

Internal migration of ethnic minorities in Vietnam

IRIS Research Report for Summer 2023

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I would like to express my gratitude to the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) and the Department of Geography for awarding me a grant for my summer fieldwork. In my Ph.D. research, I want to focus on the migration of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. When I planned for my preliminary fieldwork in Vietnam, I wanted to examine the urban migration of minority peoples, focusing on the Hmong. In particular, how and why they decided to migrate to other cities and how such migration processes impact their livelihood. I took several courses about development studies in Southeast Asia in my first year of PhD at UW-Madison, which enriched my theoretical background. After consulting my professor, I decided to do the preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2023.

I went to the fields and had opportunities to talk to many people and learn from their stories. Due to the mobility of migration research, I traveled between four provinces/cities in Vietnam, including Hanoi, Hai Duong, Bac Ninh, and Yen Bai. In each place, I talked to minority migrants, residents, and local government officials. Most of the people I met with were the Hmong. Besides, I also spoke to people from other ethnic groups in Vietnam, such as the Kinh – the majority group, or the Tay – a minority group. I stayed in local people's houses and homestays, which allowed me to experience their culture and observe their daily lives. This is very important for me, as a person from a majority group, since I could learn from local minority people and listen to their stories. In Hai Duong, I met the Hmong people who migrated to the city and worked in a garment factory. They are the Hmong migrants from different provinces in the North and Central Vietnam. In Hanoi, I spent time building connections with some professors in universities in Vietnam, which was very helpful for me to prepare for the current and upcoming fieldwork in Vietnam. I also talked to the Hmong migrants in Hanoi to learn about their livelihoods. In Bac Ninh, I stayed with a Hmong friend working in a factory there. Staying with her was helpful and convenient for me to meet her Hmong friends working in the factory. In Yen Bai, I visited Suoi Bu, Suoi Giang, and Sung Do, homes of the Hmong peoples in Vietnam. I also stayed in local houses and homestays to understand their culture. These three places in Yen Bai have different socio-economic characteristics, which impact the migration decisions of local people. While people from Suoi Bu and Sung Do tend to migrate, people in Suoi Giang seem to be less mobile. I also spent time talking to people from the majority group to understand their opinions about the migration of the Hmong and other minority groups.

I really appreciated the fieldwork in Summer 2023. Talking and meeting many people broadened my horizons, giving me ideas for further research. After the fieldwork, I also think about specifying the research questions and purposes. In addition, I questioned how I could tackle the mobile features of potential research subjects.