

Participation of Ethnic Groups in Activities in Border Markets

Tạ Thị Tâm*

Received on 28 May 2024. Revised on 16 July 2024. Accepted on 24 July 2024.

Abstract: The study shows that the development of Vietnam-China border markets since the early 1990s has turned the remote border area into a dynamic socio-economic region following the implementation of various investment policies, especially market improvement and developing policies by the Vietnamese government. Increased livelihood-related activities have been generated for the local ethnic people with the development of the border market. Ethnic groups actively exchange and trade goods in this border social space. The border market has become a place for ethnic groups from inside and outside the locality to gather and trade, creating a vibrant, bustling economy and culture. For the region's ethnic groups, income generated from market activities is an important financial source supplementing the livelihoods of many households. Since inception, the local economy has improved, the poverty level has decreased, and infrastructure has been upgraded. The findings demonstrate the need for more place-sensitive policies on market development and management in the border areas in general and in the Vietnam-China border area in particular.

Keywords: Border markets, livelihood, Vietnam-China, borderlands.

Subject classification: Anthropology.

1. Introduction

The Vietnam-China border area is 1,449.566km long; it is home to 383.914km of rivers and streams, 31 districts and two cities in seven provinces bordering China. These include the Northeast with four provinces (Hà Giang, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Quảng Ninh) and the Northwest region with three provinces (Lào Cai, Lai Châu,

* Institute of Anthropology, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Email: tathitam2021@gmail.com

and Điện Biên) (Vũ Dương Ninh, 2010: 12). This is a strategically important area for Vietnam's politics, economy, national defense and security, as well as the country's ecological environment. Hence, this area has always been of interest to the Vietnamese government since very early on in history. Inhabiting this region are the Kinh ethnic and 24 ethnic minority groups (Vương Xuân Tình, 2014: 59) with a population of 4,111,228. Ethnic groups with large populations include the Tày (1,626,392 people) in the Northeast and the Thái (1,550,423 people) in the Northwest. Meanwhile, 12 ethnic minority groups (Zhuang, Han, Dai, Buyi, Miao, Yao, Yi, Hani, Lahu, Kelao, Jing and Hui) have lived in southern China for a long time, maintaining kinship relationships with ethnic minorities on the border with Vietnam (Vương Xuân Tình, 2014: 56). The main livelihood activity of the ethnic minorities in the Vietnam-China border area is farming combined with animal husbandry, trade, and services.

Up to now, the Vietnam-China border area is characterized by a rather dense market system, with nearly 200 large and small scale markets, in cities, towns, commune centers and inter-communes in the region (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022: 73).

These markets not only are places where local residents can exchange, buy and sell their goods, but they also attract traders and amass goods from other Vietnamese localities and China, to create diversification in the Vietnam-China border markets (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022; Bonnin, 2014; Lý Hành Sơn, 2014; Tạ Thị Tâm, 2013; Bùi Xuân Đỉnh & Nguyễn Ngọc Thanh, 2013). They also serve as the cultural and social center of ethnic groups in the region (Trần Hữu Sơn, 2004; Hoàng Nam, 2003; Phan Thị Đém, 2002; Lê Đức Hùng, 2000). The development of the market system in the border area has affected the socio-economic activities of the ethnic minorities living here.

While a significant amount of research pays attention to the new dynamics of the borderland and border marketplaces (Kirsten, 2015; Bonnin, 2011; Trần Hữu Sơn, 2014; Tạ Thị Tâm, 2018, 2022), and the livelihood transformation of associated ethnic minorities (Trần Hồng Hạnh, 2018; Turner & Michaud, 2016), no study has yet examined whether or not the new development of the border market benefits the local ethnic minorities. In this project, the author would like to see evidence that the actual role of border markets improves the livelihood of the local ethnic people, and whether they have benefited from border market development policies or if they have become marginalized.

This paper aims to explore the role of border markets in improving the livelihoods of local ethnic minorities in the Vietnam-China borderlands. To pursue this goal, the key research areas to be investigated are: (1) the work and participation of local ethnic people in the supply chain of goods and activities in the

marketplace; (2) the benefit received and costs incurred by local people from market activities and the development of border markets during the past two decades; (3) ethnic social/cultural factors enabling local ethnic minorities to become more dynamic and intensify their cross-border contacts, overcome market competition, and their own marginalized status; (4) noting which market model (traditional or modern) brings more benefits to local people as well as the actual role of border markets in improving the livelihoods of the local ethnic minorities.

2. Material and methods

The field study was conducted in three markets: Đồng Văn (Đồng Văn district, Hà Giang province), Cán Cẩu (Si Ma Cai district, Lào Cai province), Lộc Bình (Lộc Bình district, Lạng Sơn province), Móng Cái (Quảng Ninh province). These are three specific case studies from 200 markets along the Vietnam-China border area that support arguments relating to the role border markets play in improving the livelihoods of the area's ethnic minorities.

The author applied the following specific research methods:

In-depth interviews (using pseudo-names of the respondents in order to protect their identity) are an important and effective method. After observing and becoming acquainted with the study site in the first fieldwork session, during subsequent studies the author conducted 120 in-depth interviews with pre-prepared targeted and focused questions across three groups: (1) market traders; (2) households with members conducting business in the markets; and (3) local officials (market managers and local government). In each market the author chose 40 respondents selected by criteria such as gender, age, industry, and so on to ensure a balance of information. Interviews included open-ended questions about the respondents themselves, their socio-economic situation, their livelihoods, standard of living, and their jobs in the marketplace.

Focus group discussions were held with respondents of the three groups mentioned above. Three group discussions were held with five respondents in each study site, totaling 120 respondents in 24 group discussions across three markets. Discussion focused on three topics: (1) the activities and participation of ethnic groups in the commodity chain in the market; (2) the role of the market in the economy; and (3) the cultural and social organization of ethnic groups.

Attendance observations were made relating to market activities and the lives of residents. Reports and statistics from local departments were also an important statistical source.

3. Participation of ethnic groups in activities in border markets

3.1. Type of commodities traded at the border markets

Commodities traded at Đồng Văn market are plentiful and diversified, ranged across 11 main categories, most notably agricultural and forestry products, clothing, food, and livestock. The commodity structure at Cán Cấu market is mainly concentrated on agricultural, forestry and native products. Since 2010, the structure of the industry has changed. With the increased supply of livestock products due to high demand from China, buffalo merchants from regional and national markets have switched from trading at Trà Lĩnh market (Cao Bằng province) to Cán Cấu market where buffalo is now the most important commodity. The major products traded at Lộc Bình market are seeds, seedlings, and native agricultural and forestry products. This trend is not only influenced by the geographical location and farming conditions of the Tày and Nùng people in Lạng Sơn province, but also by the agricultural development of land on the Chinese side across the border. In all three markets, diverse agricultural, forestry and native products are traded, many are local specialties. These are produced by local residents, for family sustenance as well as ensuring a supply of goods for local residents, and this also limits dependence on the Chinese market. However, sellers of agro-forestry native products in Đồng Văn and Lộc Bình markets are being marginalized, often having to sell along roadways and sidewalks, while in Cán Cấu market, traders have long been interested in the market development process since re-establishment.

Food products: are popular goods, creating the characteristics of each market. At Đồng Văn and Cán Cấu markets, typical dishes/food associated with the H'mông culture include *thắng cố* (cooked with horse meat and horse offal), *mèn mén* (corned rice), bean soup, black chicken noodle soup, *lợn bản* (pigs raised by local people in the villages), five-colored sticky rice, corn wine, and so on. These are displayed and sold at fixed market stalls. Some traditional cakes of the Tày and Nùng people are also sold at the Đồng Văn market gate. In Lộc Bình market, the most prominent food area are rows of roasted pork and duck with *clausena indica* leaves, *khâu nhục* (pork belly marinated with spices and steamed until tender), fried duck noodles, sour noodles, black rice, *bánh chưng đen* (cake made from ingredients such as sticky rice, pork, green beans and charcoal ash from forest trees), *bánh ngải cứu* (mugwort cake), and so on. There are many such stalls on market days and year-end fairs. In this group, sellers are mainly local people who rent the market stalls according to the market session, and they have to pay the rental fee of seats and market tickets.

Garments: Each market has its own characteristics. In Đồng Văn market, there are 40 stalls selling H'mông brocade and traditional costumes, and 10 stalls selling Kinh clothing and footwear. At Cán Cấu market, there are 320 stalls selling H'mông

dresses, brocade and traditional costumes, and seven selling Kinh clothing. In Lộc Bình market there were 45 stalls selling clothes and costumes of the Kinh people, and 17 stalls selling traditional costumes of the Tày and Nùng people in 2020 (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

The origin of goods in the markets

Results of research carried out at the markets show that homemade products account for 31% of the total number of goods, the majority of which are mainly native agricultural and forestry products. At Đồng Văn and Cán Cấu markets, many local specialties are also sold such as upland rice, honey, tamarind, locally grown wild vegetables, and fruit, as well as products grown/produced by ethnic minorities. These products serve the needs of households and are sold at the market sessions. Each session has from 700 to 800 traders selling local agricultural and forestry products in 2020 (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

As previously mentioned, buffalo is the most common commodity traded at Đồng Văn and Cán Cấu markets. This livestock comes from three main sources: (1) those owned by the local people (in communes, districts, provinces). The H'mông mainly raise and graze them according to tradition. There is also a form of “trading” buffalo, i.e. buying skinny buffaloes from the market to fatten up, and young buffaloes (*calves*) aged several months to a year old; (2) buffaloes brought by merchants from northern provinces; and (3) buffaloes imported by merchants from Laos, Cambodia, and other countries. However, in Đồng Văn market, buffaloes are mainly raised by local ethnic groups and bought and sold in the market.

Agricultural tools, including plowshares, hoes, knives, sickles, etc., are sold at the market by seven commune-based production establishments. In addition, 30% of agricultural tools are imported from China, the most common types being knives and hoes. The results of in-depth interviews with buyers at the market showed that residents prefer locally produced agricultural tools, as quality is better than those from China. However, locally produced goods are VND 5,000 to VND 10,000 more expensive.

Consumer goods such as salt, sauces, instant noodles, spices, and so on, are sold by the Kinh people who come from lowland provinces such as Thổ Tang town, Vĩnh Tường district, Vĩnh Phúc province, and even from Hanoi as La Phù, Hoài Đức district. In addition, some H'mông in Đồng Văn and Cán Cấu markets import these commodities from China. In the past, local residents mainly bought goods originating in China; however, since 2010, the push for Vietnamese people to buy Vietnamese-produced goods has influenced the perception of the local ethnic groups. Residents have switched to buying salt, sauce, spices, and instant noodles produced in Vietnam, while the demand for Chinese products has gradually reduced. Nowadays, it is just Chinese soy sauce that is popular.

Seasonal fruits grown locally and domestically account for 30 to 35-40% of products sold at the market; however, 55-60% of the products are made in China with nice-looking designs and low prices, which compete with local goods (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Commodity nature of product lines

Cattle and poultry

Livestock and poultry make up a very diverse group; notably, H'mông black chicken is a rare breed of the highest quality in Vietnam. It is suited to the climate and the grazing method used by the H'mông people. The chickens are raised mostly in Lũng Sui and Sán Chải communes (Si Ma Cai district, Lào Cai province). In addition to serving the needs of the family, these chickens can sell for VND 180,000 to VND 200,000 per kg. Only a few dozen are sold at each Cán Cầu market session as ingredients in *phở* and onward trading to merchants in the plains (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2023).

Meanwhile, chickens, ducks, and geese sold at Lộc Bình market have particular features such as small legs and firm yellow sweet meat; they are mainly sold to regular customers around town; Chinese chickens (also called “phoenix feather” chicken) imported illegally from China in large quantities (200 to 300 chickens per session) are mixed up with locally sourced chicken, making it difficult for customers to differentiate between breeds. At Lộc Bình market, it is common for people in the district around the Chi Ma border gate (Lạng Sơn province) to buy “phoenix feather” chickens at a cheap price of VND 50,000 to 60,000 per kg (the price can be even lower at certain times), and then sell them on at lowland markets. In addition, capons are also sold at Lộc Bình market. These are a very special item sold at the end of the year market. They are three to four times bigger than standard chickens; the meat is tender and sweet, with a lot of fat; the thick crispy skin turns an attractive glowing yellow color after boiling. This castrated rooster meat is very delicious so the local people often eat it at the Lunar New Year or give it as gifts (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

In addition, the *lợn cắp nách* (lit. “carried-under-arms pig”) sold at Cán Cầu market is a popular specialty in the border area due to its strange sweetness and aroma. In particular, buffalo in Cán Cầu market has its own particular characteristics and is quite diverse compared to buffalo in many other markets, as the livestock comes from the immediate region and many other localities throughout Vietnam.

Buffalo in Cán Cầu market are also moved by the Kinh traders from the lowlands. These animals have a smooth black coat, long legs and body, with a large stomach. According to H'mông traders, it is more difficult to “distinguish” buffaloes from the plains from those bred in the local area, as the former, although often underweight due to the small amount of meat, have a high fat content and

large bones. Moreover, as they are transported over long distances, the animals are poorly treated. At each veterinary quarantine rest stop the Kinh buffalo traders often try to increase the weight of the buffalo being sold by using a hose to pump water directly into the buffalo's stomach. This causes a lot of meat loss after slaughter, and it also affects the quality of meat. Compared to the buffalo of the local ethnic groups, those of the Kinh are weaker, often slipping on wet roads; there are also instances when buffalo fall into the Chảy river and drift downstream en-route to Vành Săng, which causes problems for the Chinese buyers. Therefore, the latter are very careful when selecting which buffalo to buy from the Kinh traders.

In addition, a large number of buffaloes are brought to Cán Cầu market from Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. These animals have a big stomach, a large long body, and long legs, high pointed horns, and a long coat, slightly black colored skin mixed with dark red. It is also difficult to evaluate or “estimate” the weight of this breed; the animals are usually underweight but have a lot of fat because they are transported long distances and are ‘cared for’ by pumping water into their stomach so that the animals look good. Consequently, they are susceptible to dying which is a huge problem for the buyers. However, this breed of buffalo is in huge demand from China, hence supply from the border provinces of Laos and Cambodia is concentrated in Cán Cầu market where 200 to 300 animals can be on sale at each market session and the figure was even higher in 2023.

Category of agricultural, forestry and native products

The section where native agricultural and forestry products are sold in Cán Cầu market stands out with its diverse fresh bright colors, and unique tastes. The locals use a very specific method of selling. Prices are fixed by bunch, bundle, thread, or piece, rather than by weight. A lot of imported seasonal fruits from China, such as apples, oranges, tangerines, pears, plums, peaches, and so on, are sold at low prices, which creates a competitive environment to the local ethnic minority native products.

At Lộc Bình market, an abundance of seasonal fresh and vibrantly colored vegetables such as kohlrabi, cabbage, and mustard greens, and fruit, are sold in high quantities, especially during the afternoons and on fair days. This market is particularly famous for sweet potatoes (with a golden color and sweet taste) and white sugarcane (with a soft, fragrant, cool, and sweet taste) - two very popular products for both the locals and visitors. In addition, at Lộc Bình market fruits such as apples, pears, oranges, tangerines, plums, and peaches from China are sold at low prices, creating competition with those locally grown.

Food stalls

Food products on sale at the market include special, unique, unusual, and popular dishes prepared by local people. At Đồng Văn market, the highlight is *mèn*

mén, *thăng cố*, baked corn cake, buckwheat cake, rolls, hump square cake, and so on. *Thăng cố* is also a popular dish sold at Cán Cầu market. This is a traditional H'mông specialty which is cooked with horsemeat and horse offal that is cleaned and marinated in characteristic spices before stewing in a large pot on the stove. Savoring *thăng cố* with corn wine is a typical delight of the H'mông people every time they go to the market. In addition, *mèn mén* is made from corn, usually a sticky or white corn, mixed with upland rice. The result is an unusual, unique, easy-to-eat dish, with a sweet, aromatic taste.

In addition, other H'mông dishes include sweet, fragrant, soft black chicken noodle soup, and “carried-under-arms pork” soup with rice noodle cake. This is an indispensable dish, cooked with salted kale and chili, that creates its unique aftertaste. Meanwhile, bean soup is made from ground beans cooked with kohlrabi to create a cool, sweet soup eaten with *mèn mén* or white rice. In addition, five-colored sticky rice is cooked using upland sticky rice colored with natural forest products such as turmeric and rosewood, and various leaves and foliage.

Local dishes sold at Lộc Bình market, also have their own special appeal, particularly roasted duck and roasted pork with sweet crispy skin, or the duck noodle dish, ribs, char siu, etc.

3.2. Ethnic minority people at border markets

3.2.1. Ethnic groups at border markets

In researching the markets, the ethnic picture is full and varied. The market is a place that attracts a lot of local participation from the surrounding areas, the lowlands, and China.

Results from the Đồng Văn market survey show that the market's ethnic composition is made up of the following groups: H'mông - 45%, Tày - 21%, Nùng - 9%, Kinh - 2%, Giáy - 5%, Dao - 4%, and others - 14 %. Of the gender split 38% are male and 62% are female; 65% of respondents said that their main occupation is in agriculture, 35% are engaged in professional and semi-professional work combined with hired labor. Of the respondents 88% said that their main job is selling goods at the market, 3% go to the market to buy goods, 4% deliver products, 2% are involved in money exchange, 2% transport goods, and 1% are sales staff. Before they engaged in market trade, 63% were farmers, 6% were laborers, 1% were civil servants, 7% were students, 6% were traders, while 17% were hired labor. In terms of education, 13% of respondents had completed high school, 37% finished secondary school, 31% finished primary school, while 19% were illiterate (Survey results from Đồng Văn market in 2019) (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Statistically, 46% of permanent traders sell goods only at Đồng Văn market, while 2% trade at other district markets, and the rest 52% sell at Đồng Văn market and other commune markets in the region. Since 2012, when the new Đồng Văn market opened, 74% of respondents sold goods at permanent areas (of which 37% are Kinh, the rest are H'mông, Giáy, Tày, and Nùng), 14% sell at temporary stalls, 4% sell in market areas, 1% sell outside the market gates, while 7% trade in old Đồng Văn markets (Survey results from Đồng Văn market in 2019) (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Đồng Văn ancient market is located adjacent to the clay walled houses with *yin-yang* tile roofs, which have been renovated and converted into homes of the Tày ethnic people and restaurants. Since 2010, Đồng Văn ancient market has mainly been frequented by tourists, and its activities are carried out by the H'mông, Tày, Nùng, Giáy, Dao, and Kinh. There are 47 souvenir stalls, of which 32 are rented from the market's Management Board by the Kinh who hire H'mông, Giáy, Tày, and Nùng people to sell the goods, while the remaining 15 stalls are run by the Giáy people who sell products such as hats, towels, and pillows (Survey results from Đồng Văn market in 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

In Cán Cấu market 90% of traders are the H'mông totaling 2,645 people from 480 households in Cán Cấu commune. The other traders are the Nùng (4%), Giáy (1%), Dao (1%), and others (4%). In terms of male-female ratio 52% are male and 48% female. Regarding educational attainment, 9% of respondents have a high school education, 30% finished secondary school, 49% completed primary school, while 12% are illiterate (Survey results from Cán Cấu market in 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Interviewees at the market said that 48% of their main occupations are trade-related, 47% are in agriculture combined with trade, and 2% are civil servants, the rest work in transportation and services. Before taking part in the market activities, 77% used to be farmers, 1% were laborers, 1% were civil servants, 11% were students, 5% were traders, 3% were hired labor, while 2% had other employment. Regarding the participation of ethnic minorities in the market, 93% of respondents said they go to the market to sell goods, while 7% go there to buy (Survey results from Cán Cấu market in 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

At Cán Cấu market 95% of traders also sell goods at other markets in the district including the central district market. In terms of market stall location, only 1% of goods are sold at the permanent location in the market, 24% is sold at temporary stalls, 29% is sold freely in market areas, 24% is sold freely outside the market gate, and 22% is peddled outside the market (Survey results from Cán Cấu market survey, 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Regarding the demographics at Lộc Bình market, 43% are Tày, 42% are Nùng, the Kinh account for 10%, and 5% are other ethnicities, while the male-female ratio is 91% female and 9% male. In terms of education, 20% of respondents have an upper secondary school education, 28% finished lower secondary school, 37% finished primary school, while 15% are illiterate. Respondents at the market said that 2% of their main occupations were in the civil service, 2% work in enterprises, 13% in agriculture combined with trade, 72% in trade and services, 9% are seasonal workers, and 2% work in transport and as “motorbike taxis” drivers. Before trading at the market 49% were farmers, 13% were laborers, 7% were civil servants, 13% were students, 12% were traders, while 1% had other employment. At the market 92% of the traders also sell at other markets in the district (Survey results at Lộc Bình market, 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Of the small-scale traders who took part in the market survey, 90% of their main jobs are selling goods and 10% are buying. Regarding places of sale, 35% sell goods at fixed stalls, 50% sell freely in market areas, 2% sell freely at market gates, 2% are street vendors near markets, while 11% participate differently. Most of the people who sell clothes or run food stalls have helpers, who may be their spouses or relatives, or hired help (Survey results at Lộc Bình market, 2019), (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

Regarding when they started trading at the market, up to 95% of the respondents said that they had got involved from around 1991.

Since the *Đổi mới* (renovation), especially since 1990, trading at border markets has expanded and become stronger. With better travel/transport options and tourism development, since 2000 trading and exchange activities at Đồng Văn market have expanded and attracted the participation of many ethnic groups. Since 2010 Cán Cấu market has also attracted the participation of a large number of ethnic groups, especially focused on cattle trading between Vietnamese H’mông and Chinese traders. Due to the market’s development, and the changing market and policy system for importing cattle at the border gates from China, Cán Cấu market has become the largest cattle trading center in North Vietnam. Meanwhile, since 1991, residents have strengthened their trading activities at Lộc Bình market, maintaining stability up to the present time (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022: 70).

3.2.2. Professional traders

+ Đồng Văn market:

The professional market traders deal with products such as fabric, clothing, footwear, groceries, household goods, agricultural tools, and electronics. In terms of demographics the H’mông, Tày, Nùng, Giáy, and Kinh people are engaged in

daily sales and large-scale trade. In particular, the Kinh participate in the upland market network as commodity regulators. They are major traders, taking decisions on the exchange of goods in the market.

The professional fabric and clothing vendors are those who sell from permanent stalls, which have an area of 12m² per counter. There are 40 H'mông women selling fabric and garment material at Đồng Văn market as well as at other markets in the region. Among them, 30 are young aged 15 to 35 years old, who specialize in fabric sales and are good seamstresses. They sell their products at Đồng Văn market on Sundays as well as at other markets in Đồng Văn and neighboring districts such as Ma Lé, Lũng Cú, Xà Phìn, Phó Bảng, Phó Cáo, Lũng Phìn, and Phìn Lung. They sell from fixed stalls at Đồng Văn market paying a monthly rent of about VND 160,000; each counter is fixed at a value of VND 100 million to VND 130 million. At other markets in the region, they rent space for VND 20,000 to VND 30,000 per session (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022: 81).

The fabrics they sell are lace, brocade and apparel items. The fabric is sold by the roll and by weight. Đồng Văn market customers often buy material in bulk weighing from 100 to 150 kg or per roll for onward retail sale at markets such as Sà Phìn, Lũng Phìn, and Phó Bảng. The sale price of 1kg of lace fabric is VND 150,000, the purchase price is VND 125,000 per kg, and brocade is sold at VND 110,000 per m². At each session fabric is sold to a few dozen customers who buy anything from a few tens of meters to a whole roll. At each market the fabric vendors make a profit of VND 1 million to 2 million, which can rise to VND 3 million over the Tết holiday. In particular, the further the vendors go to sell at more distant markets, the more is sold and at higher prices. Therefore, the amount of profit earned also increases. In addition to selling fabric at Lũng Cú, Đồng Văn market, the young people go to Du Già, Du Tiến and Bạch Đích communes in Yên Minh district, and Minh Tân commune in Vị Xuyên district (Hà Giang province).

Ten H'mông women, aged between 40 and 60 years old, sell at only one session per week at Đồng Văn market. They sell fabrics, skirts and shirts, towels, and aprons of the H'mông ethnic. When they were younger they used to sell at the regional markets, but now, having got older, they stay closer to home only selling at Đồng Văn market. Although selling at only at one session a week on Sundays, they sell a lot of products as they have many regular customers from neighboring districts and communes in the district. They import large quantities of goods from markets in Ninh Hiệp commune, Gia Lâm district and those in Thường Tín district, Hanoi, as well as from Hanoi's Đồng Xuân market, making a profit of VND 2 to 3 million per session. In addition, because they know their customers well and have many longtime business friends, they even sell from their homes on weekdays. Five H'mông women are in this group and as they also have shops on the street they can sell more groceries on weekdays and sell fabric from their homes.

In addition to the H'mông women who sell fabric at Đồng Văn market there are also 10 Kinh households selling clothes and shoes every day. Originally from Thổ Tang town, Vĩnh Tường district, Vĩnh Phúc province, they moved to Đồng Văn in 1985 and a scattering arrived in the years 1993-1994, 2014, and 2015, of whom two were Kinh households. Living in Đồng Văn for about 25 years, each household has three adjacent stalls in the market where they sell clothes, shoes, elastic bands, buttons for clothes, etc. The total value of the items on each stall is VND 1 billion to 2 billion. They sell mainly to residents in the district as well as some owners in other markets in the commune. At the main market on Sundays, these Kinh owners need to hire three to four people to sell in order to deal with the large number of 200 to 250 customers. Sales total VND 25 million to VND 30 million per market session. Before Sundays, the stall owners sell by themselves. The goods are brought from Thổ Tang and Ninh Hiệp markets. The other seven Kinh owners have one to two stalls at the market, and goods worth VND 1 billion to 1.5 billion. They trade from lowland markets to sell permanently at Đồng Văn market and some sell freely in regional markets.

In the group selling electronic and telecommunications products, there are three to four Kinh households that have two to three stalls at the market. Goods are brought from the lowlands or via agents, while some are imported from China through the Phó Bảng border gate. A diverse range of products are sold, with a total value of VND 1 billion to 2 billion per household. Before Sundays the owners sell by themselves, while on Sundays they hire two to three salespeople, such as high school students from Đồng Văn district. There is a plentiful supply of domestic and Chinese produced electronic and telecommunications goods for both wholesale trade to agents in the district markets, and retail to local residents and tourists.

In the market, there are also six general stalls selling telephones, electric wires, electric bulbs, and plow excavators with the total value of goods per household from VND 2 billion to 3 billion. Each owner has three to four adjacent stalls.

They are the Kinh people from the plains who moved here in 1991. Before the Kinh group from Thổ Tang (Vĩnh Phúc), Thường Tín, Hoài Đức (Hanoi), a H'mông household sold electronics and telecommunication items but they didn't have a large stock, and products were mainly Chinese so they stopped the trading in 2010.

In addition, there are 10 market stalls that sell fruit including apples and pears, and incense every day. The traders are mainly the Tày people from Đồng Văn town and some people from other localities. They make about VND 200,000 to 300,000 per day (2023).

In particular, each Đồng Văn market session sees 10 Chinese people in Phó Bảng who come to the market to sell shoes. They each have a 12m² wide stall.

Goods are mainly imported from China and their customers are chiefly locals; the purchasing power of these stalls is less than those of the Kinh's footwear.

There are also three to four fixed stalls belonging to the Kinh people selling motorbike helmets, raincoats, and agricultural tools. Goods are in plentiful supply, with some sourced domestically while half come from China. Thus, in Đồng Văn market, although the Kinh people are low in number, they trade at high value from large-scale permanent areas in the market. In addition, some H'mông fabric traders have fixed stalls, and trade in large quantities of both wholesale and retail goods. They are participants and integrated into the development of Đồng Văn market. However, a large element of the local ethnic minorities is marginalized from the market's development; they are only able to sell goods on the sidewalks or from temporary locations, always in a precarious position for their buying and selling activities.

+ Cán Cầu market:

The professional H'mông buffalo traders in Cán Cầu are divided into three operational groups - large, medium, and small scale.

- In the *large scale group*, there are seven successful and well-respected buffalo merchants generating a value of VND 100 million to 160 million per animal with a business capital of VND 3 billion or more. They are the largest buffalo traders in the region having business relationships with three to five Chinese traders as well as with buffalo owners in Hải Phòng city, and Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An, Đắk Lắk, Đắk Nông and Lâm Đồng provinces. In addition to sourcing livestock in the region and from neighboring provinces, they also go to Điện Biên and Sơn La provinces to select fighting buffaloes as well as importing some from the Laos/Cambodia border. These traders have large capital resources; they have been trading in buffaloes for many years, highly experienced in buffalo selection, and have an extensive business network.

- The medium-scale group refers to those who specialize in buying buffaloes at markets in the region and lowlands, and selling directly to Chinese traders. They trade at a rate of 30 to 40 buffaloes per day per session, and have a business capital of VND 1.5 billion to 2 billion. There are 40 merchants of this size at Cán Cầu market. They were the first-generation buffalo traders, some of whom are young with good business sense. These traders all have vehicles of capacities of three to five tons to transport buffaloes.

- In the small-scale group are 80 people who mainly buy buffaloes at Cán Cầu market and some markets in neighboring districts, and bring them directly to Chinese traders or provide vehicle hire to large-scale merchants at the market. They have business relations with dozens of Chinese traders because they are the ones who supplement the shortage of buffaloes during the day for their Chinese

counterparts. In addition, they often buy buffaloes from the Kinh people in the lowlands for onward sale, even the weak ones, or those for fattening up before selling. Traders in this category have a total capital of VND 200 million to 300 million. Some have vehicles of carrying capacities of three to five tons for transportation, and they also hire out the vehicles to large-scale traders (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022: 89).

Apart from the professional traders above, some H'mông trade buffaloes semi-professionally, buying directly from the Kinh and ethnic minorities at Cán Cầu market for onward sale to Chinese traders or customers in the regions - "buying at one end of the market and sell at the other end". This method requires VND 100 million to 150 million in capital, suitable for many people in the region in 2023.

In addition to the H'mông who participate in buffalo trading at Cán Cầu market, there are also the Thu Lao, Giáy, Tày, and Nùng ethnic groups in the area and neighboring districts such as Bảo Thắng, Bắc Hà, Mường Khương (Lào Cai province), and Xín Mần (Hà Giang province). However, they are small scale professional merchants, with little capital and no relationship with the H'mông traders in China.

In addition, in Cán Cầu market, there are 80 to 90 Kinh traders from Hanoi, of whom 35 to 40 are professional buffalo traders from Hợp Thanh commune, Mỹ Đức district. They buy buffaloes in lowland provinces and sell to a number of slaughterhouses in Hanoi and the carcasses are brought to Cán Cầu and Trà Lĩnh market for sale. This group trades on a large scale, each trip amounts to 200 to 250 buffaloes, which are sold directly to the H'mông at Cán Cầu market (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022: 95). These are Kinh traders who often come to the Nậm Cắn market area in Kỳ Sơn district, Nghệ An province to buy buffaloes and cows transported by local people from Laos and Thailand. They have not only trading relations with the H'mông people in Cán Cầu market but also extensive relations with the H'mông people in Kỳ Sơn, as well as other ethnic groups in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. In addition, there are 40 to 45 professional buffalo traders in Nam Định, Ninh Bình, Phú Thọ, Vĩnh Phúc, Hải Dương, Hưng Yên, and Bắc Giang provinces bringing with them eight to 12 buffaloes per trip, which they sell to H'mông traders. In addition, there are 70 to 75 traders in Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Quảng Nam, and Quảng Ngãi provinces who import buffaloes from Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. These Kinh people create diversity in the trading relationships with buffalo traders at the border market, as well as excitement in livestock trading activities there.

There are 30 to 50 Chinese traders at Cán Cầu market who buy buffaloes for onward sale at the markets in Vành Sáng, Seo Pào Chư, Maguadistrict, Yunnan province, China; some of them bring the animals to inland China especially to areas with a large Muslim population.

In addition, there are 25 to 30 H'mông who trade in fruit, buying produce from markets in China, and sell at Cán Cầu market (2023).

In the area where agricultural tools, traditional herbs, and agricultural materials are sold, there are 45 to 50 H'mông merchants, five of whom sell agricultural tools produced by the H'mông themselves; most goods, however, are sourced from China (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

There are 80 traders who sell poultry breeds and seeds including ducks, chicken, geese, rice and corn, as well as vegetables from markets in Maguan, China. There are five H'mông merchants selling black pork, and village pig and 15 Kinh traders from Bắc Hà District selling pork originating from the lowlands.

+ *Lộc Bình market*

Professional traders focus on seeds, seedlings, agricultural supplies and tools, clothing, crockery and household goods, fruit, fresh food, livestock and poultry. About 400 small traders sell at the daily and main market, as well as at other markets in the region such as Na Dương, Bản Ngà, Cao Lộc, and Giếng Vuông, in Lạng Sơn province. In the group trading seeds, seedlings, and agricultural materials, there are 73 Tày and Nùng traders who import goods from Aidian market, Ningming district, and Nonghuai market, Pingxiang district, the major agricultural center of Guangxi province in China. There are 17 Tày traders who sell agricultural tools from Lũng Vài market and one fifth of the goods are brought from Đa Sỹ, Hà Đông district, Hanoi. There are 54 to 60 Tày and Nùng merchants who import products from Lũng Vài market, Tân Thanh border gate, and Hữu Nghị and Ninh Hiệp markets, Thường Tín markets in Hanoi (accounting for about one sixth of the quantity of goods). As for chinaware and household goods, seven Nùng traders, specialize in bringing goods from Đông Kinh market, Lạng Sơn city, imported from Lũng Vài market by major owners, two out of five goods come from agents trading in Song Long plastic, and ceramic dishes from Hải Dương ceramics (Hải Dương province) and Bát Tràng pottery (Hanoi). There are 37 merchants specializing in fruit products who go to Lũng Vài to buy and sell. In the fresh food group, there are 60 Kinh traders selling pork, which is usually brought from the lowland provinces. In particular, 85 professional chicken traders conduct business at Lộc Bình market and other regional markets. They often go to villages in the district to buy directly from the locals and sell at markets. Some others trade chickens from villages in the district, selling them at Chi Ma market or to customers from China, of which 25 people are from lowland areas. At the Lunar New Year, the chicken traders do very well. As well as amassing goods to send to the lowlands, they also sell to China according to orders placed. There are also 45 pig traders; in addition to buying swine from the region, half of these traders also brought seed products from lowland provinces.

Medium and small scale

At Đồng Văn market, there are 75 to 90 retailers specializing in groceries, seeds, small, and medium-sized food produce, and agricultural tools, etc. They import goods from China through the Phó Bàng border gate as well as some goods from the lowlands. Due to their small capacity and limited capital resources, the items sold at their counters are not as plentiful and diverse as the agents and professional traders. They only sell at the Sunday market and at some other markets in the area. Their monthly income is VND 5 million to 6 million per household.

In Cán Cấu market, there are 50 to 65 retailers of agricultural tools and materials, seeds, groceries, food produce, clothes, and so on. These retailers purchase their goods from major traders in the markets in surrounding areas and the city for onward sale at the main market session. According to the cycle of market meetings, in one month, retailers can participate in four sessions at Cán Cấu market. In addition, they go to other markets in the region, earning VND 4 million to 5 million per person. This source of income contributes significantly to the household economy. Ms. M., a 43-year-old H'mông lady in Cán Cấu commune, sells food at the market at four sessions per month, making a profit of VND 400,000 to 500,000 per session. In addition, she also works in the fields, raises pigs and chickens, and grows vegetables. As well as Ms. M., Mr. S. sells groceries at the market gate and he explained that his income from the grocery store is about VND 3.5 million to 5 million per month generating important additional funds for the household (Tạ Thị Tâm, 2022).

As for Lộc Bình market, the retailers focus on food and clothes. Income from trading is VND 5 million to 7 million per month per person. According to 47-year-old Mrs. H., who sells clothes at Lộc Bình market, her income ranges from VND 6 million to 7 million per month, rising to VND 9 million to 10 million when business is good.

4. Conclusion

From the above results, this study proposes some recommendations to promote the role of markets and the market system in the border areas in the sustainable socio-economic development of the Vietnam-China border area as follows:

1. The border market system plays an economic role on a macro level. It is part of normalizing the economic relationships within the region's market system as well as promoting the market's socio-economic role in border areas regarding relationships and interaction with markets in the region, inter-region, nationally, and across the border with China. Therefore, it is necessary to plan and invest in connecting markets to create a network. This is on the basis of promoting the

advantages and structure of traditional markets, combined with modern elements, to create favorable conditions for commodity, cultural and social exchange for people in border areas.

2. The network of markets in the border areas and border trade activities is the driving force for sustainable development in this area, creating a basis for consolidating the national consciousness and strengthening the maintenance of national security. Therefore, it is necessary to facilitate and support the local ethnic minorities to participate in trade activities as well as contributing to the border economy (support for capital, business locations, tax reduction and exemption for poor/near-poor households, who work at border gates and in economic zones).

3. Needed is a unified management focused on investment and training programs for border areas, avoiding overlaps and duplication which causes waste and inefficiency. This should be considered a preferred solution. In developing markets in border areas, it is necessary to improve the infrastructure and focus on the road network. This is considered vital for the development of these markets in particular and the requirement of ethnic minorities in general. Market development policies need to consider the interests of ethnic minorities and small traders who live and work in this region. At the same time, local governments need to be empowered to operate markets and adopt flexible market policies, in line with changes in neighboring China, helping localities along the Vietnam-China border control and better manage trading activities at markets in the region.

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