

# Local Exchanges and Marketplace Trade of Water Buffalo in Upland Vietnam (Lao Cai Province)

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**Abstract:** Historically, throughout many parts of northern upland Vietnam, water buffalo have been a vital resource for rural citizens, especially for small holder rice agriculturalists. In the case of ethnic minority H'mông farm households, water buffalo are their most highly treasured, essential asset. Buffalo serve multiple functions within their household economy, as well as maintaining an important role as ritual animals, markers of identity, and symbols of wealth and prestige. In this paper, I explore different approaches that H'mông residents of Lào Cai province use to access and circulate these precious livestock. These transactions are embedded in numerous social, cultural and official institutions that set the guidelines by which trade is conducted, whether in the context of community-based or more 'impersonal' marketplace trade. Moreover, H'mông residents' ability to maintain access to buffalo through a diversity of approaches and options provides an important contribution to upland livelihood security. As water buffalo are among the most expensive purchases that H'mông households must make, localized approaches in particular assume a crucial function for the sustainability of upland livelihoods and in mitigating vulnerability.

**Key words:** Water buffalo, H'mông, livestock markets, livestock trade, livelihoods, upland Vietnam, ethnic minorities.

## 1. Introduction

For thousands of semi-subsistence H'mông households living in mountainous Vietnam, water buffalo are one of their most important assets.<sup>(1)</sup> Therefore, upland residents must carefully consider the benefits and disadvantages of the different methods that exist for exchanging or trading these treasured animals. Indeed, a number of social, cultural and official institutions influence how water buffalo transactions are conducted, whether in the context of community-based or more impersonal marketplace trade (cf. Alexander, 1992). In some trade contexts, certain approaches

reduce vulnerabilities and add to livelihood sustainability, while in others they bring financial rewards but may add risk and complications.

To explore these decisions, I discuss the

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<sup>(1)</sup> This paper stems from a chapter of my PhD thesis in geography on upland marketplace development and trade livelihoods of H'mông residents in Lào Cai province. Fieldwork for the dissertation involved over 18 months of ethnographic research, including 45 semi-structured and conversational interviews with H'mông, Yao, Kinh, Tai and Chinese water buffalo traders and household buyers in upland hamlets and markets in Lào Cai, Lai Châu, Hà Giang provinces in Vietnam as well as in Ma Guan district, Yunnan, China. All names are pseudonyms.

significance of water buffalo to H'mông livelihoods in Lào Cai province, focusing on the importance to households of having different ways of accessing and trading these animals. Water buffalo serve many important functions within the household economy as sacrificial animals, and as symbols of wealth and prestige. I then examine two different approaches of buffalo exchange and the social actors and trade networks involved. Access to these networks can vary for H'mông individuals and households depending on methods of regulation, processes of inclusion and exclusion and the impacts of water buffalo vulnerability. Concerns over livestock fitness, adaptability and extreme weather events create new flows of supply and demand, yet the critical place of buffalo in H'mông livelihoods remains quite stable.

## **2. Water buffalo and H'mông livelihoods**

Over half of Vietnam's water buffalo population are in the northern mountainous region, where environmental conditions are ideal for them (Đỗ Kim Tuyên and Nguyễn Văn Lý, 2001; Lào Cai DARD, 2011). In 2010, water buffalo constituted 79 per cent of Lào Cai, province's total population of large livestock (Lào Cai DARD, 2011).

In mountainous areas like Lào Cai where terraced farming is practiced, water buffalo are important to H'mông households for their farming activities, especially as mechanized plows are often found to be poorly suited for steep, narrow rice terrace plots. Buffalo are unique livelihood assets because they act as or contribute to physical, natural, financial, social and cultural capital

(Chantalakhana, 2001; Iqbal et al. 2009).

As sources of fresh and dried meat, buffalo also have an important role in food security and nutrition. However, H'mông farmers in Vietnam have not tended to raise buffalo specifically for consumption. Aside from ritual sacrifice, slaughtering water buffalo for food tends to happen only once the animal can no longer work because of age or injury (Đỗ Kim Tuyên and Nguyễn Văn Lý, 2001; Berthouly, 2008). Other material uses include buffalo hides and the horns are used to make knife handles, musical instruments, and for the traditional health practice of 'cupping' to relieve pain (Hồng Thao, 1995). Water buffalo will also consume the by-products of farm production such as rice stalks which are otherwise unusable waste. Their dung can be used as cooking fuel and biogas, while the manure enhances soil fertility (Berthouly, 2008; Chantalakhana, 2001; Iqbal et al. 2009; FAO, 2002).

Water buffalo are also mobile and commutable sources of wealth, savings and insurance, and rural H'mông farmers in mountainous areas often consider them as their most prized livestock possessions. Due to their high monetary value and long life spans, water buffalo help households build long-term income security. In 2012, according to H'mông farmers in Lào Cai province, the standard price for an adult working buffalo ranged between VND 18-20 million. These animals can supply farm labor until around the age of eleven and their worth grows as they mature and breed, with females able to bear young until

around 18 years of age (Berthouly, 2008; Đỗ Kim Tuyên and Nguyễn Văn Lý, 2001).

The number and health of the buffalo in a H'mông household is a key marker of prosperity. According to H'mông residents, a household is considered well off if it has three or more buffalo and poor if it has none (MRDP, 1999; Bonnin, 2012). Households also describe a reluctance to sell their buffalo if they can avoid it.

Nevertheless, H'mông households consider water buffalo an important economic safety net. In times of need or crisis, the animals can be sold to generate immediate cash or used to guarantee a loan. The sale of a buffalo is a common way to cover medical costs when a family member falls seriously ill. They can also be used as payment for customary fines within H'mông society (adultery for instance) and are donated by sons for sacrifice at the funerals of their parents. H'mông households may also sell a buffalo to fund a wedding ceremony, or for a groom and his parents to acquire the large sum of money and items exchanged as the bride wealth. Clearly, the contributions of water buffalo to H'mông livelihoods and ways of life are extensive and diverse.

The importance of water buffalo<sup>(2)</sup> is also apparent through their place in H'mông lifecycle ceremonies, especially funerals, where the sacrificed animal accompanies and guides the deceased on their journey to the underworld (Tapp 1989; Symonds 1991). As with a number of other ethnic minority societies in mountainous parts of Southeast Asia, ritualized funeral feasts are important events in a H'mông household's lifecycle (Hayden, 2009). French military

reports dating back to the late 1800s reveal the continuity of this practice in mountainous Vietnam, where water buffalo have long been preferred for these ceremonies (CAOM GGI 66105, Phong Thổ, 1898; EFEO ME 364, Lao Chảy, 1903).

These practices are important to the continuance of H'mông lineage and identity as well as household wellbeing and prosperity. During a funeral ceremony, the way the slaughtered buffalo is divided and the meat is distributed is important to the continuity of cultural identity through the symbolic re-enactment of H'mông kinship structure (Tapp, 1989). By meeting these obligations, a household demonstrates its status and prestige, solidifies its social networks and contributes to the food security of the community through the redistribution of meat (cf. Hayden 1998, 2009).

The cultural significance of water buffalo extends their value and meaning beyond being simply a physical or financial resource. This overview of the role of water buffalo within H'mông economy, society and culture in the region, thus sets the groundwork for an examination of the different approaches to buffalo exchange and trade. In the following analysis, it will become clear that the many roles and meanings of buffalo are embedded and expressed within these transactions.

### **3. Exchange approaches for water buffalo**

In Lào Cai province, H'mông households

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<sup>(2)</sup> Cattle are used for funeral rituals in areas where the agro-ecological environment does not support extensive terrace wet rice cultivation.

describe various approaches for acquiring or trading water buffalo. In the following sections, I compare two of these methods, each of which has its own different benefits, opportunities, downsides and risks. The first involves household-based trade and exchange within a hamlet or between neighbor hamlets. The second entails trade at periodic livestock marketplaces. The former involves localized networks of kin and community, while the latter can involve local, regional and even upland-lowland or cross-border trade networks.

### ***3.1. Hamlet-based trade and exchange***

H'mông, Yao and other minority individuals from Lào Cai province, describe that the most common way for people to obtain water buffalo for household use is from other households within their own or a neighboring hamlet. This approach is seen as the most flexible method. These locally-based transactions often involve strong social networks and sanctions that ensure trust, cooperation and reciprocal obligation, minimizing risk and profiteering (cf. Scott, 1976). Such collective moral understandings of how transactions should be conducted are significant given the animals' high monetary value.

Permanent or long-term buffalo exchanges within hamlets include barter, cash exchange or loans, as well as shorter-term arrangements or seasonal sharing between kin and neighbors. Localized trade occurs via social networks and by word of mouth. An individual in need of an animal will first ask their own kin, then others in their hamlet and then, if they have no luck, they

will try neighboring hamlets to see if one is available for sale. Though, as one male H'mông farmer Long, explained, with this approach it can often take a long time to find a buffalo.

Nevertheless, a big benefit of this localized approach is that payment is frequently flexible. Buyers can normally arrange a 'casual' payment schedule with sellers; very relevant given that water buffalo are the most expensive purchases a household must make. H'mông residents explain how it is possible to pay for a portion of the full amount in cash immediately – sometimes as little as half of the total – with the rest to follow at a later time.

In addition, if a household is faced with the sudden expense of a funeral and hastily needs to obtain a buffalo but is unable to cover the full cost, it may be possible to negotiate an exchange with another household. In this case, a buffalo is bartered in return for a similarly high-valued resource, like terraced rice land. Of course, for less well-off households, a loss of paddy land may affect food security or farm production, perhaps for many years. Still, the option for reciprocal exchange within the community is important for enabling poorer or unprepared H'mông households to meet spiritual and cultural obligations.

Localized methods of exchange also entail informal mechanisms for settling disputes. For instance, when a buffalo is bought locally from another H'mông person, it is customary to take the animal home for a 'trial period', to ensure that it is healthy and capable of work. In these cases,

the buyer only has to pay between half to three quarters of the total agreed amount up-front. If after the assessment the buyer finds that the buffalo is acceptable, then the rest of the settled price is paid. Then again, if the buyer feels that the buffalo is satisfactory but still not as good as was promised – for instance, it is found to be a ‘slow’ buffalo – they can renegotiate a lower price. However, if the buffalo is observed to be unfit for work or sick, the buyer can return it to the seller, losing a small percentage of the original cost, usually around VND 1 million in 2009.

Although the buyer is expected to take some financial loss, they are still able to return the animal and recoup most of their investment. At the same time, returning an animal signals to the community that the potential buyer is making a serious claim against the seller’s buffalo. That seller will therefore be unable to promote that specific buffalo to anyone else in the hamlet – and very likely, neighboring hamlets as well. Long, the H’mông man introduced earlier, clarified this is “because this buffalo is now bad luck, and you can never sell it anymore. Everyone now knows this and it is no good for you.” The seller’s future ability to trade animals or conduct other business may also be affected if they have earned a reputation for trying to sell a poor quality animal. Being dishonorable in a community-level deal can have significant financial and social repercussions. Clearly, these localized transactions are embedded in a moral economy that affords security to both buyers and sellers, preventing either from acting out of self-interest and taking

advantage of – or substantially profiting from – the other.

Localized exchanges are also very important for H’mông households who must cope with hardship and crisis. While H’mông residents of the mountainous region depend greatly on their water buffalo, this precious household resource can be lost through accident or illness, causing unexpected challenges. In recent years, abnormally cold winters have resulted in wide-scale buffalo mortalities from exposure. For example, according to Lào Cai officials, between January and February 2008, over 8,000 buffalo perished in this province alone. In 2010, another spell of abnormally cold winter temperatures resulted in more than 12,000 buffalo deaths in the province (LCPC and DARD, 2011). These calamities have led to shortage in the number of mature buffalo in Lào Cai. With this drop in numbers, prices have risen accordingly. In 2007, H’mông informants stated that the cost for a top quality buffalo that is “large, strong, healthy and fit for work”, was between VND 8 and 10 million. After the cold winter of 2007-2008, this had jumped to between VND 12 and 15 million. While this new price level remained fairly constant through 2009 and 2010, by 2011 a number of informants from Sa Pa district reported another hike in prices, in response to the harsh 2010 winter, between VND 18 and 20 million, remaining at this figure in 2012.

In Sa Pa district, Lào Cai province, the wide-reaching losses of buffalo due to harsh winters have affected almost every H’mông farmer spoken with during 2008 - 2012. These impacts include the loss of

productive labor and a saleable asset as well as reduced security for dealing with future eventualities. In particular, many households who previously owned just one or two buffalo are now in a difficult position, without an animal for plowing. Household members now draw upon kinship, clan or hamlet-based social networks and other reciprocal arrangements in order to try to meet their farm production needs. These social support mechanisms are of course not new, and the usage of water buffalo has often extended beyond an individual household unit to the wider kin-group. For example, during the plowing season, buffalo are commonly shared amongst married brothers and sisters, exchanges of help and hospitality based on open-ended mutuality.

Yet, during times of crisis such methods of mutual assistance often assume a far more critical role (cf. Ellis, 2000). Since the harsh winter of 2008, some households have made agreements to plow another's fields or plant their rice in return for the loan of a buffalo. Some arrange to barter an equivalent value of harvested rice in return for a period of buffalo labor, which many prefer to a cash-based rental. The ability for H'mông communities to gather together resources and cope with the buffalo crises caused by extreme weather events has greatly depended upon these local social networks.

In sum, the hamlet-based approach for exchanging or purchasing water buffalo, which affords access through community-level and kinship based social networks, trusted partners, shared cultural identity, common language and largely non-monetized dealings, is a highly flexible and fairly safe

way for H'mông to procure or sell an animal. Forms of payment are accommodating and added costs of transport and time attending markets are avoided. Also, by placing the pressure on sellers to ask for a fair price and be trustworthy, a protective guarantee exists in the form of reputation within the community. This approach aids H'mông farmers who rely intensely on buffalo and need a healthy and reliable animal to meet their livelihood needs. Moreover, local systems appear resilient for their capacity to adapt in times of crisis, such as during community buffalo shortages. In contrast, the second method of buffalo trade that I will discuss – transactions in periodic livestock marketplaces – brings with it even greater risks for participants – unless one wants to sell of course – but also greater opportunities. Here, access to information, knowledge and social networks become critical resources

### ***3.2. Upland buffalo marketplaces***

Livestock markets, some of which may have originated at stopping points along ancient trade routes, have likely existed in the mountainous region for centuries (Choquart, 1928). These days, they exist either as specialized livestock markets or as a livestock section attached to a larger periodic marketplace. Particularly since 2000, the Vietnam government has built or renovated many buffalo and cattle markets in mountainous areas to encourage animal husbandry and livestock trade for poverty reduction (CPV, 2006; National Agricultural Extension Centre, 2009).

In Lào Cai province, specialized markets with large numbers of water buffalo are

operational to the west of the Red River<sup>(3)</sup>. These upland markets are characterized by a diverse array of social actors across multiple ethnic groups dwelling in the neighborhood. First, there are those involved in household-level trade, generally people from nearby hamlets who either need to purchase a buffalo or have brought one to the market to sell. Second, there are localized, commercial traders, who tend to operate between two different marketplaces, making the most of the differences between these in terms of offer, demand and prices. Third, there are multi-market commercial traders, who cover larger distances and use a number of marketplaces and hamlets to source their animals as well as cross-border and upland-lowland market trade.<sup>(4)</sup>

The buffalo market is set in a large, flat, sometimes enclosed area adjoining the marketplace. During the market session, groups – the vast majority being men – gather around a given buffalo they are interested in, with prospective buyers carefully looking over and fondling the buffalo, checking its teeth, legs, hair, horn shape, neck size, hoof spread, eyes and tail in order to assess its physical condition, hardiness and character. When a deal is reached, the circle of potential buyers and interested onlookers quickly disperses, with the buyer departing the area shortly afterwards with the buffalo in tow, either heading for home or to have the animal and the sale registered.

#### *Household trade at the market*

For ethnic minority households residing in close proximity to a marketplace with buffalo trade, deciding to buy there instead

of within the hamlet is a possible option when nothing else has worked. H'mông farmers contend that purchasing buffalo in a marketplace is more precarious than localized trade, involving greater – and even inter-ethnic – anonymity, especially for an infrequent household buyer, with participants arriving from a wide range of villages. Moreover, marketplace transactions are fixed in time and space. Traders are not always local and the origins of the buffalo being sold are unknown.

Given the uncertain environment, access to knowledge is a key resource that actors must draw upon in order to trade in buffalo marketplaces. Being expert evaluators of a buffalo's physical condition is vital, as buyers need to make quick decisions with little time to make appraisals. Traders arrive around 7:00 or 8:00 on the morning of the market and by early afternoon most trading is completed, although not all sellers end up trading their buffalo with many returning

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<sup>(3)</sup> Here, the largest buffalo markets are Cán Cấu and Bắc Hà. Cán Cấu is presently the larger of the two in terms of number of traders and animals for sale, handling an average of 200-300 buffalos per week. The buffalo market in Cán Cấu, built in 1996 according to officials, first began on a very small scale, oriented primarily towards household-level local trade. It has since expanded to include a large number of commercial traders, and forms an important node in the cross-border buffalo trade with Yunnan, China. Approximately 100 buffalo are sold at this market each week, with annual trade estimated at 5,000 buffalo.

<sup>(4)</sup> In this paper, I concentrate on ethnic minority, specifically H'mông, engagement in buffalo trading, while I also recognize that a large buffalo meat trade is also driven by groups of, mainly Kinh, long distance wholesale meat traders who supply lowland markets with buffalo sourced from upland livestock marketplaces and villages.

for additional market sessions before they seal a successful deal.

Therefore, marketplace buyers must be experienced at gauging a buffalo's fitness and health and calculating its current market value in order to make a profitable sale. Tou, a H'mông man from Sa Pa, discussed how purchasing an animal from outside of the community is risky; one-time sales mean that long-term social networks do not need to be preserved and buyers have little time to observe the animal and make sure that it is fit. In Tou's opinion,

*I think it's important to never leave your own village to buy a buffalo. If you do, there's no way to know whether, after bringing the buffalo back to your village, it will get sick, or if the animal cannot settle to the different conditions in your village. And then you will have lost all of your money!*

Tou's comments raise the important concern, shared by many, as to how a non-local buffalo will respond to a new habitat. Several farmers explained that a buffalo is best adapted to and familiar with the particular conditions of its original area. A recurrent apprehension about the long-distance trading of buffalo is therefore the sensitivity of these animals to new environments, and whether a 'foreign' animal might not be able to adjust.

Nevertheless, things are not entirely unpromising for buyers. H'mông informants repeatedly stated that the big advantage marketplace trade is that it offers a far greater selection of animals. When purchasing in one's own hamlet, a buyer usually has very limited options, as it is unlikely that

many households will have a buffalo for sale just when the buyer needs it. So, if an individual requires a buffalo right away and cannot wait until one meeting their criteria is available locally, they must either settle for whatever animal is on offer at that time or else visit the market. According to Vang, a 26 year old H'mông trader in Cán Cầu market, Vietnam:

*When you buy a buffalo from your own home village, you will only have around two animals to choose from. Whether you like it or not, you don't have much choice there. A lot of people here like to come to the market because they are able to choose from a lot of different buffalo. There's far more selection here.*

The multitude of animals available for sale each week at the markets, as well as weaker moral obligations between buyer and seller, mean that competing and bargaining over prices becomes easier. Chi, a H'mông woman from Sa Pa district, suggests that because H'mông who live in places with buffalo markets have long been exposed to this type of trade, they tend to be more practiced at it:

*Here, we don't have a livestock marketplace, so we go to H'mông families and choose our buffalo from the village. We buy buffalo that are living in our own village already. In [places where] H'mông have buffalo markets etc. because of that, they know how to make that type of business. So, more of the people from those areas will say "we are going to the market." They are used to that kind of trade.*

*Commercial traders*

Most of the exchanges that take place in



buffalo markets are business transactions of a professional nature rather than household-oriented. Professional or commercial traders aim for a quick turnover, purchasing buffalo that they hope to be able to sell again within a short timeframe. The majority of these buffalo traders are H'mông, Nùng, Tày and Yao men who are regularly involved in livestock trade as a part-time livelihood strategy. These traders sell to other buffalo traders or to household-level buyers. Some operate at a very small scale, moving two to three animals at a given time, usually focusing on trade between two marketplaces. For instance, Tuan, a Nùng man, buys animals in Xín Chéng market and on Saturdays walks them 16 km from his home in Si Ma Cai to the Cán Cầu buffalo market. Due to their narrow geographical trade scope, this group sometimes lacks the official permissions and contacts that allow for longer-distance trade.

#### *Multi-market commercial traders*

Multi-market buffalo traders with more extensive trade networks make up the third group of actors involved at marketplaces. Their trade activities involve sourcing from and selling to a range of marketplaces and hamlets, sometimes reaching across the border to Yunnan or to the lowlands. These traders operate on a larger scale, often having several buffalo to trade at a time. They usually have greater financial capital and the largest traders may even hire trucks to transport buffalo. Some H'mông informants describe their work as a 'family trade'. Involved in the business for many years, they explain that their fathers passed on their trade knowledge, skills and contacts to

them. Vang, one H'mông such trader, also describes it as a "fashionable" way for young H'mông men to earn money. In particular, he sees the trade as exciting because of the travel it presents.

Given the high levels of risk and uncertainty for both buyers (as to the unknown characteristics of the animal they may purchase) and sellers (as to the possibility of not finding any buyer that day), traders may adopt a variety of mechanisms in order to create confidence and trust. One of the main risks of buying livestock in a marketplace is ending up with a buffalo that is sick or falls ill. Vang explained that purchasers try to reduce this likelihood by sourcing only from market traders with whom they have developed long-term connections, or traders who have been recommended to them.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This important household livelihood asset is traded through numerous networks sustained by specific social, cultural and official institutions. Water buffalo fulfill a vital role for H'mông households to meet livelihood objectives, store wealth and status, and reduce household vulnerability in times of need. Maintaining access to buffalo through different approaches and options is an important resource for upland livelihood security and sustainability.

Local or hamlet-based exchanges are the most common, reliable and deemed the most culturally appropriate means for Lào Cai's H'mông residents to access buffalo on a small scale, also being the approach which most H'mông farmers use. The local social and cultural norms and rules embedded

within this trade approach benefit individual households as well as the wider community. This is the most flexible method for H'mông households who require a buffalo for everyday use, with accommodating payment arrangements, the possibility of a refund and 'fair' trade in terms of price and animal reliability. Also, in times of difficulty or crisis, H'mông individuals adapt their exchange approaches to permit kin and community members to meet farm production and food security imperatives. These localized approaches assume a crucial function for the sustainability of upland livelihoods and in mitigating vulnerability.

Alternately, buffalo marketplaces contain a mix of social actors, types of trade and extensive commodity networks. Individuals buying or selling for their household, petty traders, larger-scale dealers as well as cross-border and upland-lowland traders all congregate in these periodic trading spaces. For upland households, markets present the greatest variety of buffalo options and offer better potential for bargaining. Yet the quick turnover rate of animals, their unknown origins and the greater level of anonymity between market participants makes this a highly risky form of trade for small farming households. While dedicated traders must also juggle these risks, they can often be economically worth it.

Specific elements of access critically shape the nature of different approaches to livestock trade and exchange upland Lào Cai. Access to the benefits of social capital and mutual-assistance networks facilitate H'mông hamlet-level trade, yet remain largely the exclusive domain of community

members, excluding outsiders in favor of kin and locals. Beyond the village, access to knowledge regarding buffalo health and information on current prices are rarer, yet essential resources. Traders in marketplaces can exploit a lack of such knowledge to exact a higher profit, with risk directly passed on to the buyer. Kinship, intra- and inter-village level operations based on trust rather than pure business logic, leave no written traces and enter into the larger flow of barter and favors. These operations occupy an ongoing position in the customary exchange system and are by far the preferred ways to acquire buffalo for H'mông farmers – highly significant as water buffalo are among the most expensive purchases that H'mông households must make - and are approaches that should be given greater attention in relation to upland socio-economic development.

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