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Title: Cardamom Materialities: Precipitating Marginalities and Livelihood Maneuvers

Abstract: Ethnic minority farmers in the upland Sino-Vietnamese borderlands have resided in the socio-economic, cultural, and political margins of states for centuries. However, these ‘marginal’ farmers have increasingly become assimilated into more ‘favorable’ state ideals through economic renovation policies beginning in China since 1979 and Vietnam in 1986. At the same time, black cardamom prices began rising, a commodity used in traditional medicine and the national breakfast soup, phở. Given a demand for cash due to relatively recent economic renovation policies and a lucrative market, a vast number of upland Hani, Hmong, and Yao ethnic minority households in the western Sino-Vietnamese borderlands transitioned from gathering black cardamom for household use to intensifying cultivation for trade. Black cardamom materializes the many challenges that its cultivators face: increasing governance, a changing climate, commodification, attempts to be made legible, and capitalist expansion. From the propagation, cultivation, harvest, drying, and trade of black cardamom, emerging complexities, contradictions, and contentions of this livelihood strategy have forced households to maneuver capitals and diversify their livelihood portfolios to a scale not yet seen before. In this paper, I explore the materiality of black cardamom and the maneuvers its cultivators employ to navigate the margins.

Keywords: materiality, livelihoods, NTFPs, black cardamom.