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Title: Animal Entanglements Amid Disentangling Forces: Examining the Relationships Between Ethnic Minority Farmers and Water Buffalo in Upland Northern Vietnam

Abstract: In the rural rice fields of upland northern Vietnam, Hmong and Yao ethnic minority farmers on the ‘margins’ have been relationally entangled with a number of domesticated animal species to secure semi-subsistence livelihoods. Among these different inter-species entanglements, the relationships between farmers and water buffalo are the most varied and profound. However, in recent years, the broader, contextual factors that shape entanglements between farmers and water buffalo have been changing rapidly, provoked primarily by the increasing presence and impacts of government programs, economic transformations, and extreme weather events. Since the recent emergence of these political, economic, and environmental factors, the persistence of complex, traditional relationships between farmers and water buffalo have been consistently contested. Drawing from over 60 interviews and participant observations with Hmong and Yao farmers in Lào Cai Province, Vietnam during the summer of 2019, I analyze how the relationships between farmers and water buffalo have been changing in recent years, as well as how these changes have been pushing farmers to maneuver and adapt their lifestyles to new realities. Broadly, I find that farmers have been transforming how they use and perceive water buffalo amid changing political, economic, and environmental contexts in a number of new--albeit anticipated--ways.

Keywords: ethnic minorities; water buffalo; human-animal relationships; extreme weather events; entanglement.