CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Lives in the Forest

The Central Highlands of Vietnam or *Tây Nguyên*, in Vietnamese, is a common name of a region of mountains and plateaus covering five provinces, administratively named Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Dak Lak, Dak Nong and Lam Dong. The Central Highlands stretches from 10°33' to 15°27' northern latitude and from 107°15' to 108°05' eastern longitude in the central region of Vietnam. At the time of the reunification of the country in 1975, this region was inhabited by a small number of ethnic peoples having resided here for thousands of years. Linguistically, they are arranged into twenty ethnic groups.[1] It is said that these ethnic peoples or, "highlanders", organized themselves into villages, which commonly included a small number of households that were related through blood and marriage. Agricultural production including rotational shifting cultivation, raising livestock, and the gathering of minor forest products were their primary subsistence livelihood strategies. In the village, the social organization, social relationships, production activities and organization of the living place were all ordered in accordance with their own cosmology, knowledge, beliefs and subsistence ethics generated from a long period of adaptation to the natural environment as well as other living conditions. For instance, the highlanders believed that there are Spirits (*Yang*) that inhabited places, such as in high mountains, watershed areas and so forth. The Ethnic peoples were not allowed to cut down trees or to farm in those areas in order to maintain the resident areas for the spirits (Dang Nghiem Van *et al.*, 1981; Vu Dinh Loi, Bui Minh Dao and Vu Thi Hong, 2000; Ngo Duc Thinh, 2002).

[1] According to various ethnological studies (e.g. Dang Nghiem Van *et al.*, 1981; Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son and Luu Hung, 2000; Phan Ngoc Chien *et al.*, 2005), ethnic groups, such as Bahnar, Xe Dang, Ko Ho, M'nong, Ma, Gie-Trieng, Brau, Koho, Ro Nam, Ma, Ro Nam and H're, who are linguistically arranged into the Mon-Khmer speaking family; and Cham, Giarai, Raglai, Ede and Chu Ru, who are linguistically arranged into the Malayo-Polynesian speaking family have inhabited in the area for two thousand years. In 1975, seventy-five percent of total population of the region was people of these indigenous groups (Nguyen Tuan Triet, 2003).

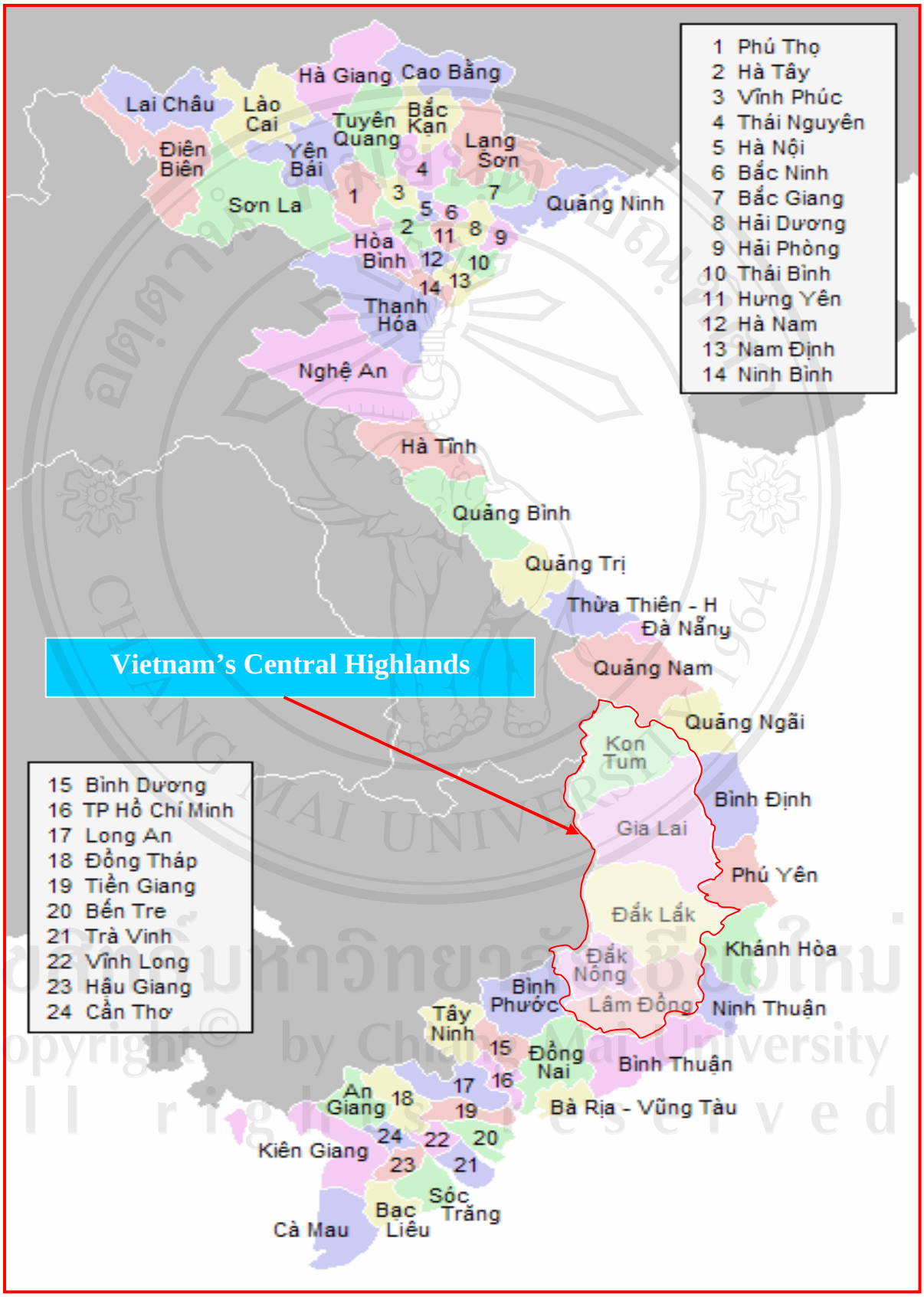
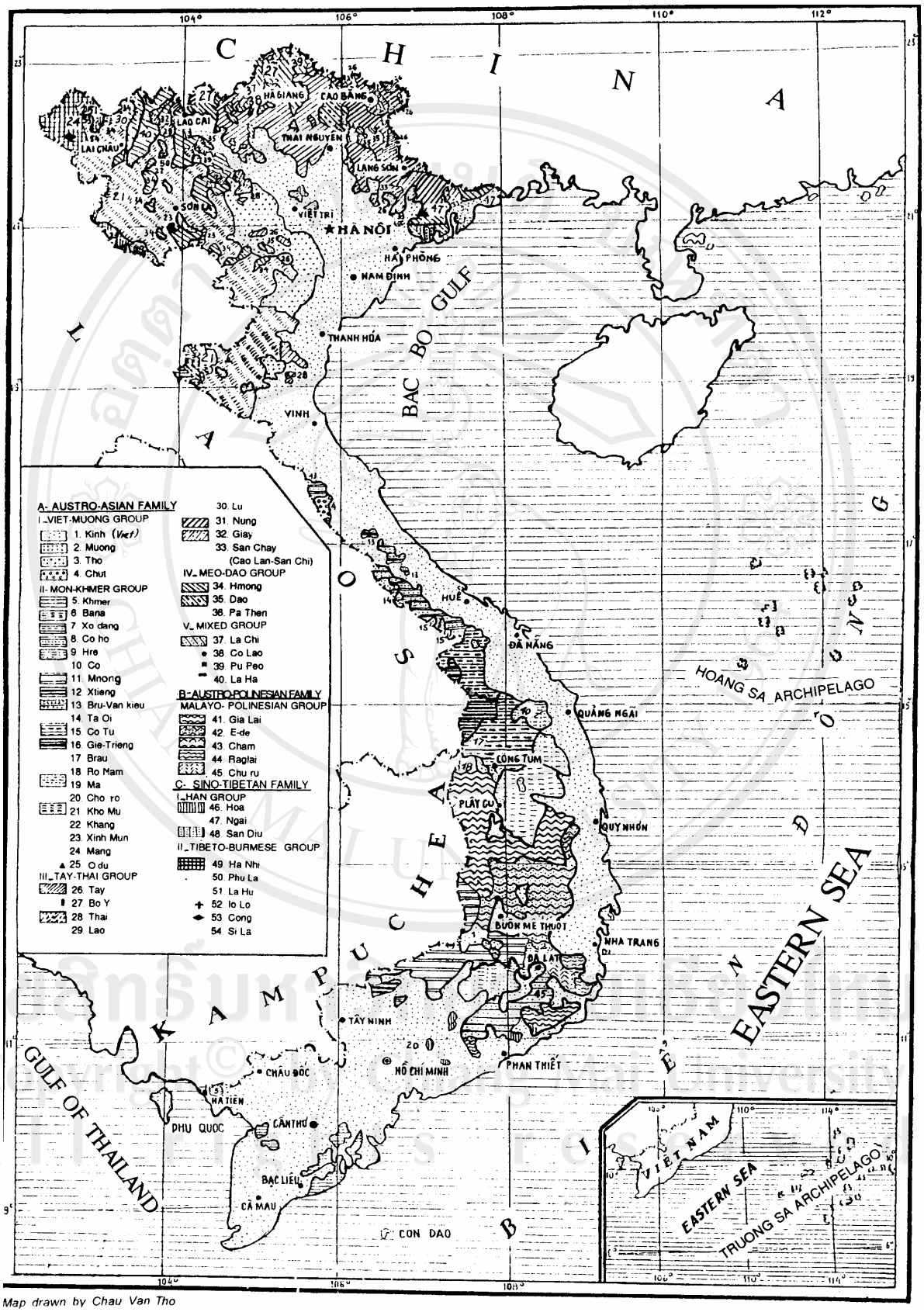


Figure 1.1 Map of Vietnam and location of the Central Highlands



Map drawn by Chau Van Tho

Figure 1.2 Ethno-Linguistical Map of Vietnam

Since the reunification of the country, the socialist state has implemented a number of development programs in the Central Highlands; which, according to the advocacy of the state, are scientifically constructed and aimed at helping ethnic peoples and their region obtain a 'higher development stage' in a short period of time. These development programs are named as follows: "Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Settlement" (*Định Canh Định Cư*) to help ethnic people obtain stable lives; "Collectivization" (*Hợp Tác Hoá*) to replace rotational shifting cultivation or 'irrational' agricultural production; "Constructing New Way of Life and New Culture" (*Xây Dựng Đời Sống Mới và Văn Hoá Mới*) to help the 'primitive people' to learn more about 'scientific knowledge' and to transform themselves into "New Socialist Men" (*Con Người Mới Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa)*. The socialist state also carried out a program called "Constructing New Economic Zone" *(Xây dựng vùng Kinh Tế Mới)* aimed at bringing lowlanders or skilled labors to the region to help ethnic minorities obtain the 'higher developmental stage' quickly. In addition, a program on "Constructing Large-Scale of Production" (*Xây Dựng Nền Sản Xuất Lớn Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa*) was implemented to make "effective utilization" of the land and forest resources in order to meet the demands of both the national society and ethnic people (Le Duan, 1976: 265).

My consideration of going to the Central Highlands during my summer holidays in 2004 was inspired by the debates concerning two mass ethnic demonstrations organized by the ethnic peoples (the first occurred in late January 2001 and the second in early April 2004) on the streets of Ban Ma Thuot, Plei Ku[1] and other remote areas of the region. According to various international media, the demonstrations were made by groups of ethnic minorities who wanted to claim their rights to ancestral land and forests, and to their autonomy in determining their existence. Meanwhile, Vietnamese authorities blamed the unrest at the Central Highlands on a group of ethnic people, who had failed to develop themselves in accordance with development process of the national society. It was said that the state had placed a high priority on the development of ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, and many development programs had been implemented to assist ethnic

[1] Buon Ma Thuot and Plei Ku are capital towns of Dak Lak and Gia Lai province.

peoples of this region. But, some ethnic people, who have failed to improve their lives because of their "backwardness" and lack of ability to learn the "new logic", staged the demonstrations against the development process for the whole region and nation.

Accompanying these blaring debates, reports sent by local authorities to the central government contended that the situation of poverty, landlessness and other social problems among the ethnic people were the main cause of ethnic unrest. These reports asserted that more than fifty percent of ethnic households in the Central Highlands, which included around 86,000 ethnic families with one half of one million people, were living under the national poverty line (the income per capital was less than 6 US$/month) with poor living conditions and lack of cultivable land (MARD, 2004).

I received this information with skepticism. I was skeptical because the reports made by local authorities provided data that denied all the 'beautiful reports' of the 'scientific developmental programs' made by the authorities themselves and the 'scientific reports' made by the Vietnamese social scientists before the incident. Importantly, it is clear that most of the ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands were living under difficulties despite the fact that they had been beneficiaries of various well-intended developmental programs. This skepticism, along with my basic anthropological knowledge taken from the few courses in Sustainable Development at RCSD - Chiang Mai University, had encouraged me to carry out an empirical investigation of the development process for ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands.

With my skepticism, I made a decision to visit *Buon Luoi*, a small and remote village of the Bahnar[2] people, where I used to stay when I was a member of a national study team working on the "*Constructing Models of Community Forest*" in parallel

[2] The name of Bahnar ethnic group is written differently among ethnologists themselves and between research papers and official documents. Bahnar was a common written name that had been used by French ethnologists, who had developed a written language for this ethnic group and by some earlier Vietnamese ethnologists. The name of this ethnic group is written in various ways in studies made by current Vietnamese social researchers. Some studies use "Ba Na" as the current official category (e.g. Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006, Dang Nghiem Van 1981); some studies use a term "Ba-na" (e.g. Dang Nghiem Van, Chu Thai Son and Luu Hung, 2000); others use a term "Bâhnar" (To Ngoc Thanh, Dang Nghiem Van, Pham Hung Thoan and Vu Thi Hoa, 1988; cited in Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006). Practically speaking, those written names are unrecognizable by this ethnic people. Many people of this ethnic group, whom I had a chance to talk to, preferred to use their name as Bahnar instead of the names used by the Vietnamese social researchers, as well as official category. For this study, therefore, I use a terms Bahnar as it is conventionally recognizable by ethnic people.

with economic development for ethnic minorities in 1994 and 1995. Buon Luoi or *Plei Luoi*, in Bahnar terms, is situated in the northeastern Vietnam's Central Highlands. This small village, like many villages of ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands, has received all kinds of development programs of the Socialist State since the country's reunification. These programs were used to describe as great efforts to develop the 'place of rich natural resources' inhabited by 'primitive people'. After thirty years under such development programs, however, Buon Luoi, as I learnt from various official documents, was "one of the poorest and least developed places of the Central Highlands as well as Vietnam" (Decision No 1232/QD-TTg, dated 24th December 1999, of the Vietnamese prime minister; cited in National Political Publisher, 2006). Based on the information, I set up my objectives for visiting Buon Luoi as a trial investigation of what development programs were brought to the small forest village and its people, and how the village and life of its people had changed after the various development programs of the socialist state were implemented.

I arrived to Buon Luoi on a day in late April 2004. Looking from the top of the hill at the head of the village, I learned that the small valley that was once occupied by one hundred Bahnar families in 1995 had now become a densely populated area. Green coffee gardens and maize fields had replaced the evergreen primary forests surrounding the village. Its sunken lands had been changed into wet-rice fields covered by the green color of growing rice. Two roads alongside the village were busy with motorbikes and heavily loaded trucks carrying goods, agricultural products and logs. The Bahnar village also had some changes in comparison with what I saw in middle of 1990s. One half of the houses in the village were made of brick roofing with red or white tiles, while some others had kept the traditional form: The frame, floor and external walls of the houses were made of hard woods, but the grass roofs had been replaced by red tiles. Looking from this vantage point, it seemed to me that the Bahnar people and their living area had undergone some modern changes.

However, my positive point of view quickly changed when I reached the village gate. In contrast to a village of new immigrants at the opposite site of the road, where people were living in beautiful houses that were full of life, the Bahnar village was very quiet. All doors of the houses along the entry road had been locked.

Picture 1.1 A view of small valley of Buon Luoi

Picture 1.2 Silent houses at Buon Luoi

According to data of the communal authorities, Buon Luoi had 109 households with 448 people. But my first observation gave me a sense that it was an empty village. I went to the center of the village without seeing anybody. The traditional communal men's house or *hnam rong*, in Bahnar's terms, located at the center of village, was closed. There was no one around the houses as I used to see in the past. It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and I decided to go to the house of the traditional village headman or *tơm plei*, which was two hundred meters to the north of *hnam rong*. The house was also locked. Wondering about the desolated village, I came back to *hnam rong* with a hope that I could find someone with whom I could ask some questions about the village and its people.

After about a half of hour of waiting, I saw some small children who came out from a coffee garden, one hundred meters in front of the *hnam rong*. I went to them and asked whether they knew where the traditional village headman and other villagers were. They looked at me, but no one said a word. I repeated my question and then one small girl answered to me that villagers had stayed in their forest cottages. I asked her if she know whether the traditional village headman would come back to his house in the village. She told me that she did not know and I had to go to his cultivation area if I wanted to meet him. I was very worried after hearing her answer but I did not leave the village. It was near nightfall when I saw a small group of villagers coming out from the same path as the group of children had come before. I went to greet and asked them about the traditional village headman. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard from an old man of the group, whom latter I learnt his name as Mr. Bat, who told me that the traditional village headman was on his way coming back to his house.

I went back to the house of the traditional village headman. I reached the gate of the house at the same time when the traditional village headman accompanied by his son, the son's wife and their two-year-old daughter arrived. They all returned from their field. I was invited into the house after some short greetings. The family of the traditional village headman had two houses. One was a traditional style house (which was built on pilings with its frame, floor and external wall were all made of hard-wood and it was roofed with titles), and another situated on the left hand side of the old house, which was made of bricks with a title roof. Under the dim light of two

small oil lamps inside the two houses, I realized that the traditional communal men's house looked almost the same as the one I saw about ten years ago. In the new house, there was an old Chinese motorbike and a small bed that was covered with a sleeping mat made of forest leaves.

Over our simple dinner that consisted of rice, natural vegetable soup and two small grilled squirrels, the headman asked his son to bring a small jar containing home-made wine for a small welcome drink as is the custom of the Bahar when they welcome a guest of honor visiting the family. After we had finished some drinks with formal greetings, I started my talk with the village headman concerning the question of why so many families in the village were living in the forests. Taking a few minutes to answer my question, the village headman told me that it was very difficult to tell me everything in a short time. However, it could be said that all villagers were faced with many difficulties in maintaining their lives. I could not understand the real meaning of his responses. I continued to ask him another question about whether the villagers could farm in the forests and come back to the village after each of working day to enjoy the better living conditions created by the state's developmental programs so that their children could come to school, or so that they could go to the health care station whenever they had an illness. What I said seemed to touch on some serious issues, as I realized that the headman sat silently and his eyes looked straight into the wine jar. After a few minutes, he answered my question as follows:

> "You know, people think that we are 'stupid' and 'backward', but before the arrival of roads, school and health care station of what you are calling development programs, we had many things: land, paddy, forest resources and buffaloes. Accompanying with the arrival of those modern things, our things have gone away. Nowadays, we will have no food without living in the forests. The modern things have not only taken away resources for livelihood, but also destroyed our tradition (*truyền thống*) and brought conflicts (*mâu thuẫn*) to every corner of the village. The more you stay in our village, the more you get to know."

What I heard from the traditional village headman promoted me to arrange my time visiting families living inside the forests. My ten-days of visiting families in the forest with the traditional village headman had given me a chance to learn that half of the families in Buon Luoi were permanently living in different places in the forests, locally called Dam Xim, Dam Lo Nhon, Dam Chon Plong and Dam Suoi Tra, about 4

to 8 km away from their main village following path roads. Dam Sim was the most crowded place with 25 families, the following was Dam Lo Nhon with 12 families, and the others, Dam Chon Plong and Dam Suoi Tra were consisted of 15 and 8 families respectively. All of these families were living in small huts made of small logs, bamboo and thatch. Their furniture consisted of simple leaf mats for sleeping beds, and they used some small aluminum pots for cooking their meals. During the daytime, these people went to their cultivated fields scattered in the surrounding forests and came back to their huts in the evenings only. The livelihood strategies for subsistence of these families basically depended on farming in a small-scale and gathering of minor forest products from the surrounding forests. Maize, upland rice and cassava were high priority crops of the families. Upland rice and cassava were used for self-consumption, while maize was used to exchange for rice from the Kinh people, who had migrated to this area within the last twenty years. The shortage of food was a common problem of these families. Illness and diseases was a regular occurrence among family members. As I witnessed, four members of a family (a

Picture 1.3 The huts of villagers of Buon Luoi in the forest

husband, his wife and their two little sons) had had serious fever for a month without any treatment. The wife and two children spent their days sitting by the fire. Even in his illness, the husband had to go to the forest to collect some minor products (wild honey, rattan and etc.) that were exchanged for some rice with the Kinh traders in order to maintain the family's survival. At the same time, most of the families in the village were living under threats of a large debt to the Kinh people that had been accumulated from borrowing for agricultural plantation or for buying rice to eat between crops. If the families could not repay their debts on time, the Kinh lenders would take over their cultivated lands.

Besides the poor living conditions, there were a number of shocking actions that, according to the villagers, manifested in tremendous changes in the lives of the villagers. These shocking actions included family conflicts and two suicides, of one 22-year-old man and another of an 18-year-old girl, which I will give more details below as examples of the current situation in the forest village.

The suicide of the 22-year-old man happened in the family of Bok Gut in the year 2001. Bok Gut had four buffaloes, and he decided to use one buffalo for a sacrificial ceremony to be given to his late father for the customary reason that Bok Gut could not look after his father in the past. However, his eldest son did not agree with his decision. From the point of view of the son, it would be a "stupid ceremony" because a buffalo was very expensive (interviewed with Mr. Gut, 20th May 2004). The son reasoned that Bok Gut could use a small pig in order to save some money to buy a motorbike. However, Bok Gut did not accept this suggestion. The son was furious at his father's decision. On the day of the sacrificial ceremony, the son attacked Bok Gut with a sharp knife. Fortunately, some of his relatives and the neighbors attending the ceremony intercepted the "crazy action" by the son. After he was released, he used a sharp knife to stab his heart, and he died shortly afterwards.

The second suicide was committed by an eighteen-year-old daughter of one of the poorest families, H'Lung family, occurred in early 2003. According to H'Lung and his wife, the family had made an agreement on a joint investment of a coffee plantation with a Kinh family in early 2000. The H'Lung family contributed 1.2 ha of their cultivation land for the coffee plantation. The Kinh family contributed 1,000 seedlings of coffee and some chemical fertilizers. One year after the planting, the

Kinh family asked H'Lung's family to divide the planted area into two uneven portions, of which 60% of the planted area would belong to the Kinh, and the remaining 40% would belong to the H'Lung family. The H'Lung family did not agree with the Kinh's division. The H'Lung family wanted 50% of the coffee plantation area, but the Kinh family did not accept this option. In an attempt to claim his land, H'Lung had cut down some coffee trees in the area that the Kinh wanted to take over. When the Kinh family learned about the incident, the husband of this family came and beat up H'Lung badly. He then sold the entire coffee plantation to another person without giving any money to H'Lung's family.

As a solution for dealing with their loss of land and food shortage after losing cultivation land, the H'Lung family had allowed their seventeen-year-old daughter, Ha, to marry with an eighteen-year-old boy of a neighboring village. The teenage girl went to live with family of her husband after the wedding ceremony. H'Lung's wife related the story: "As she was a teenage bride, Ha did not know how to serve her husband's family well as a mature married woman, but instead of teaching the teenager how to live in their family, her husband and his family treated her badly". Ha's husband eventually fell in love with another girl in his village. One year after her marriage, Ha returned to her family and asked her parents whether she could divorce her husband. The H'Lung family did not allow Ha to do so because they did not have a pig and money to compensate her husband's family for the divorce. Ha was disappointed with her married life and committed suicide three months later in the forest nearby her husband's house.

Practically speaking, the problem of the Bahnar in Buon Luoi is not uncommon in the Central Highlands today. Vietnamese social scientists, after the first demonstration of ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands, had paid great attention to examining the status of ethnic peoples, and they brought out many stories relating to the problems of ethnic peoples. According to these social scientists, however, such kinds of problems are the results of "backwardness", "primitiveness" and "superstition" of people living in "out-of-the-way-places" (see for example: Truong Minh Duc, 2005; Tran Van Binh *et al.*, 2004; Nguyen Tan Dac, 2004; Phan Huu Dat, 2004; Bui Minh Dao *et al.*, 2006; Dang Nghiem Van, 1986). To illustrate, a statement

on the current status of ethnic people made by Truong Minh Duc, who has spent more than forty years studying ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands is cited below:

> "A great number of ethnic compatriots in the Central Highlands are maintaining their traditional way of living and isolating themselves from the developmental tendency and making themselves to fall back to their early history. A part of these compatriots are nomads with primitive cultivation's technique, backward life and those people are facing with many difficulties and various lacks. The others are ethnic compatriots, who have participated in Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Settlement, but they cannot adapt to new mode of production leading them to a difficult life and many of them have recently come back to nomad life in the remote area with poor living conditions, poverty lives and diseases." (Truong Minh Duc, 2005: 301)

Stories of the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi, as I have attempted to describe, are actually laying out a different explanation for the current problems and status among ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands. The stories show that the current problems and status among ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands cannot be understood without examining the development process for transforming these people and their places of living by the socialist state. Actually, the development programs of the socialist state for ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands have been based largely on scientific assumptions that the ethnic peoples are "primitive" and "backward". The primitiveness and backwardness, in the state's rhetoric, have resulted from their distance from development progress in the evolutionary ladder that the ethnic peoples have failed to achieve. Those differences will be abolished when ethnic peoples obtain a higher developmental stage. These ethnic peoples can move quickly on the evolutionary path when they have learnt more about "scientific knowledge", "new mode of thinking" and a "new way of life". Also, it is the duty and rights of the state and more advanced groups to transform those peoples and their societies in conformity with the natural order of evolution, or, to put it in another way, to higher stage of development, called socialism. Hence, government-directed programs are well-intended plans to bring "civilization" to "backwardness", "science" to "superstition", and "well-being" to those "suffering" from various lacks: lack of historical records, lack of subsistence ethics and managerial skills. Under the imposition of those development programs, ethnic people and their living areas have experienced, and are experiencing, tremendous changes. Their present-day life is very different from what it used to be thirty years ago. However, beneath this veneer of a

"progressive transformation" of the Central Highlands lies a story of hardship. The clue to the ethnic tragedy lies in this transformation. The development process, which had aimed at evolving the ethnic people, has brought more problems to them than it had ostensibly intended to resolve.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

This study is based on the current problems of the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi and anthropological theories seeking to construct another way to gain a better understanding of the problems and current situation of the ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands, while at the same time challenging the propositions made by the Vietnamese social scientists. The study is guided by three main concrete questions:

1. How have development policies and programs for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands in post-colonial Vietnam been justified and legitimized?
2. How have such kinds of policies and programs operated to lead ethnic people at the Central Highlands to a miserable livelihood that caused both live to be lost and community irretrievably disrupted?
3. How have the ethnic people maintained, adapted and changed their livelihoods when dealing with the impacts generated from the "development process" and in negotiating with the state?

Discussions guided by these questions aim at achieving the following three main objectives:

1. To reveal the source and process of justification and legitimization of development policies and programs for ethnic people in the Central Highlands in postcolonial Vietnam;
2. To provide some account for how such development programs have operated and how they irretrievably disrupted the livelihoods of ethnic people and caused lives to be lost and community disrupted;
3. To explore practices of negotiation of the ethnic people as they deal with the negative effects of development programs.

1.3 Theoretical Arguments and Conceptual Framework

Discussions in this study are situated within anthropological studies of the state-directed development processes and small-scale ethnic societies (see Ducan, 2004; Karlsson, 2000; Harrell, 1997; Howitt, Connell and Hirsch *et al.*, 1996; Li *et al.*, 1999; Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995; Salemink, 1997; and Scott, 1985). Following the theoretical framework provided by mentioned studies, my study argues that the actual purpose of development process of the Socialist State for ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands is to integrate the diverse ethnic groups with diverse cultures, knowledge, social institutions, modes of livelihood and natural resources in the highlands into national society and state's control. To attain this purpose, the socialist state has created a discourse, which defines the Central Highlands, its people, their production and their cultural practices as primitive, traditional, backward, and in need of "development". Also, it has attempted to implement various policies and programs under the rubric of development, which, to use words of Vandergeest and Peluso, "divide the territory into complex and overlapping political and economic zones, rearrange the people and resources, and create regulations delineating how and by whom these areas and resources can be used" (Vandergeest and Peluso, 1995: 387).

Besides this argument, I also maintain that ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands are not "backward" and "superstitious", a conception that has been misconceptualized by the Vietnamese social scientists and in their development discourse. Practically speaking, the ethnic peoples have their own knowledge, beliefs and subsistence ethics or their own "social space". This "social space" has played a very important role in the organization of the ethnic village, the regulation of social relationships and in the activities of the people, in the maintenance of natural resources and furthermore, in the protection of ethnic people from external forces. In other words, they are certainly not, to use Wolf's well-known phrase, "the people without history" (Wolf, 1982).

Then, I argue that the development policies and programs of the socialist state in Vietnam have not only taken away resources for the livelihood of ethnic peoples, but also brought the contented people to misery and vulnerability, and their increasingly marginalized status. Furthermore, the programs have made tremendous

impacts on their conceptions and cultural practices, which have been generated from a long life living in the struggle for subsistence and natural adaptation and which has played a very important role in the everyday life, that have led the harmonious lives of ethnic minorities into contradictory situation causing them both to lose life and to have their community irretrievably disrupted. In other words, I argue that the growing forest life and other social problems of ethnic people, such as the Bahnar in Buon Luoi, are closely linked to their growing integration into “mainstream” Vietnamese and international society. It is their immersion into the national culture and their entrapment by the tentacles of the state hegemony, which has brought about their social and economic disadvantages.

But, like other small ethnic groups all over the world, ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands of Vietnam are neither passive, nor do they accept their marginalized status created by the state and more powerful people. These ethnic peoples have employed different strategies in their everyday practices in order to negotiate with the state and people, who are trying to extract resources from them and creating domination upon them. The negotiations of the ethnic people in the Central Highlands, as I hope to bring out from my analysis, are not simply about the natural resources, but also about the power to decide how and by whom this region and its resources can be used.

The analysis for constructing the theoretical arguments is guided by the following conceptual framework:

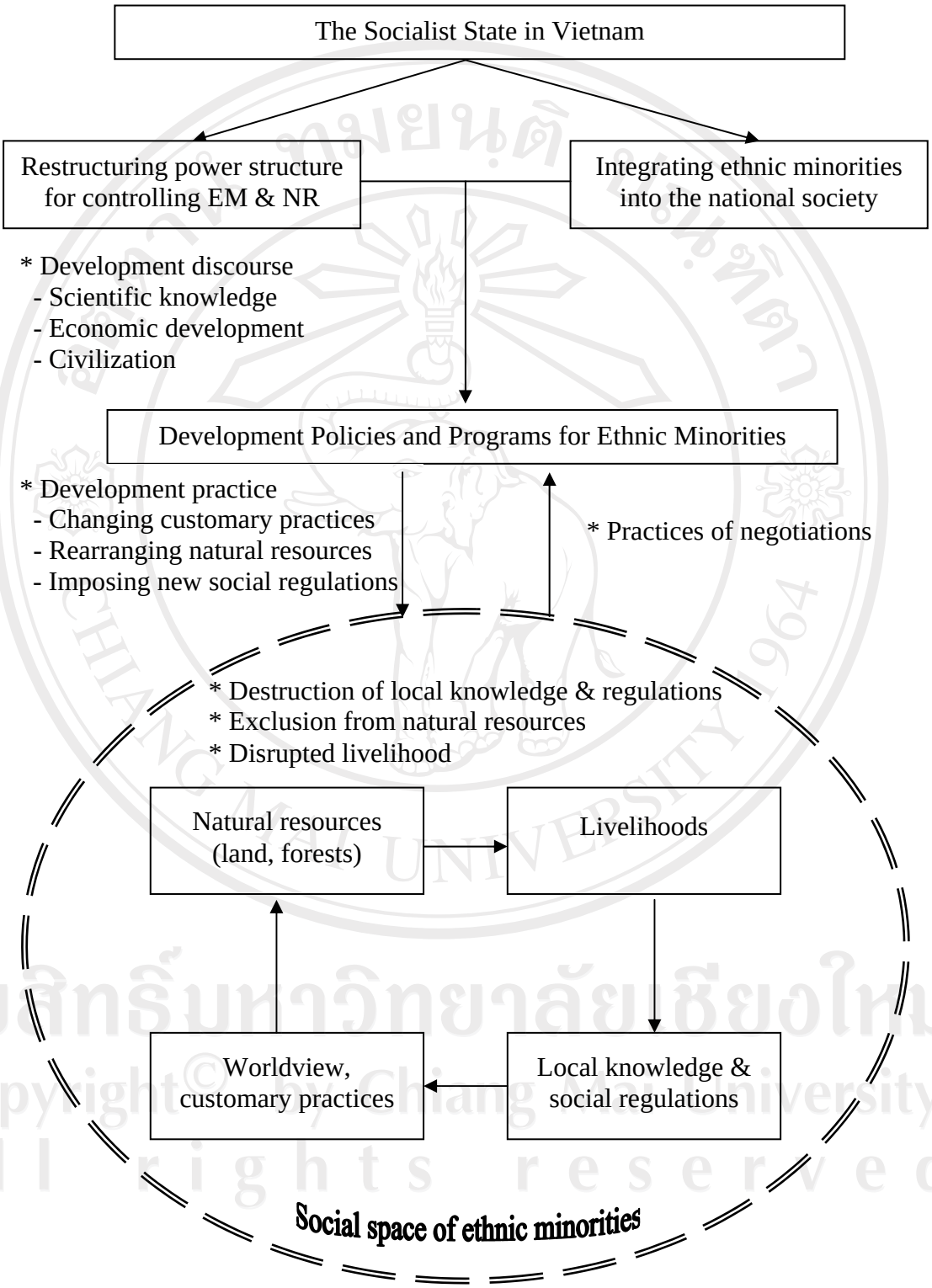


Figure 1.3 Conceptual framework

1.4 Research Methodology

This study deals with the Bahnar who are living in the northern part of the Central Highlands. My selection of the Bahnar for this study is based on two reasons:

First, the Bahnar are an ethnic people whom I have gained a good knowledge on their culture and everyday life through my work and my stay with them in the past.

Second, the Bahnar people are currently among the poorest in the Central Highlands and most of them are living under poor living conditions, despite the fact that they have lived in the area which has rich natural forests, good soil conditions for agricultural production and other high value resources, as well as the potential to become great resources for regional economic growth in particular, and national economy in general. Moreover, the poverty of these ethnic peoples is being blamed as the main cause of mass forest destruction in their homeland. Stricter policies of the state are being implemented in order to control the forest resources in the living areas of these people.

My field data were collected at Buon Luoi, a small village of the Bahnar people, which is administratively managed by the So Pai commune - K'Bang district - Gia Lai province (see more details in the maps of my research site). So Pai is a commune with a small natural area (administratively, its total natural area is 11,400 hectares, but in fact 9,785 ha or 85.83% of this natural area has been defined as state's forestland and managed by a state forest enterprise). It is composed of eight ethnic groups that include the Bahnar, Dao, Kinh, Nguon, Nung, Muong, San Chi and Tay. The commune has 1,026 households and 4,447 people including 178 Bahnar households with 811 people (see data provided in Table 1.1). The Bahnar people are living in three small villages (*thôn*/hamlet) administratively called *Thôn* 1, *Thôn* 3 and *Thôn* 4, which previously had long been called *Buon Luoi*, *Lang Cung* and *Buon Ta Kor* by the Bahnar. Moreover, in comparison with the newcomers, most of the Bahnar families are living under poor conditions, and many of them are suffering from the lack of land and other resources to maintain their survival.

Although most of villagers at Buon Luoi have been living under poverty, none of them have participated in the two mass ethnic demonstrations. From my point of view, this does not mean that the people have passively received the negative effects of the development programs. Moreover, ethnic people should have survival strategies

to deal with their situation. In other words, my study about this village can provide a better understanding on how ethnic people can cope with the negative effects of development policies and programs.

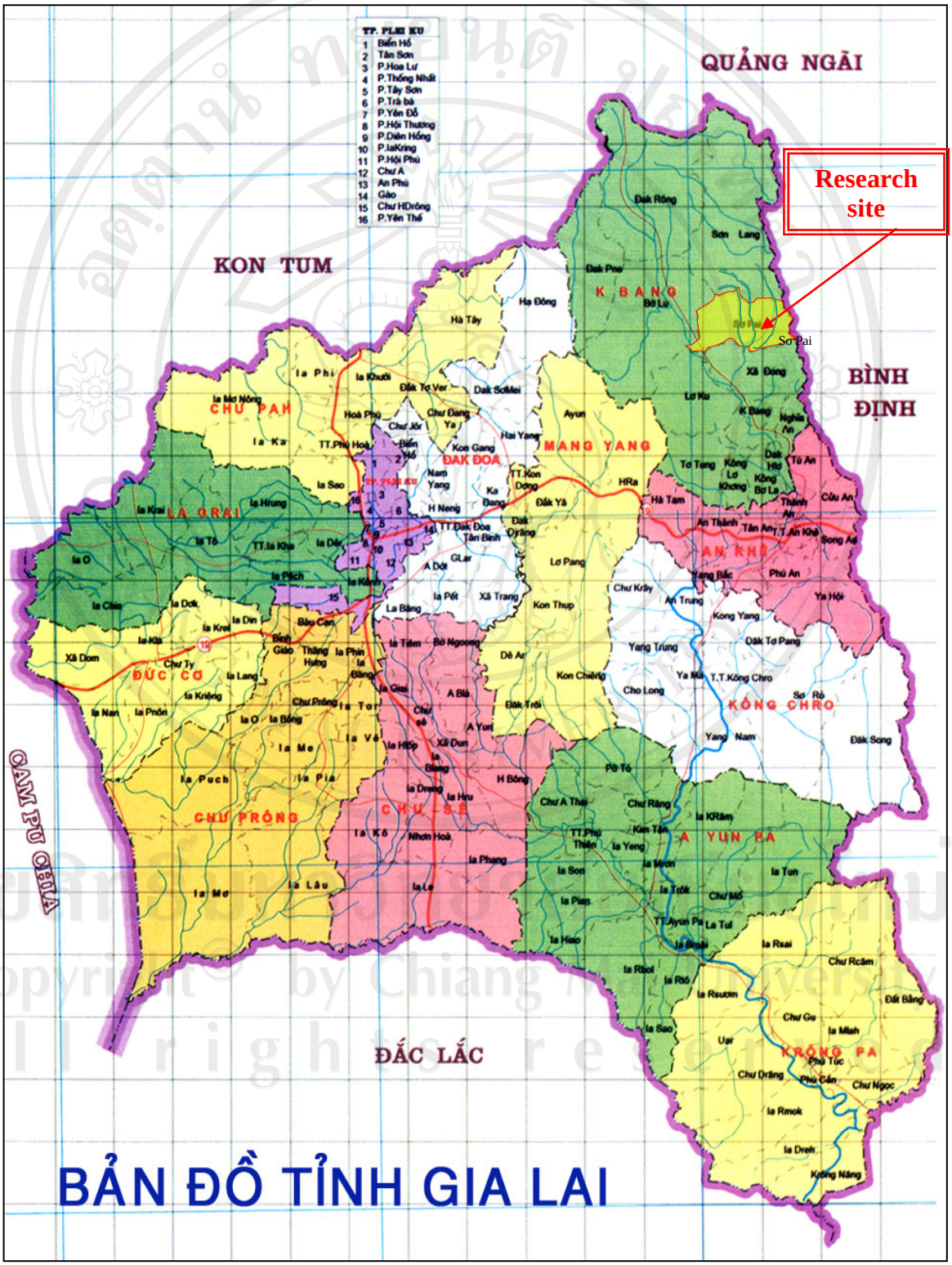


Figure 1.4 Map of Gia Lai province and Research Site

Table 1.1 Administrative units, ethnic groups and ethnic populations

In So Pai commune

Hamlet / Ethnic group	Buon Luoi	Hamlet No. 2	Ta Kor	Lang Cung	Hamlet No.5	Hamlet No.6	Hamlet No.7	Hamlet No.8
1. Bahnar								
Number of family	109		51	18				
Population	448		271	86				
2. Dao								
Number of family			2					
Population			6					
3. Kinh								
Number of family		283	12	3	45	55	162	109
Population		1233	50	12	182	239	690	488
4. Muong								
Number of family		1						
Population		2						
5. Nguon								
Number of family		2						
Population		8						
6. Nung								
Number of family		4				76		1
Population		13				340		2
7. San Chi								
Number of family		1						1
Population		4						3
8. Tay								
Number of family		14	13			43	9	1
Population		37	46			161	49	8

(Source: Interview with the Chairman of the Executive People's Committee of So Pai commune, May 2005)

This thesis is an outcome of my ten-months of fieldwork during 2004 and 2005 in Buon Luoi. My fieldwork was divided into two short stays. The first stay was for five weeks in April and May of 2004. Within those days, I spent three weeks in the village to collect some general data relating to the present livelihood of villagers.

The other two weeks were to collect secondary data and to interview local authorities. The data gathering from this first stay was used to develop a research proposal for this study.

My second stay in Buon Luoi lasted from April to December of 2005. Informed that the local situation was politically sensitive, I decided to stay at the house of a traditional village headman (*tơm plei*). I started my fieldwork by mapping the village's geography (for instance the physical landscape, household locations), together with making kinship charts and charts of the administrative structure at the village level. I then collected data on customary practices and village history. I used key informant interview to obtain this kind of data. Four focus groups (elder group, middle-aged group, youth group and members of the women's association) were also established and eights discussions were organized within first two months to collect the data on their perception and attitudes relating to customary practices, state policies, state's resource management and livelihood.

As my fieldwork progressed and I learned more about the village and the villagers learned more about myself, I started to look for stories and collect the life histories of a number of people and their families with whom I had become their friend. In collecting the stories of the village and life histories, I came to stay and to work with the families talking to them at times that were convenient to them. Through informal interviews with the people and their families, I received a great deal of data on the history of the ritual practices, land holdings, land use patterns, type of crops, access to the forests, perception of householders toward their rights to use the land and forests, resource conflicts, household experiences (participation, benefits and conflicts) in conjunction with the implementation of the development programs, such as, "Fixed Cultivation and Fixed Settlement", "Large-scale Forest Production", "National Program for Poverty Alleviation" (or Project 135), etc. Furthermore, my informal conversations with them had provided me a chance to explore how the households experienced their life changes and how household livelihood strategies were changed in dealing with the limitations of land and forest resources as well as other disadvantages.

During my fieldwork, I found that the villagers seemed to enjoy talking to me, as one elderly man told me, as follows:

> "You are not like other authoritative staff who came to our village and were only interested in criticizing our way of life and production or buying our products; you come here to learn our language, work with us and talk about people."

What was implied in this remark, as well as from my own observation, is that most of local authorities came to the village to give order to the administrative village headman to tell the villagers what they had to do. Some of them came to the village just for their own interests, such as to buy indigenous pigs, goats and natural bee's honey.

As long as I stayed in the village, I became more and more involved in the exchanging of ideas and working with villagers. I also organized two meetings between the villagers and representatives of the Communal Executive People's Committee and Communal People's Committee to discuss about land and forest management. In addition, I took the *tơm plei* to attend several meetings with communal authorities and district authorities. It was from this active involvement that much of the data for my analysis in the thesis was gathered.

Although I set out to do my fieldwork at Buon Luoi, I found myself often engaged in exploring and observing events far beyond the boundaries of the village. This is because the Bahnar community, like any other ethnic communities in Vietnam and elsewhere, cannot be studied in isolation. A village community is deeply embedded in kinship ties as well as with networks of exchanges, which cover a great number of communities near and far away. Several Bahnar and Kinh communities in the area had become part of my field research. This included a number of Bahnar villages such as Buon Ta Kor, Lang Cung in So Pai commune, village K8 in Vinh Son commune (Vinh Thanh district, Binh Dinh province) - the original village of villagers in Buon Luoi - village 1B in Son Lang commune, and other surrounding Kinh villages of So Pai commune.

By the end of my second stay, I had observed a number of communal events, gathered some thirty life stories, and participated in most aspects of the routine everyday life in Buon Luoi. I had recorded almost one hundred hours of interviews and discussions, took two hundred pictures as well as recording field notes. I kept three different kinds of field notes. First, by using an appointment diary, I kept a chronological record of my interviews, discussions and events that I had observed

during the day. Second, there was a note that I rewrote in full detail as an account of each day based on my first field notes. Practically every day before I went to bed, I used about two hours to review what I had recorded during the day and orderly rewrote in my second notes with a full detailed account and necessary questions for further observation. The third kind of note was a topical note. In these notes, I classified information into topics that ranged from local conflicts and political activities to notes specifically of names and places, to customary ceremonies, etc. Although it was laborious and time consuming, I found that this was an effective way of organizing my field data.

My last visit to Buon Luoi was in the second half of January 2007. In this two-week visit, I tried to crosscheck all data that I had presented in my thesis. I also talked to villagers about what I had planned to write and asked for their reflections.

1.5 Thesis Organization

My thesis is divided into seven chapters that analyze the process of development for ethnic people in the Central Highlands of the socialist state of Vietnam and the responses of ethnic peoples. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two, *Literature Review and Theoretical Debates*, is a review of theoretical debates and aims to construct a theoretical framework, both of which are used to explore the process of development for ethnic communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands. This chapter is divided into four main parts, of which the first part is a discussion about the state of knowledge in research on ethnic peoples and development in the Central Highlands. Then, the following three parts deal with the literature review and theoretical debates relating to the concepts: development as discourse and practice of integrating ethnic peoples, the concept of social space and everyday practice as negotiation.

Chapter three, *Historical Development of the Central Highlands*, is aimed at providing some basic understanding about the historical development processes that the colonial states and postcolonial state had implemented in the Central Highlands. Discussion of the development process of each state is focused on two aspects. The first aspect is developmental justification, which had been used for justifying the state's attempts "to develop" the ethnic peoples, and their living places. The second

aspect is about development initiatives and development policies for ethnic minorities in the Central Highlands.

Chapter four, *Practices of Ethnic Knowledge in Forest Livelihood*, looks at the social life of the Bahnar people. This chapter begins with a discussion about the worldview of the Bahnar. Then the discussion shifts to focus on the implications of local knowledge in livelihood. The chapter ends with a discussion of the organization of the village and social regulations. Through these discussions, I want to show that each ethnic community in the Central Highlands has their own world, which has long been constructed from a long period of adaptation to the natural environment, as well as to other living conditions, through which social relationships within the ethnic community are regulated.

Chapter five, *Development Practices and Disrupted Livelihood*, is focused on analyzing the negative effects of development policies and programs on the livelihoods of ethnic people. In particular, this chapter exposes that the development policies and programs of the socialist state have not only taken away the resources needed to maintain the livelihoods of ethnic people, but has also created tremendous effects on their conceptions and cultural practices, which has led the harmonious lives of ethnic minorities into contradictory situation that have caused both lives to be lost and their way of life to be irretrievably disrupted. In other words, the forest lives, social conflicts and marginalized statuses of ethnic people have not resulted in "backwardness" or "primitiveness" of ethnic people. Rather, the "backwardness" and "primitiveness" have been generated from the involvement of ethnic peoples with the development programs.

In Chapter Six, *Practices of Negotiation as Survival Strategies*, I discuss three stories that are related to the changes in everyday life and the practices of negotiating a livelihood of the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi. These stories provide, again, more evidence as to how the development process created by Vietnam's socialist state has taken away cultivation lands or forest resources for everyday life of the Bahnar people as well as changed their living place into a contested site, and an arena of conflicts and struggles that has caused distress to the ethnic peoples. At the same time, discussions of these stories also demonstrate how day-to-day negotiations of the Bahnar people have been constructed for negotiating with the state and people, who

are trying to extract resources from and create domination upon them. The main argument in this chapter is that the Bahnar people, like other ethnic peoples all over the world, have applied different strategies and have accumulated a body of learned knowledge in their negotiations. Their negotiations are not merely about the natural resources, but also about the power to decide how and by whom the place and resources can be used. Importantly, they are negotiations of how ethnic peoples are perceived and behaved.

Chapter Seven, *Conclusion*, is the last chapter of the thesis and is used for summarizing major findings of the study and provides some theoretical discussions. It also points out the implications and limitations of the study.

Picture 1.4 Other forest's houses of villagers of Buon Luoi

Picture 1.5 Logs harvested in the forests around Buon Luoi