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Hmong Christianisation, the will to improve and the question of neoliberalism in Vietnam's  
highlands

*Abstract: This article focuses on the convergence of mass Christianisation and economic transformations among the Hmong of Vietnam's northern highlands over the past thirty years. A history of impoverishment and ethnic discrimination has led hundreds of thousands of Hmong to follow Christianity as a perceived alternative path to progress instead of the state-led development agenda, despite sharing the same 'will to improve'. By exploring local understandings about the means to development as well as new religious teaching on prosperity, entrepreneurialism and calculativity in a rapidly developing Hmong village, this paper queries the 'elective affinity' between new Christian movements and neoliberalism posited by other scholars. The case study sheds light on the awkward combination of 'cooperative competitiveness' accompanying a community-benefit tourism development model. Hmong Christian activity can both overlap, and sit at odds with, government agendas and market expansion, resulting in complex transformations and subjectivities which cannot simply be reduced to neoliberal logic.*

Keywords: Hmong, Vietnam, Christianity, development, neoliberalism, calculativity, faith, entrepreneurship

## Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, Vietnam's northern highlands have witnessed a remarkable religious transformation as hundreds of thousands of largely impoverished Hmong converted to Protestant Christianity. One such convert is 50 year-old Cua,<sup>1</sup> who enjoyed a relatively comfortable career in the local authorities before being forced to retire due to institutional religious discrimination after his public conversion. Cua's wife had been suffering from chronic body aches, neck pains and recurrent nightmares; after a series of unsuccessful doctor appointments and shaman rituals, she visited the local church to pray and converted to Christianity. A month later, she had recovered from her ailments and persuaded her husband and children to become Christians. Despite being a relatively new believer, Cua's social prestige and relatively high level of education means he now holds a respected position as church elder, while his daughter has attended Bible School and plays an active role in church ministry.

During fieldwork interviews, Cua explained that richer, well-connected Hmong like himself have plenty of opportunities to 'engage with society' (*va chàm xã hội*), to learn from others and change their lives. Conversely, poorer Hmong very rarely go out into wider society and have few chances to socialise; therefore, they don't know how to – or don't accept – change. Nevertheless, according to Cua, poor Hmong Christians *are* able to change, because they listen to the word of God preached by the pastor, so they don't need to 'engage with society' as much. From his perspective, poor Hmong households are generally stuck in a cycle – they just do hired labour and then spend their hard-earned (but meagre) salary on alcohol or

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<sup>1</sup> All names of research participants and locations are pseudonyms.

traditional rituals. For Cua, however, Christianity is a ‘way out’ of poverty which is of particular use to poorer Hmong.

Tâm Ngô (2016) highlights the significance of the Hmong-language term for Christianity as the ‘new way’ or ‘new road’ (*kevcai tshiab*), which implies a means to an end. For Ngô it is, among other things, “clearly a project of modernizing oneself and one’s world” (2016: 58). This article investigates both Cua’s explicit claims about progress and their underlying assumptions to uncover the wider socio-economic forces at play, which frame the tensions between state and religious visions, aspirations and practices regarding ‘development’. Based on extensive fieldwork in Vietnam’s northern highlands from 2016 to 2018,<sup>2</sup> I draw upon Foucauldian concepts of governmentality and ‘technologies of the self’ to explore how logics of discipline are cultivated through daily routines and economic practices (Elias and Rethel 2016). At the same time, these processes are never entirely successful and can be resisted or reinterpreted by local actors, often leading to contradictory, messy, and refractory effects (Ferguson 1990).

After this introduction, Hmong Christianisation is contextualised within broader academic debates about the explosion of Pentecostal Christianity across the developing world, often in tandem with neoliberal structural reforms in developing countries, leading to the common claim of an ‘elective affinity’ (Comaroff 2009) between the two. A conceptualisation of neoliberalism as governmentality overlaps with the ‘will to improve’ (Li 2007), which

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<sup>2</sup> I took a multi-method fieldwork approach of participant observation and in-depth interviews with hundreds of Hmong villagers across three highland case study sites, as well as further interviews and focus groups with Hmong students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, with a Hmong-speaking research assistant available to translate for the many older Hmong interviewees who were not fluent in Vietnamese. While there are limitations for interpreting fieldwork data collected not in their mother tongue, the advantage of a Vietnamese-language analysis is the ability to associate and compare with state and policy discourses.

pervades everyday life in Vietnam's highlands as a fully internalised desire for modernity. Unlike other failed state attempts to transform Hmong subjectivities, the 'will to improve' was especially successful because state and Christianity governmentalities overlap in their disparagement of traditional culture and promotion of progressive visions of the future. Nevertheless, these visions sit uneasily alongside the increasing awareness of economic inequalities and embroilment in the cash economy which characterise 'these modern times'.

This is followed by an analysis of four key factors which Hmong interviewees considered to be means to development: material assets, work diligence, connections to wider society and 'calculativity', a novel way of thinking which constantly looks for business opportunities and rationally assesses potentials for profit. 'Calculativity' is quite alien to traditional Hmong economic attitudes but a key feature in the 'development success story' of *Bản Thác* village, which provides an instructive case study. A closer inspection of the ambivalent tension between communalism and increasing market competitiveness with the development of 'community-benefit tourism' in this village points to a hybrid form of Christian subjectivity which cannot be wholly attributed to a neoliberal logic.

Religious self-fashioning of economic behaviour is further explored in the growing influence of Pentecostalism and Prosperity theology in Vietnam's highlands, which proposes another means to development in the belief that God will bless devout believers materially. One important dynamic is the translation of religious faith into confidence in the economic realm, cultivating a spirit of entrepreneurialism which allegedly leads to Christians to be more willing to embark on business ventures than risk-averse non-Christians. However, Prosperity teaching also has the potential to obscure and justify increasing inequality by attributing spiritual causes to material accumulation while blaming the 'godless' poor for their own

poverty. These observations suggest that the neoliberal logic is not monolithic in upland Vietnam but intersects with other cultural and religious logics of communalism and state territorialisation projects to produce distinctive local subjectivities, which nevertheless appear to facilitate incorporation into the expanding capitalist market economy.

### **Faith on the neoliberal frontier**

Recent Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam fits into two significant wider transformations: firstly, the conversion of ‘tribal’ peoples from localised beliefs to world religions, a key factor in the global history of what we call ‘civilisation’ (Hefner 1993). This process gained momentum from the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the dawn of European colonialism, but has in fact accelerated during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the expansion of state power to the edge of its borders (Scott 2009). This has turned peripheral peoples into ‘minorities’ facing assimilation pressures, as well as globalising socio-economic trends which render “the practice of localized animistic religions [as] markedly disjunctive with the world in which they now live” (Keyes 1996: 288). For example, traditional Hmong animist ceremonies (still widely practiced by non-Christians) were described by converts like Cua as economically burdensome, especially for poorer families (Chindarsi 1976) – with the introduction of Christianity seen as a ‘way out’ of poverty. The Hmong are by no means the only marginalised ethnic minority in South East Asia to turn to Protestant Christianity, but the timeframe of this phenomenon is particularly striking – with perhaps a third of the 1.4 million Hmong population in Vietnam converting in the space of just thirty years and counting, although reliable statistics are hard to come by. In fact, there is a longstanding Catholic presence in Vietnam’s northern highlands since the French colonial era, but it was limited to

a few locations and did not prove very popular, with most of Vietnam's Hmong having never been exposed to any form of Christianity before the 1980s.

Secondly, in what is arguably “the largest shift in the religious marketplace” (Miller 2007: 19) over the past 50 years, the Global South has witnessed an explosion of new Christian movements which can loosely be categorised under the label of ‘Pentecostal’. Notwithstanding the huge global diversity of belief, Pentecostalism generally shares evangelical trademarks of the literalist authority of the Bible and the need to be ‘born again’, but additionally emphasises the importance of a personal, direct and miraculous encounter with God through the practice of ‘speaking in tongues’, fasting and praying for healing and deliverance (Le 2018: 2). While some church networks explicitly label themselves as Pentecostal, the movement also influences other Christian traditions and denominations who are increasingly adopting similar values and becoming ‘Pentecostalised’ (Spittler 1998).

This is the case for the majority of Protestant churches in Vietnam who are not explicitly Pentecostal but share many features with these diverse new Christian movements, including the prominent role of ‘mediated evangelism’ (Lim 2009). In the absence of missionaries on the ground in 1980s Vietnam, highlanders tuned into Hmong-language evangelical radio broadcasts (which were recorded among the US-based Hmong diaspora but aired from Manila) and proactively spread the message from village to village (Ngô 2016). In recent years some church leaders have made contact with national and international Christian networks (Rumsby, forthcoming), but for the first decade or so the radio was the only external religious catalyst. Religious proselytisation, church organisation and lifestyle changes were largely the result of local agency and most Hmong Christians have had no physical interaction with foreigners to this day.

The economic significance of Pentecostalism has been subject to increasing academic scrutiny in recent years. Critical perspectives posit a new ‘updated’ elective affinity between Pentecostalism and neoliberalism which realigns the Protestant ethic in accordance with contemporary labour demands of post-industrial capitalism (Martin 1995). These studies often emphasise Pentecostalism’s “concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire” (Kramer 1999: 35) as a form of “embedding neoliberalism, particularly in the absence of viable state governance” (Barker 2007: 408). On the one hand, Comaroff & Comaroff (2000) depict the rise of ‘Neoprotestant’ movements as a *response* to the perception of an epochal shift in the constitution of the lived world” (2000: 307), namely, the radical uncertainty of crises brought about by economic liberalisation. On the other hand, it is also alleged that born-again faiths in the Global South “often run ahead of such [neoliberal] transformation, bearing aspirations – visions of a this-worldly millennium – that help prepare the ground for more radical, market-oriented reform” (Comaroff 2009: 24).

Martin (1990) notes that economic advance and Pentecostalism often go together and may appear to reinforce each other, although any causal direction is hard to evidence. Aspects of Pentecostal teaching can promote self-worth among the poor and disempowered, and engender new skills of entrepreneurship and economic management (Le 2018). In both developed and developing countries, Pentecostal churches and organisations have allegedly become ‘surrogates of the state’ (Jennings 2008) by providing ‘mercy ministries’ to fill the gap left by state cuts in social welfare provision (c.f. Cooper 2015). Freston claims that the “Pentecostal ethic reinforces dominant capitalist values among people who have already embraced them but as yet without material reward” (1998: 353), while Freeman argues that Pentecostal churches “have a part to play in the conversion to capitalism that the neoliberal

agenda requires” (2012a: 160), by bringing about a ‘personal transformation’ which other development agencies cannot easily achieve.

Such insights are useful for comparing and contrasting to similar trends among Hmong Christians, however the majority of this religion and development literature is based on research in Africa, Latin America or South Asia. The developmental impact of religious movements in late socialist states such as China or Vietnam, with their legacies of socialist developmentalism, ethnic marginalisation and antagonism towards religion, are relatively understudied and entail quite different dynamics between religious and economic transformations. Still less can neoliberalism be assumed to be a monolithic, consistent global factor and, as this article argues, it is not the only (or necessarily dominant) logic of governmentality or economic rationality in Vietnam’s highlands.

Of course, neoliberalism means different things to different academics. Perhaps most commonly, neoliberalism describes a set of macroeconomic policies and programmes guided by the ‘less state, more market’ maxim whereby “individual liberty is conceived in economic terms, and the ‘market’ – the mechanism of price – is to play a central role in all aspects of social regulation” (Gauthier et al. 2013: 13). Ten years ago Gainsborough (2010) claimed that neoliberal political economy was ‘present but not powerful’ in the Vietnamese state, in spite of supposed ‘reform’ and sustained engagement with various neoliberal actors. Masina (2012) agrees that while *đổi mới* reforms dismantled central planning and released the ‘animal spirits’ of capitalism, “Vietnam could hardly be considered a showcase for neoliberalism” (2012: 204) due to the state’s limited and ambiguous adherence to neoliberal prescriptions.

Yet recent fieldwork suggests that the situation is changing rapidly, and neoliberal political economy may well be becoming increasingly influential in Vietnamese policy. For instance, well-informed Hmong villagers said that poverty reduction welfare schemes to poor households are gradually being scaled back and replaced by low-interest loans from the Social Policy Bank (*Ngân hàng Chính sách Xã hội*) in order to “stimulate their ability to work for themselves”, in the words of one local cadre. This resonates with Nguyen and Chen’s (2017) findings on how both Chinese and Vietnamese regimes have increasingly emphasised ‘socialisation’ in the past few decades, which implies that “people should rely on their own resources for their well-being while actively contributing to social causes... except for the neediest and most incapacitated, deemed to be failing subjects” (2017: 235).

This leads onto another conceptualisation of neoliberalism as a modern form of governmentality whereby social realities are reconstructed to facilitate ‘governance at a distance’, so that “political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy” (Foucault 2008: 131). Neoliberalism as governmentality intervenes not on the market but on social actors, by instilling technologies of the self which promote “the models and ideas of ‘entrepreneur’, ‘investment’ and ‘risk’ at the level of day to day life” (Cotoi 2011: 115). This understanding of neoliberalism is seen to be extremely malleable, utilised by democratic, authoritarian and communist regimes (Ong 2006) by emphasising the economic imperative above the political (Brown 2015). In addition, it has become a strategy of international development to promote values of personal responsibility and ‘resilience’ (Joseph 2013). Governmentality is not just a state project but is rather achieved through the participation of various institutions, including religious ones (Marshall 2009).

Along these lines, Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) argue for a more nuanced analysis of how neoliberal and socialist regimes interact and overlap in Vietnam, seeing “not so much a decline in state power but a diversification of forms of governmentality” (2012: 385). The following empirical sections offer evidence of the ways Christianity may contribute to a hybrid of neoliberal subjectivity among Hmong communities, but this is complicated by state territorialisation, ethnic politics and other competing logics of governance and discipline.

### **Aspirations for modernity: the will to improve**

Implicit in Cua’s opening vignette is the need for *change*, that the Hmong should not stay as they are – a widely held concern of both Hmong Christians and non-Christians, as well as a fundamental doctrine of ‘development’ (Salemink 2004). An extremely common expression given was the desire of research participants to ‘*vuon lên*’: literally to ‘rise up’ or to ‘better oneself’, which could also be translated as ‘social upward mobility’. This is evidence of an almost fully internalised ‘will to improve’, a phrase which Li coined (2007) in relation to external NGOs and state actors who claim progress as a goal and seek to impose ‘development’ on a group of people whose conditions must be improved.

The ‘will to improve’ is a form of governmentality which stretches back to colonial logics of governance (Ludden 2005) and clearly predates the current era of neoliberalism, but there are also overlaps including the ‘rendering technical’ of attempts to improve the population, and the concurrent depoliticisation of neoliberal development (Ferguson 1990). While there is some debate as to what extent Vietnam can be considered a developmental, neoliberal or predatory state (Gainsborough 2017), it is undoubtedly a ‘development regime’ (Ludden 2005) with its self-declared goals to eradicate poverty and ‘backwardness’ (Ngô 2016), its

claim to have the skills and knowledge to do so and, not least, the legitimacy it derives from claiming to improve the people's standards of living (Thayer 2009). This developmentalist stance also evidenced by the assessment of 'positive' and 'negative' impacts of Protestantism found in government documents, framed in terms of its ability to deter 'backward customs' and encourage "a progressive religious direction, which is closely knit to the nation, conforming to [the Party's] 'wealthy people, strong nation, just and civilised society' objective" (Anonymous 2008).

However, the striking fact emerging from fieldwork was the extent to which this will to improve was articulated by ordinary Hmong citizens with no reference to state agendas – almost every interviewee talked about it, often expressing frustration or concern about their lack of progress compared to their desires. The intended outcome of governmentality is to "artificially so arrang[e] things so that people, following their own self-interest, *will do as they ought*" (Scott 1995: 202), but Li (2007) contends that under contradictory capitalist forces, these external interventions are only ever partially successful and may inadvertently generate political backlash. Nonetheless, in Vietnam's northern highlands the project to instil a will to improve among the Hmong has become so successful that it would not be an exaggeration to call 'progress' or 'development' a hegemonic desire (Beard 2007).

Over the past 60 years the Vietnamese state has embarked on several territorialisation projects to bring upland inhabitants and resources under its jurisdiction – to varying degrees of effectiveness. While 'distance-demolishing technologies' (Scott 2009) of infrastructure, telecommunications and army, police and local authority presence has brought a degree of control, everyday resistance still looms large in the form of undocumented border crossings and drug trafficking. Often heavy-handed attempts to instil a sense of civic duty, patriotism

and loyalty to the Communist Party (Ngô 2016) have been rather unsuccessful among the Hmong, evidenced by the lack of engagement with state mobilisation campaigns (Bonnin and Turner 2014) and widespread cynicism or disillusionment with government propaganda articulated in (private) interviews. This makes the success of the ‘will to improve’ all the more remarkable. Why has this desire for progress been so deeply internalised, when other state governance agendas have failed among the Hmong?

Ngô (2016) argues that while Vietnamese state campaigns to ‘modernise’ its upland ethnic minorities was met with resistance as Hmong people interpreted it as assimilation attempts, they nevertheless had the effect of making ethnic minorities conscious of their ‘backwardness’ and socio-economic inferiority to the ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority). Ironically, the state derision of traditional Hmong culture arguably prepared the way for mass Protestant conversion (Ngô 2016: 40); the subsequent reversal of state policies which ‘encouraged’ new converts to renounce Christianity and return to their traditions (2016: 130) only caused more confusion and undermined the state’s legitimacy in the eyes of Hmong Christians.

The need to change has been a constant and shared feature of state socialist campaigns, post-reform development projects and also Christian outreach: “In the most practical terms, missionaries and the Communist authorities compete as agents of change” (Ngô 2016: 6–7). Many Hmong have become disillusioned with Vietnamese state rhetoric which has had little tangible developmental impact in their communities, and instead tried Christianity as an alternative ‘route’ out of their perceived backwardness. Notwithstanding the potential for Christians to overstate or exaggerate the differences of pre-/post-conversion life (Marshall

2009), the following interview quotes at least illustrate the interconnectedness between religious and economic transformation:

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

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

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

In the life of the church if there are any difficulties, we must help families to always move up, not go down, but every year to rise [*vuon lên*] a bit. The purpose of us believing in God is to get a bit closer to God every year. And for working and finances, each year we must improve a bit. That's my hope.

As Li points out, “‘the state’ has seldom had a monopoly on improvement” (2005: 384). Here is a compelling answer to the question about the efficacy of the ‘will to improve’ among the Hmong of Vietnam compared to other governance agendas; it was not just a state project, but was compounded by the efforts of Christian improvers – albeit resulting in “a different model of what it means to be modern than that offered by the Vietnamese Party-State and its Kinh officials” (Ngô 2016: 40). It is worth noting that levels of extreme poverty in upland Vietnam have decreased steadily over the past two decades, with state poverty reduction projects and welfare benefits clearly playing a role (Chaudhry 2016). However, many Christian

interviewees were inclined to attribute the primary source of living standard improvements to the fact that so many Hmong people had embraced Christianity, playing down the role of the state in economic transformation.

Li also observes that the very “interventions that set the conditions for growth simultaneously set the conditions for some sections of the population to be dispossessed” (2007: 20). While the will to improve was practically universal, some Hmong interviewees also articulated some of the negative effects of ‘progress’ in their communities. Improved infrastructure has brought new livelihoods opportunities but has also a more competitive local environment and reluctance to share knowledge among neighbours, with a few notable exceptions like *Bản Thác* village (see below). What’s more, increased connectivity to the wider national economy has increased the visibility of educational, economic and ethnic disparities between the Hmong and Kinh. Another common complaint concerned land scarcity and lack of grazing pasture for livestock, due to a combination of sedenterisation policies and rapid population growth – one retired teacher claimed that during the past 30 years, the number of households in his village had risen from just 100 to over 600.

According to one local cadre, “if you’re not willing to study, then you cannot fulfil the demands and requirements of modernity, and it will be harder to earn money, and even production and farming will be difficult”. These ‘requirements of modernity’ included the need for what another Hmong official called ‘intellectual labour’ as opposed to the manual labour which characterised traditional livelihoods. For those who only had to worry about the latter, “when they eat, it tastes better for them; they just eat until they’re full, drink until they’re drunk and go to sleep” – whereas ‘intellectual labour’ brought with it more headaches and troubled sleep from worrying about the future. Although perhaps presenting a somewhat

nostalgic view of the past (and ultimately no-one went as far as to say that things are *worse* now than their former poverty), this official articulates something of the stresses which many Hmong felt facing the uncertainties and challenges of a volatile market economy which was quite bewildering compared to what they had grown up with.

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

Nonetheless, the ends of capitalist development and ‘progress’ had been accepted by most Hmong interviewees as fundamentally desirable, in spite of the concomitant competitiveness, stress and inequalities. In the next section I draw out the prominent ideas which Christian and non-Christian Hmong interviewees held about the *means* by which they could improve their lot in life, which can be categorised as assets, diligence, connections and ‘calculativity’ – an externally instilled value derived from market rationality.

### **Means to development**

Commonly articulated ideas of how to move up in the world, yielded from hundreds of interviewees across multiple villages, can be grouped into four broad categories. Firstly, it was widely agreed that having existing *material assets* in the form of land (especially land located near roads), cash, livestock, motorbike etc. was obviously an advantage, whereas the ‘have-nots’ would struggle to catch up with the ‘haves’. Conversely, having too many children was in a sense considered a burden, not only due to the cost of raising them but also because in the future, the household land would have to be divided up so that each son would receive less ‘assets’. These assets were often referred to as ‘*điều kiện*’ (‘means’ or ‘conditions’), as in ‘you need money [as a condition] to make money’.

The second consensus is that one’s economic success was at least partly determined by one’s *diligence* to work. The biblical principle “you reap what you sow” was quoted in multiple interviews to justify hard work as well as illustrating the wisdom of Christian principles. Both Christians and non-Christians spoke disparagingly of those who were ‘workshy’ or, literally, ‘couldn’t handle hardship’ (*không chịu khó*) and did not seek further livelihood opportunities beyond growing rice and corn for subsistence, thus staying trapped in poverty. This was also associated with a pejorative narrative of relying on state benefits, although it seems unlikely that this narrative is a recent phenomenon owing solely to neoliberal cultivations of self-responsibility and ‘failing subjects’ (Nguyen and Chen 2017).

Thirdly, there was a widespread perception that those who had significantly improved their conditions had relied on the right *connections* with wider society. These connections included relationships with government officials, lowland Christians from the city, members of the transnational Hmong diaspora, cash crop middlemen and so on. For non-Christians, the right connections (as well as significant assets) were required to secure coveted civil service

employment, while transnational religious networks offered the status and resources for Christian elites like pastor Vang of *Bản Thác* (see below) to become political brokers in their communities (Rumsby, forthcoming). On the other hand, the wrong connections, such as entering informal manual labour in Vietnam's cities or in China, could lead to drudgery, exploitation and even being trafficked. In spite of numerous such horror stories circulated around Hmong communities, many still took their chances at navigating these unequal power relations in the hope of upward social mobility, evoking Joan Robinson's famous quote that "the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all" (1962: 46).

The need to 'socialise' or 'have social interaction' (*va chạm xã hội*) was seen as key to cultivating the most beneficial connections and relationships, however Hmong people faced significant barriers in achieving this. Many older people had not attended school and couldn't speak Vietnamese language fluently, which seriously restricted their potential networks. Living in remote areas makes it more difficult to forge economically useful relationships, which is why the opportunity for church leaders to travel for Christian conferences is invaluable for their networking abilities. These factors, combined with ethnic discrimination, make many Hmong people understandably apprehensive and afraid to 'go into society' and build connections. Moreover, as Cua noted at the opening vignette, assets and connections tend to be mutually reinforcing as wealth affords the opportunity of travelling and investing in gifts or bribes to build relationships.

Fourthly, 'intellectual assets' were seen as another potential means of development. This includes formal education and literacy, information about upcoming business opportunities, 'knowledge' or 'understanding' about how to grow cash crops, 'awareness' or 'wisdom' to be

business savvy, and so on. These descriptions can be encapsulated by the oft-repeated *tính toán*, a term that literally means ‘*calculation*’, but with connotations of self-interest. This was used to refer to someone’s intellectual ability to succeed and make a profit in the marketplace, whereas those who couldn’t calculate would get stuck in poverty spending their efforts on unprofitable ventures:

if you want to make a living, you must *calculate*, think about whether it will make a profit and only then do it. But if that land can’t grow rice, you could change to plant something else and then sell for money to buy rice to eat.

This sort of rational calculating logic points to the social transformations accompanying the expansion of market exchange which involves “anonymization, the cutting of social ties, and rational, calculative and efficient post-social coordination”. (Berndt and Boeckler 2012: 199). It is arguably a hallmark of the historical Protestant work ethic during the rise of capitalism in Europe (Weber 2002). Calculativity was not simply portrayed as extra knowledge but rather a transformation of thinking, as one university-educated Hmong man described: “I have a wider perspective, I think about things which others find very complicated, but I find them simple”. This way of thinking enables the ‘enlightened’ to see economic opportunities that others don’t and understand the mundane business tasks and investments required, while the unenlightened are overwhelmed or daunted by the risks and uncertainties involved. Calculativity can be learnt at school and especially higher education, since Hmong students who move to urban areas become exposed to and familiar with the livelihoods of the Kinh – who have a reputation for being highly calculating (and self-interested). Because significant material assets or the right connections are required to pay for further education, secure a scholarship or find cheap accommodation, it would again appear that the different means of development are mutually reinforcing.

Rigg (2016: 41) notes how market reforms in Vietnam deepened inequalities that had previously been ameliorated under the socialist policies, with the losers suffering from (1) living in remote *locations* (especially highland minorities), (2) lacking the necessary state or private *connections* to access information, investment or employment opportunities, and (3) not having a formal *education* to help them adapt to the new economic environment. This maps strikingly closely onto the above local perceptions on the means to development, indicating that Hmong communities understand the politico-economic realities they are up against, as well as highlighting the importance of marketisation in people's understanding of development.

### **The *Bản Thác* village success story**

One place where most Hmong locals felt they had collectively moved up the social ladder was *Bản Thác* village, the biggest development 'success story' across all my fieldwork sites. *Bản Thác* is a remote village of around 100 households near to a beautiful waterfall in the highlands of Lai Châu province near the Sino-Vietnamese border, an hour's drive away from the nearest major urban centre. In 1992, 18-year-old Vang became the first Christian convert in his village and assumed the role of church leader; now about three quarters of the village are Christian. Over the past ten years in particular, villagers have engaged in remarkable communal funding and labour which have transformed *Bản Thác* from an impoverished backwater to a thriving tourist destination, under the leadership of Pastor Vang. Building 5km of road from their remote village down to the main road has enabled villagers to sell flowers and livestock to visiting customers or to traders, who can drive large vehicles up there. Furthermore, the establishment of a weekly market from scratch brought crucial trade and

wealth into the village, which makes it easier for most to earn a living. In 2015 the village was designated as an official tourist destination, which had a huge economic impact as it gave villagers permission to use their houses as homestays for both national and foreign tourists. Other Christians come to visit what is reputedly now the wealthiest Hmong village in all of Vietnam, to learn from and buy peach tree or orchid seeds to try planting back home.

Church leadership and structures played a key role in persuading and mobilising villagers for collective labour tasks, coordinating tourism and market activities, ensuring discipline and warding off external state attempts to muscle in and take over the profitable tourist industry. A Hmong visitor said the difference with *Bản Thác* is that “they know how to calculate [*tính toán*]; they have a pastor who works to make things convenient, they know how to work, so they’re better off, richer”. Unlike in other fieldwork sites, several locals articulated the necessity of unity and benefits of working together for the sake of development: “Because we villagers are very constructive, share ideas for example, we understand each other”, unlike in other villages where “they will compete to talk, and they cannot do it, they don’t unite”.

Pastor Vang is aware of contestations within the political economy of tourist development. “We want to learn from the experience of other [tourist] areas like Sapa or Hà Giang”, he said, where the Kinh reap all the benefits of ‘ethnic tourism’ while the Hmong on display get very little. Therefore villagers endeavoured to build everything themselves, so that they “wouldn’t owe anyone anything” or give outsiders a foothold in *Bản Thác*. In other Hmong tourist areas, tourist entrance tickets are sold by local authorities who pocket the revenue and discontented locals see no direct benefits. In contrast, ticket sales and market stall rental income of *Bản Thác* is administered by a village council who allocate the funds for village

maintenance or market infrastructure, and apparently do not pay anything on to the commune People's Committee.

Villagers refused to sell off the waterfall land, but this is an ongoing threat. Local authorities gave a deadline to Pastor Vang, who acts as a political broker, to start building a larger tourist resort by 2018, otherwise they would forcibly buy the land and sell to an external company to further exploit this opportunity. By the time of deadline, the villagers had not yet raised the collective funds to embark on this project, however Vang was able to negotiate with the authorities, who backed down and allowed more time to raise funds. Subsequently, Vang utilised his external Christian networks to borrow a large interest-free loan from a Singaporean Christian organisation and has recently joined forces with 12 households to invest in the construction of new luxury 'Eco resorts', an idea Vang picked up from fellow Hmong in Thailand. So for now, *Bản Thác* has managed to keep the state at arms' length, as Scott (2009) might say – but crucially, this is enabled by the support of wealthy non-state patrons (Rumsby, forthcoming).

In an interesting turn of events, *Bản Thác* has of late been heralded by state actors as an exemplary model of 'community-based tourism' (CBT) which others can learn from. In 2018 the deputy prime minister Vương Đình Huệ and his entourage visited *Bản Thác* to inspect the tourist site and interview prominent villagers, including pastor Vang, with an eye to promoting the community development model to other areas. For such a high-ranking minister to not only visit but seek to learn from a Hmong community is unprecedented and highly prestigious, even if it was partly a PR stunt. Soon after, when I was visiting, a team from the state-owned radio station Voice of Vietnam approached me for an interview about the village from an international tourist's perspective. During the recorded interview, which

was later broadcast nationally, the presenter asked leading questions and gave her own suggested answers in a manner which promoted a narrative that *Bản Thác*'s success lay in the inhabitants' taking the initiative, looking for opportunities and, in her words, "not waiting for the state" to support them.

This relatively new discourse of self-responsibility and self-reliance strikes a chord with Nguyen and Chen (2017) about neoliberal governance in Vietnam shifting the moral obligation of welfare away from the state, except in this case the emphasis was not placed on the individual's burden as much as on the local community. It resonates even more with McCarthy's (2019) work on the responsibility of development in Myanmar where villages must prove themselves to be eligible for state benefits by proactively engaging in communal development projects, as *Bản Thác* inhabitants did by building the road themselves before local authorities saw and contributed resources. In doing so, McCarthy argues that state aid becomes seen as contingent and not a right, thus justifying the exclusion of certain 'undeserving poor' groups including ethnic and religious minorities. However, in upland Vietnam the state-promoted vision of self-reliant village tourism development masks the significant private support received through Vang's development brokerage, which other villages without the right connections could not easily emulate. Furthermore, as mentioned above local state actors do not simply leave *Bản Thác* to find its own path, but are attempting to muscle in on the profits in an ongoing political struggle over land and resources.

### **Cooperative competitiveness**

The deputy prime minister's visit to *Bản Thác* coincides with increasing interest in the potential for CBT as an empowering model for development. For example, a recent

international workshop in poorer rural areas of Vietnam aimed to challenge the ‘Western’ model of formal, for-profit tourism and instead “nurture both local social entrepreneur talents and develop local community capacities”.<sup>3</sup> CBT’s original meaning of fostering community empowerment and self-reliance can become co-opted into a neoliberal agenda, although this is not an inevitable outcome – particularly if tourism assets, management and benefits remain under community control (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri 2012). Simpson also warns that CBT communities “may become subject to external pressures, issues of governance and structure, conflicting stakeholder agendas, jealousies and internal power struggles can be exacerbated or created, and the growth of artificial hierarchies and elites may occur” (2008: 13).

These dynamics are relevant for the case of *Bản Thác* where a peculiar culture of ‘cooperative competitiveness’ has emerged. Pastor Vang, himself a new local elite, claims that individualism and self-interested behaviour has decreased due to Christian conversion and moral transformation. This is reinforced by regular informal ‘development meetings’ in the church building, which provided an important collaborative space to share and learn livelihoods advice. On the other hand, fieldwork revealed unresolved tensions as tourism expansion has opened up new arenas of competition between different market stallholders and homestays over customers.

This awkward combination led to a denial of competitiveness, as market stallholders maintained that relations with other sellers were purely friendly and there were no feelings of rivalry. For instance, there were six families who had built homestays to date, including Pastor Vang who claimed they shared out tourist customers on a roughly equal basis. This was later contradicted by another homestay owner who asserted that Vang and the village

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://thetourismcolab.com.au/activate/community-benefit-tourism/> for more information

elder receive more homestay guests than the others – before reiterating that “we don’t compete, because wherever the guests want to go, it’s up to the guests to choose”. Since *Bản Thác* had only opened up to tourism in the past five years, it remains to be seen how these contradictions associated with marketisation unfold.

Pastor Vang accepted the principle of competition on a macro-level between, rather than within, communities, by exhorting other villages to consider their unique features which could be exploited as a ‘comparative advantage’ in the tourism industry. Of course, other church leaders who see the achievements of *Bản Thác* long to replicate this in their own communities but are less successful, lacking the natural resources, external networks, village unity and bargaining power with local officials. Interestingly, the state’s promotion of CBT entrepreneurialism instead of ‘waiting on the state’ was also pitched at a communal, rather than individual, level. This grates somewhat with many definitions of neoliberal political philosophy which include a possessive, competitive form of individualism that underpins claims of economic efficiency and ethical self-responsibility (Ong 2006: 11). However, in this case neither state programmes nor Hmong Christian activity are framed in an overtly individualistic fashion. Other Hmong church social outreach programmes observed during fieldwork subscribe to a cooperative economic logic – from livestock redistribution and husbandry mentoring schemes to collective hiring of a lorry to transport the village’s banana harvest and cut out the middle-man.

Hefner (2017) highlights the importance of spatial and cultural contingencies of different “interaction[s] of capitalist or neoliberal rationalizations with religious revitalization” which “do not always result in the hyperindividualized subjectivity highlighted in so much recent scholarship” (2017: 272). While neoliberal policies and practices are arguably becoming

increasingly pertinent to everyday Vietnamese life, my fieldwork results treat it as one of several influences which often overlap but are not all part of the same all-encompassing logic. Rather, they combine to produce unique social outcomes and localised forms of governmentality (Cotoi 2011: 122). With regards to the logic of communality present in *Bản Thác*, pastor Vang taught his congregation an economic model based on the biblical description of the early church having “all things in common”, which has been interpreted as a form of ‘proto-communism’ (Montero 2017).

At another level, the wider relationship between the Vietnamese state and Hmong church could also be described as one of ‘cooperative competitiveness’. In Vietnam, Hmong pastors are indeed propagating the value of diligence and entrepreneurial faith as they act as informal business consultants to their congregations; this element of Hmong Christianity is regularly praised by official government texts as “fostering their willingness to work and learn hard, and desire to be rich” (Nguyễn 2016: 117). Furthermore, Hmong Christians may consider their various outreach initiatives – including food distribution, visiting the sick, paying for medical costs, communal labour, and so on – to be necessary because of the weakness or absence of state development aid.

Yet it would be misleading to call them ‘surrogates of the state’, because in practice local authorities tend to consider Christian social initiatives as a threat to the state’s monopoly on being the bearers of development (Chung 2017). Indeed, arguably one of the goals of government poverty reduction support is to keep marginalised people like the Hmong engaged with the state and deter them from mobilising around religion instead (Chaudhry 2016: 230). Therefore, while some academics and officials from Hanoi evaluate Hmong Christianity to have a positive overall social impact which conforms to state development

objectives, local authorities tended to emphasise the potential of religious development initiatives to “counter, subvert, disrupt, or reconfigure state power”, which Fountain et al. (2015: 24) identify as a wider dynamic of religion and development in Asia.

### **Prosperity, faith and failure**

A controversial doctrine associated with Pentecostalism is ‘Prosperity theology’, which holds that religious devotion (especially faithful church tithing) will result in the miraculous blessing of all aspects of life, including one’s finances (Yong 2012). Vince Le presents Prosperity teaching as “an embodiment of the desire of ordinary people in late-communist Vietnam” (2018: 113), especially popular among poorer and marginalised sectors of society – including ethnic minorities – where the teaching of ‘health, wealth and blessing’ is easily understandable without the need for education or religious language. From its outset in the 1980s, Hmong Christianisation was more influenced by conservative American evangelicalism which took a rather austere approach to money, emphasising the value of simplicity, savings and tithing – but more recently Pentecostalism has been gaining popularity across the northern highlands. In particular, during fieldwork I encountered a strong emphasis on prosperity theology among Hmong pastors from the ‘Christian Fellowship Church’ denomination (*Hội Thánh Liên Hữu Cơ Đốc*), some of whom had met and forged partnerships with Pentecostal missionaries from South Korea.

The Pentecostal affirmation of an ‘enchanted worldview’ (Miller 2007), whereby believers engage with both heavenly and demonic forces with the promise of “mastery in an uncertain world” (Marshall 2009: 9), can be easily inscribed onto traditional Hmong worldviews of overlapping and interconnected material and spiritual dimensions (Tapp 1989). The majority

of Hmong Christians I interviewed agreed with the statement that God would bless his followers both spiritually and materially, often based on their own experiences of improving living standards since conversion. The prevailing wisdom is that this happened through mundane causal mechanisms, e.g. reduced expenditure on cigarettes, alcohol and shamans enabled saving or investing in education. With a few exceptions, most saw God's economic blessing as indirectly given through the 'wisdom' and 'understanding' they had gained since converting, and especially through learning to read and studying the Bible:

All my material possessions have been given by God, only from God's blessing do I have good health to work; God has given me everything... And God gives me understanding so that I can earn money or buy these things, so God blesses me through this – it's not like I believe in God and pray for God to give me, and He'll just drop it from the sky!

Marshall (2009) sees the logic of Prosperity teaching – whereby believers are encouraged to 'bet' on God's faithfulness to reward bigger offerings – as cultivating an attitude of risk-taking which converges with participation in a risky global economy. A key element in Pentecostal subjectivisation is "a shift from seeing oneself as a victim to seeing oneself as a victor" (Freeman 2012b: 12). This is particularly pertinent in contexts such as Vietnam's highlands where, due to Kinh chauvinism, economic inequality and assimilatory policies undermining traditional culture, minority groups are characterised by low self-confidence and self-respect (Jamieson et al. 1998). Furthermore, Tapp notes that the traditional Hmong worldview is "rooted in a deep pessimism about the human condition in which the inevitability of death and the prevalence of sickness figure prominently" (1989: 92). Hmong Christians and non-Christians expressed shared concerns about their extremely disadvantaged socio-economic position and doubts about the prospects of their children to 'move up' in the world.

In addition, those more exposed to Kinh culture and life outside the village would criticise their fellow Hmong comrades for being too risk-averse regarding business and investment. In focus groups with Hmong students in Hanoi, where the ‘low intellectual standards’ (*dân trí*) of the Hmong – in comparison to the Kinh majority or even other ethnic minorities – was a commonly accepted notion. Another low-level Hmong cadre who married a Kinh man compared her fiancé’s mindset – “if you want to earn money, you must borrow money to invest in this thing” – in stark contrast to the pessimistic Hmong who are afraid of business failure, “so they don’t dare investing to develop”. Of course, this fear can be partly explained by the discrimination Hmong people face doing business in a Kinh-dominated marketplace.

On the other hand, conversion testimonies often emphasised how believing in God had given them a sense of peace and assurance of God’s provision, in contrast with their former fear of ambivalent spirits, illness, future uncertainties, crop failure, human trafficking, and so on. Christians in *Bản Thác* asserted that their faith empowered them to be more entrepreneurial and take risks in livelihood decisions. This was illustrated during an interview with one of the poorest (non-Christian) households of the village, when it emerged that they had unused land which didn’t receive enough water to grow rice or maize. Upon hearing this my local (Christian) research assistant urged them to calculate first and consider growing ginger on the land, explaining the investments required and encouraging them not to be afraid of trying something new. Later, she informed me that if this household were Christian then they would have received this advice long ago at the church ‘development’ meetings, before claiming that Christians took more risks in business because they have God to put their faith in. Others had boasted that in *Bản Thác* there was inter-religious harmony, and that everyone was invited to attend the church ‘development meetings’, but in practice non-Christians felt

uncomfortable in that environment and rarely attended. Although there was no overt religious conflict in *Bản Thác*, unlike other fieldwork sites, informal lines of exclusion and inequality were still present.

The research assistant's spirit of entrepreneurialism resonates with Nanlai Cao's ethnography of Christian businessmen in Weizhou who were enthusiastic about "applying Bible principles to enterprise management" and "transforming faith to productivity" (2010: 66). At a more practical level, not just pastors but church laity gain experience organising and leading religious meetings, which can increase confidence and self-esteem (Le 2018). This certainly does not mean that the non-Christian Hmong population across Vietnam are poorer than their Christian neighbours, especially since the former are more likely to be able to access state poverty reduction assistance. Rather than attempting a detailed comparison with non-Christian village 'success stories', the focus of this article is to identify the distinctively Christian manifestations of the 'will to improve' which, as mentioned above, transcends religious boundaries.

For Christians in *Bản Thác* who have reaped the rewards of their collective communal development projects and the subsequent tourism boom, it makes a lot of sense to associate spirituality with economy. Conversely, the uncomfortable corollary to this logic is that while "True Christianity necessarily means wealth... poverty indicates personal sin, or at least a deficient faith or inadequate understanding" (Gifford 1990: 375). Over the new year holidays, pastor Vang and some other members of his congregation visited an impoverished neighbouring Hmong village for a day of 'encouragement', with three objectives: (1) to 'share their faith', (2) to advise and teach on personal/food hygiene, and (3) to give livelihoods advice. However, tensions of inequality emerged as Vang accused the poorer

neighbouring village of being ‘jealous’ of the economic success in *Bản Thác*. In his opinion, the most pressing task before economic development is to improve people’s spiritual lives, otherwise they will not receive God’s blessing. Nevertheless, it was problematic the neighbouring villagers were also Christians but remained extremely poor.

Leng, the church leader of the neighbouring village, also worries about his congregation’s residual poverty and ‘backwardness’, who have “believed in God for over twenty years but have not moved forward one inch.” Echoing the Prosperity theology narrative, Leng attributes this failure to his congregation’s ungodliness, claiming that many are nominal Christians but don’t pray or attend church, nor do they engage with government development initiatives; instead they spend all day drinking alcohol and gambling. Leng sees *Bản Thác* as a target they should aspire to but which, for now, remains tantalisingly out of reach: “they have God in their hearts so whatever they do, it becomes reality... they listen to God’s word, and follow God’s word, only then are they blessed. So whatever they do is better off.” Thus, Prosperity theology becomes disempowering when spiritual explanations of the economic inequality serve to obscure the education, networks, external patrons, communal discipline and geographical factors which contributed to *Bản Thác* success. This also fits with a wider ‘moral turn’ whereby development in South East Asia is framed as “dependent on the moral qualities of individuals, families and communities rather than a matter of redressing structural conditions and power relations” (Derks and Nguyen 2020: 2).

## **Conclusion**

Everyday life is messy, full of ambiguities, surprises and inconsistencies; it resists simple categorisations or clear cause-effect explanations. This article has documented the

complicated and sometimes contradictory aspirations for modernity, perceived means to development and religious techniques of self-fashioning within Hmong Christianisation. Rigg notes that the “ends of development are rarely disputed by the subjects of development, however poor they might be” (Rigg 2016: 225). Christianity does not challenge the ‘will to improve’ – on the contrary, it reinforces notions of progress which complement both Vietnamese state developmentalism and the capitalist growth paradigm. The *Bản Thác* success story is a rather exceptional case of economic growth, but given the reality that most Hmong communities sit at the bottom of Vietnam’s ethnic and economic hierarchies with little hope of ‘catching up’ with the majority, this endless ‘will to improve’ may be disempowering on a macro level, to which Christianity provides no counter-narrative.

From their perspective at the bottom of the Vietnamese market economy, Hmong interviewees articulated a fourfold understanding of the means to development as material assets, diligence, connections and calculativity. Ngô (2016) writes that the Hmong “were painfully and acutely aware of the socioeconomic and political forces that were beyond their control. And... conversion to Protestantism was their way of achieving some control, however slippery, over their own lives” (2016: 103). Recall Cua’s claim in the opening vignette that while poor Hmong have few chances for social interaction and thus don’t know how to change, poor Christians can listen to the word of God preached by the pastor instead, which will be equally beneficial. Here Cua is arguing that religious self-cultivation – learning to read, practical application of Biblical proverbs, gaining experience leading and organising religious activities, and advice from business-consultant-pastors – can improve diligence and calculativity, replacing mainstream education or social connections as means to development. This is somewhat similar to Wong’s (2013) examination of ‘religious capital’ among Chinese migrants in Hong Kong, although he concludes that such religious capital is not evenly

distributed and only enables the poor to ‘get by’ rather than ‘get on’, since “the fundamental reasons for poverty are not addressed” (2013: 176).

Perhaps the clearest example of Christian neoliberal subjectification was the translation of religious faith into a willingness to engage in risky business ventures. The uneasy dynamics of ‘competitive communalism’ found in *Bản Thác* lend support the claim that “the capitalist transformations that have reshaped our world do not always end in a narrowed, ‘neoliberal’ self-interest” (Hefner 2017: 282) – but as more villagers trying to enter the homestay industry, the spectre of increased competition threatens to undermine the village unity and cooperation which contributed to *Bản Thác*’s success. Nonetheless, Hmong Christian actors should not be labelled as ‘surrogates of the state’; rather, they resonate more with Marshall’s view of Pentecostalism as a “challenge to the postcolonial state, not only indicting its failure to bring about ‘development,’ but proposing an alternate mode for achieving it” (2009: 125). From the state’s perspective, tensions appear between promoting self-development and not letting the Hmong stray too far from the Communist Party’s sphere of influence.

According to Freeman (2012b), Max Weber’s main point was that “in order for a new economic system... to be taken up by people, there had to be shift in their values and subjectivity in order to motivate new behaviours and to make the new economic system seem moral” (Freeman 2012b: 20), and Pentecostalism may be doing just that for neoliberalism in the developing world. The majority of Christians I interviewed attested that such self-fashioning has contributed positively towards their aspirations for progress, and indeed it appears to equip Hmong people for marketisation, although incorporation into the bottom of an unequal capitalist economy simultaneously opens up communities to new possibilities of exploitation and oppression.

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