and forms of power. They are aware of and interact with natural and supernatural entities that have power and authority over life and towards whom they must display due respect. They appreciate and appropriate the power of traditional culture when embarking on all manner of life ventures. They acquire and utilise indigenous knowledge of soil, rocks and climate to make a viable habitat and extract livelihoods. They know how to combine social resources and especial the power of cooperation. Akin to hill peoples elsewhere in Southeast Asia, the Hmong of Mã Pì Lèng understand and value the state and, in furtherance of their own values, draw state power into their lifeworld (c.f. Walker, 2012). We should understand the Hmong relationship with the state as one of a multiple set of resources and relations that Hmong draw upon to forge a living in the limestone hills of northern Vietnam.

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