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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Trial-and-error: Securing field access for qualitative research in Vietnam

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Abstract

Field access is frequently regarded as a mere practical step in the research process, with insufficient attention given to its broader implications. Numerous writings that focus on gaining field access offer just a collection of practical tips. While these recommendations are valuable, they are specific to each setting and individual experiences. Such an ad hoc approach fosters a limited understanding of the research permit application process and limits the discussion of access by disregarding its inherent uncertainty and its manifold consequences. In authoritarian contexts, obtaining field access remains highly uncertain and can be further complicated by arbitrary decision-making. This article demonstrates that in Vietnam, social scientists, including anthropologists, must navigate ambiguous processes of trial-and-error to secure field access. With the term 'trial-and-error' we refer to an approach to problem-solving in which various methods are attempted. Proceeding through trial-and-error involves familiarisation, networking, and improvisation. Based on 15 years of experience working in Vietnam we provide evidence that the process of trial-and-error is inherent in all three aspects. Beyond the issues surrounding access for foreign researchers, our observations also underscore the pivotal role of

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trial-and-error as a mechanism that Vietnamese citizens employ to navigate the uncertainties and arbitrariness associated with bureaucracy.

KEYWORDS
field access, trial-and-error, institutional uncertainty, familiarisation, networking, improvisation, Vietnam

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gaining access to research sites to conduct fieldwork is commonly regarded as a pragmatic stage in the social science research process, often lacking in comprehensive consideration of its implications. The literature on this subject displays a dearth of overarching strategies and frameworks. Many of these strategies present a compilation of ad hoc recommendations. Although these tips hold value, they are tailored to individual settings and experiences, potentially resulting in limited comprehensions of the process of securing field access and disregarding its inherent uncertainty. Uncertainty is frequently depicted through metaphors such as the "door" or "gate," highlighting how social scientists gain access to individuals and information within a social field or organisation without knowing what lies ahead (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016, p. 11; Feldman et al., 2003, p. ix; Straube, 2020, p. 400). More broadly, uncertainty is about the flow of information and power dynamics within knowledge production, the organisations in which field researchers operate, and the institutions and societies they navigate.

In authoritarian contexts, obtaining field access is highly uncertain and can be further complicated by arbitrary decision-making (Glasius et al., 2018; Heimer & Thogersen, 2011; Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018). This is evident in post-*Đổi mới* Vietnam, a country that has embraced a socialist-oriented market economy. The Communist Party exercises significant control over centralised political power, resulting in a combination of bureaucratic complexity and procedural ambiguity (MacLean, 2013; Porter, 1993). This article demonstrates that field researchers using qualitative methods, including anthropologists, must therefore navigate a process of trial-and-error to secure field access and establish the boundaries of their field study in Vietnam. The term trial-and-error refers to an approach to problem-solving in which various methods are attempted. We argue that proceeding through trial-and-error involves familiarisation, networking, and improvisation. We provide evidence that the process of trial-and-error is inherent in all these three aspects. Additionally we argue that trial-and-error is a strategy that is also employed by Vietnamese citizens to manage the uncertainties and arbitrariness inherent in administration and bureaucracy.

Several studies have examined institutional uncertainty in post-socialist countries, highlighting normative ambiguity, arbitrary law enforcement, and individual and collective strategies to navigate uncertainty,including corruption (Burawoy & Verdery, 1999; Henig & Makovicky, 2017). One such strategy involves the formation of relational networks based on obligations, dependencies, and clientelism, known as *guanxi* in China (Gold et al., 2002) and *blat* in Russia (Ledeneva, 1998). In contrast, the literature on Vietnam provides limited coverage of this topic. This body of literature emphasises three main features of institutional uncertainty. The first is the proliferation of regulations, including laws, bylaws, decrees, ordinances, directives, and circulars. The implementation of these regulations varies across enforcement agencies, administrative

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levels, and individual law enforcers. The ensuing uncertainty arises from a "maze of rules and regulations" (Endres, 2013, p. 358), which hinders economic activity.

In a system where each administrative level "can promulgate subordinate legislation and, from a constitutional perspective, act as a lawmaker" (Gillespie, 2008, p. 681), questions regarding the applicability of rules, their scope, and enforcers' motivations remain crucial, particularly in areas of agriculture, trade, and administration. A second factor contributing to institutional uncertainty is the prevalence of "vague legal frameworks" (Horat, 2017, p. 86), characterised by regulations written in imprecise language and contradictions. As a result, individuals are exposed to the risk of inadvertently contravening authority and encroaching upon ill-defined boundaries (Gainsborough, 2010) or facing dilemmas due to stringent interpretations or lack of enforcement of regulations (Horat, 2017). A third factor engendering institutional uncertainty is the fragmentation and competition among institutions (Gainsborough, 2010). These institutions operate autonomously and face challenges from a lack of collaboration and communication (Bonnin & Turner, 2014; Horat, 2017). In brief, legal profusion, ambiguity, and particularism generate institutional uncertainty and regulatory arbitrariness.

While uncertainty and arbitrariness can have negative consequences for those who engage with the state, they allow the government to establish and exercise a certain level of authority over citizens (Gainsborough, 2010; Horat, 2017). It enables local authorities to assert privileges associated with their position (Endres, 2014). Additionally, uncertainty and arbitrariness allow for degrees of freedom for individuals, for instance for small traders from for instance the Red River Delta who struggle with public policies and market rules. These traders effectively navigate challenges and engage in lucrative endeavours by strategically leveraging formal and informal rules (Horat, 2017, p. 16). Negotiation and finding exceptions to the rule provide windows of opportunity to traders who are not passive victims of institutional uncertainties but develop skills in negotiation and circumvention (Endres, 2013, 2014), networking and moral identity performance (Horat, 2017) and flexibility (Lam, 2019). The ambiguous and divergent relationship between coercive authority and freedom of action is central to Koh's (2006) examination of the administrative divisions within Hanoi. Koh's analysis illustrates the dual nature of the Vietnamese party-state as it exhibits both dominating characteristics and an accommodation capacity. Koh underscores the presence of institutional shortcomings and inadequacies within this context, resulting in frequent deviations from national regulations by ward officials. Despite the resulting climate of uncertainty, this situation also permits adaptations to specific circumstances, granting individuals a significant degree of flexibility to pursue their own interests.

This article aims to enrich these discussions by emphasising the importance for field researchers, especially anthropologists, to perceive strategies such as familiarisation, networking, and improvisation as iterative processes of trial-and-error. As part of these processes, field researchers experiment with various approaches until they identify the most effective ones to acquire field access. Below we discuss our experiences as white male European social anthropologists at different points in their academic careers. We both have extensive experience with working in Vietnam, including doctoral and postdoctoral research, as well as project-based research conducted in tenured research fellow positions with foreign funding.[i]

Certainly, experiences of trial-and-error vary across different professional statuses. Newly arriving doctoral students in Vietnam lack familiarity with local institutions, the Vietnamese language and culture, social connections and experience in securing field access. This was the case of Lainez, whose supervisor agreed to supervise him despite not being familiar with Vietnam and the procedures the doctoral student would have to navigate to gain field access. Conversely, Pannier had a supervisor who possessed prior experience in researching ethnic groups in Northern

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Vietnam. This supervisor provided valuable knowledge, advice, and professional connections to his doctoral student, thereby facilitating field access and minimising uncertainty. Nevertheless, because we both as other foreign field researchers who continue to return to Vietnam have become more familiar with the country, expand and deepen our social network, and gain more experience in securing field access, we increasingly reduce the level of uncertainty associated with trial-and-error. However, as we will illustrate, uncertainty invariably persists. This is because every instance of requesting field access represents a distinctive scenario that necessitates the integration of familiarisation, networking, and improvisation.

The main argument of this article is that field researchers, including anthropologists, employ a trial-and-error approach to obtain field access. The argument is significant as it sheds light on broader dynamics within contemporary Vietnam. It underscores the dualistic nature of uncertainty, which can impede progress while also creating opportunities, and highlights Vietnamese individuals' dependence on trial-and-error as a crucial strategy to navigate uncertainty in relation to institutions and regulations. Our argument is bolstered by data acquired from numerous field investigations conducted by the authors in Vietnam, excluding major cities except one case, spanning a period of 15 years. Lainez will present data collected during his doctoral research on human trafficking and the 'careers of intimacy' of Vietnamese sex workers in Southeast Asia, conducted between 2008 and 2010 (Lainez, 2020). In particular, he will incorporate data from an 18-month ethnographic study conducted in Châu Đốc, a town in An Giang province bordering Cambodia. This area was recognised as a hub for human trafficking and the cross-border movement of sex workers from the Mekong Delta to Cambodia in the early 2000s. Furthermore, Lainez will include data from a two-month study conducted in Ho Chi Minh City in 2010, focusing on Vietnamese sex workers who migrated to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur (Lainez, 2019, 2022). Lainez was fluent in Vietnamese and well-versed in the sensitive subject of human trafficking and sex work. Prior to pursuing his doctorate, he worked as a photojournalist, capturing the realities of these issues throughout Southeast Asia, and worked with a child protection NGO in Cambodia for several years.

Pannier will present data from two research projects conducted in the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam. These projects involved the participation of various ethnic populations, including Thái, Tày, Hmong, Giáy, Dao, and Kinh. In both cases, Pannier conducted field trips with a team of Vietnamese students and researchers as part of collaborative programs between their respective institutions. The initial project focused on promoting local rice varieties, both from a commercial and institutional standpoint. At the time, Pannier was working as a postdoctoral fellow. The findings were derived from ethnographic studies carried out in 2016 and 2017, which specifically examined rice seed exchange networks and local knowledge. The research team comprised one environmental sciences researcher, one anthropology student, and two foreign social scientists. The second project was part of an interdisciplinary program on climate change adaptation, conducted in 2019 and 2023 (Pannier et al., 2020; Pannier & Nguyen, 2023). During this time, Pannier held a tenured research fellow position. The study aimed to explore the local perception of climate variations and responses to extreme weather events in a commune that had been heavily affected by a significant flood (Pannier & Phan, 2023). The team consisted of four anthropologists, three of whom were Vietnamese, and one foreign researcher. Pannier possesses a profound understanding of the Vietnamese language and culture, acquired through 15 years of residency and research in Vietnam. This includes 4 years as a guest lecturer at a Vietnamese university. Furthermore, he has extensive experience conducting field research throughout various regions of Vietnam, including the Northern, and Southern areas.

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The various cases presented in this study enable us to examine several situations based on our career status, age (spanning from 34 to 43), level of experience, and our collaborative frameworks. Additionally, our selection field sites highlight the challenges associated with accessing and conducting field research in both rural and urban areas, particularly those populated by ethnic minority groups. Gaining entry to rural areas inhabited by the Kinh or Viet ethnic majority and regions that are home to ethnic minorities is generally more arduous, especially in mountainous border regions. In these regions, local authorities and police are often unfamiliar with the presence of foreign researchers, particularly anthropologists who wish to conduct ethnographic fieldwork for extended periods. Moreover, in rural and remote ethnic areas, foreign anthropologists are highly visible and typically accompanied by a chaperone assigned by the local police to ensure proper behaviour, at least during the first weeks of field investigations. On the other hand, in major cities such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, field researchers must also obtain research permits from district and ward authorities. However, the monitoring system there is less stringent due to the challenges local authorities face, especially the police, in tracking field researchers' whereabouts. This allows the latter to operate discreetly without constant surveillance. By including both rural and urban areas, as well as locations inhabited by both ethnic Kinh and minority groups, this article offers a broad overview of the situations anthropologists encounter when seeking field access in Vietnam.

2 | FIELD ACCESS IN VIETNAM

Vietnamese academic institutions and local authorities involved in granting field access to foreign and local field researchers exhibit legal profusion, ambiguity, and particularism. In short, the process of granting access is subject to institutional uncertainty. For conducting field studies, researchers must request their hosting institutions to submit a research permit application to the local authorities of the study site. While there is an official procedure, its implementation varies depending on the host institution, research location and period, research topic, participants involved, and age and gender of the parties involved (Bonnin, 2010, pp. 181–2; Michaud, 2010, p. 222; Scott et al., 2006, p. 33; Turner, 2013a, p. 398). The process can be likened to a progression within an administrative hierarchy, where host scholars, officials, local authorities, and police services must evaluate and vet crucial aspects of the proposed field research plan (Bonnin, 2013, p. 126; Michaud, 2010, p. 222). The complexities of this administrative structure and its corresponding procedures give rise to considerable ambiguity. c (Salemink, 2015, p. 147).

They also need to navigate the often-unpredictable behaviour of officials. These officials operate within complex power systems governed by mechanisms that control information production, circulation, and utilisation (Le Meur, 2014, p. 49). In addition, government officials tend to be sceptical of empirical and qualitative research conducted by both foreign and Vietnamese researchers due to its perceived potential to challenge its revolutionary ideology. This scepticism is most prominent in relation to research methodologies such as ethnography, open or semi-structured interviews, oral histories, and participatory research (Dinh, 1986, pp. 71–73, 77; Salemink, 2015, p. 147; Turner, 2013b, p. 3). The government promotes the adherence of Vietnamese researchers to positivist paradigms and the use of quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, surveys, and mappings (Scott et al., 2006, p. 31). This attitude perpetuates mistrust towards foreign researchers, who can be perceived as potential spies, propagandists, or journalists that could jeopardise the interests of the one-party state. Such mistrust can be traced back to Vietnam's tumultuous history as it characterised by prolonged warfare in the twentieth century

and its resistance to Western influence up until the 1975–1986 collectivist era (Dinh, 1986, pp. 71–72; see Le Meur, 2014).

There is limited knowledge of the kind of coping strategies field researchers employ, particularly anthropologists. How do they navigate the challenges of uncertainty, arbitrariness, and anxiety when they apply for research permits in Vietnam? While there "are no clear-cut and guaranteed methods of securing access to the 'field'" (Salemink, 2015, p. 152), there are suggested recommendations. The first is to frame the research project in ways that make it more palatable and to minimise potential sensitivity by avoiding any language indicating political curiosity or other sensitive issues (Bonnin, 2010, p. 181; Turner, 2013a, p. 398, 2013b). It is crucial to ascertain sensitive topics (Scott et al., 2006, p. 35) and to realise that subjects considered safe but may unexpectedly become sensitive (Salemink, 2015, p. 150, Turner, 2010, p. 128, 2013b). In authoritarian settings, "hard red lines" exist that, when transgressed, carry inherent risks and penalties (Glasius et al., 2018, p. 38–39). In contrast, grey or "fluid lines" lack clarity, are context-specific, and can change over time and, therefore, be breached in certain circumstances (Glasius et al., 2018, pp. 40–41). These observations apply to Vietnam, where field researchers must negotiate boundaries with host agencies and informants (Scott et al., 2006, p. 38) and adjust to the rules and protocols to ensure mutual acceptance and cooperation (Le Meur, 2014; Michaud, 2010, p. 223).

Furthermore, field researchers can adapt to local conditions by "reacting creatively" (Michaud, 2010, p. 223). Reacting creatively encompasses evaluating how the research can align with these conditions, comprehensively understanding the context, and cultivating advantageous relationships to accomplish the desired objectives. Additionally, field researchers can "go with the flow and [...] give something of yourself to others who often want to reciprocate and who may turn out to be gatekeepers" (Salemink, 2015, p. 148). Investing time and establishing trustful relationships with all parties involved in the field access application and during the field investigations is critical, especially for "academics, interpreters, librarians, guides, jeep drivers," "who are far more likely to agree to help once they recognise one is a trustworthy person" (Michaud, 2010, p. 224). The literature also sheds light on the ethical dilemmas field researchers face when accessing and conducting field investigations. These dilemmas require a reflexive approach towards issues of positionality and power relations. They involve making compromises when disclosing research findings that might be considered sensitive by authorities in order to maintain field access during future visits (Turner, 2010) and establishing relationships with gatekeepers that balance engagement and distance (Bonnin, 2013, pp. 123–124).[ii] Other ethical dilemmas observed in authoritarian settings include befriending authorities who support abusive policies and considering secret payments to expedite application procedures (Gentile, 2013, p. 428).

In addition, the nationality and positionality of anthropologists may also influence the trial-and-error dynamics being discussed. For instance, Roszko (2020, p. 21) argues that her Polish background, along with the enduring sense of fraternity among former Communist Bloc nations, and her fluency in Vietnamese, played crucial positive roles in securing permission to conduct extended fieldwork in islands that are off-limits to most foreigners. As for Vietnamese researchers, they too are required to obtain research permits in order to secure field in Vietnam. We have often heard that the conditions for Vietnamese researchers may be somewhat more favourable, although still uncertain, as "Vietnamese researchers also faced obstacles of bureaucratic procedures and opaqueness" (Koh, 2006, p. 257). However, the level of constraints imposed on them is lower than that imposed on foreigners, as there is less suspicion regarding their potential role as spies. In practice, there is much tighter police control over foreigners, leading to more complex and uncertain administrative procedures. Field researchers from other Asian countries must also navigate the same ambiguous and uncertain permit application procedures.

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In this article, we examine how anthropologists, and other field researchers, navigate uncertainty and establish field access using a 'trial-and-error' approach. We argue that researchers must familiarise themselves with institutional settings, build productive relationships with administrators and authorities, demonstrate adaptability and flexibility when faced with ambiguous and evolving regulations, and show reflexivity and ethical awareness. We propose to examine these strategies using three dimensions: familiarisation, networking, and improvisation.

3 | FAMILIARISATION

Familiarisation is the critical process of acquiring knowledge about a specific subject, essential for effectively navigating it. It involves gathering information through direct activity engagement. Familiarisation is important, as the "first step is to list all possible obstacles to entering the field" (Salemink, 2015, p. 153). To secure field access, foreign researchers must acquaint themselves with the administrative and political institutions facilitating the application process and learn how to navigate procedures. Learning is closely intertwined with action, as applicants must experiment with different approaches that may or may not yield desired outcomes. The process begins with a visa application that foreign researchers need to submit from abroad. In the context of Vietnamese universities and research institutes, the International Relations Office is vital in facilitating the procedures for acquiring a research visa. Foreign researchers must apply to this office prior to their arrival in Vietnam, necessitating the establishment of a prior affiliation with the sponsoring university.

Upon arriving in Vietnam, foreign researchers must adhere to a standardised, albeit loosely defined and flexibly implemented protocol for applying for a research permit. The application includes detailed information such as the research subject, the location of study, the number of participants involved, the intended duration of the field study, and an interview guideline. Subsequently, the sponsoring institution is responsible for forwarding the application to three designated institutional entities within the selected province: the provincial People's Committee,[iii] police services, and services related to the research topic (environment, culture, agriculture, rural development, etc.) (see Michaud, 2010, p. 222). Upon receiving approval from all three services involved, the People's Committee issues a field permit stamped with a red seal (see Scott et al., 2006, p. 31; Turner, 2013a, 2013c).

In many instances, police services establish a monitoring system that involves appointing a chaperone and the gathering of detailed activity reports, particularly in rural and remote areas. Moreover, several other local services are responsible for identifying research subjects and arranging accommodation for field researchers who reside in local people's homes (unless they seek accommodation in guest houses by their own means). This intricate process is filled with uncertainty, which anthropologists navigate by acquiring knowledge and progressing through trial-and-error. They can seek research permits from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). However, working with NGOs presents ethical dilemmas as they may have their own research agendas that they expect collaborators and consultants to adhere to, or they may claim ownership over research findings after fieldwork and analysis (Turner, 2013b, p. 3).

In the case of Pannier, uncertainty surrounded his permit application when he intended to conduct a field study on climate change adaptation in Vietnam nortwest uplands. Although Pannier possessed previous experience in field access procedures gained from doctoral and post-doctoral research activities, he had to familiarise himself anew with the relevant administrators, institutions, and application procedures. The application process was initiated by Pannier's

research partner at a Vietnamese university in Hanoi. Unfortunately, the application was unsuccessful. After engaging in discussions with several officers, Pannier discovered that the officer from the International Affairs Office was dissatisfied with the formal content of the application letter. Initially, it was unclear to Pannier whether the officer sought compensation or if something else was at play. As the conversations progressed, it became apparent that the employee himself was unfamiliar with the procedure. It seemed also possible that he was seeking to assert his authority. After editing and obtaining approval for the application, the officer submitted it to the provincial authorities. However, Pannier did not receive any updates for several weeks, which caused uncertainty for him and his research partners. Recognising the importance of resolving the situation, Pannier's experienced Vietnamese colleague, who was familiar with issues related to field investigations involving foreigners, emphasised the need to identify a contact person at the provincial People's Committee. Following the establishment of contact with a person at the provincial People's Committee, Pannier discovered that the application had been blocked due to the lack of mention of a specific department within the provincial People's Committee. Neither the officer from the International Affairs Office nor the research team were aware of this requirement, particularly because previous experiences had indicated that the provincial People's Committee would designate the appropriate local department. To address this matter, the application was resubmitted, this time including the Cultural Department. Once all parties vetted the application, a red-stamped authorization letter was issued, granting Pannier field access.

Before starting field research in the villages, Pannier adhered to established protocols and conducted preliminary visits to the People's Committees at the provincial, district, and commune levels (see Bonnin, 2010, p. 182; Salemink, 2015, p. 149). These meetings facilitated mutual acquaintance among all parties involved. Progressively, he was no longer obligated to visit each level before proceeding to the villages, nor did he require a chaperone to accompany him for interviews. However, during his research in one village, he was instructed to present his research permit bearing the official red stamp to the provincial People's Committee and to be accompanied by a chaperone. This incident, which is certainly not unique, highlights the arbitrary nature of field access and the discretionary power wielded by authorities. These circumstances introduced ambiguity into Pannier's study, leaving him uncertain about whether he had violated any boundaries or might be subject to the whims of provincial authorities. As a result, he dedicated time to meeting with officers to interpret the intentions of the provincial People's Committee, evaluate power dynamics between provincial, district, and commune authorities, and anticipate potential conflicting interests. He also began to reflect on the extent to which he needed to report his activities and whether he should be accompanied by a chaperone. For instance, he gradually realised that when accompanied by a student or researcher from his sponsoring university, he did not require a chaperone from the province. However, when he visited the villages alone, this requirement became necessary. In essence, he gradually identified the necessary knowledge and boundaries of his study through a process of trial-and-error in each subsequent encounter.

Lainez embarked on a comparable trajectory of acquainting himself with the application procedures, administrative offices, and officers at two universities, one NGO, and local authorities. The purpose of this strategy was to secure field access for an 18-month ethnographic study conducted in Châu Đốc, a popular tourist destination situated in An Giang province, within the Mekong Delta region. Throughout his Master study and his early years as a doctoral student, he repeatedly received cautionary advice that the police might closely monitor his activities due to the sensitive nature of his research topic: human trafficking, irregular cross-border mobility, and sex work. He was troubled by questions such as which police services would oversee surveillance, which aspects of his topic were deemed sensitive, what risks he was exposing himself to, and

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how he could identify grey and red lines he should not cross. Gaining access to Châu Đốc was challenging. His sponsoring university submitted a research permit application to the People's Committee in Châu Đốc. However, he received no news for months. Meanwhile, he started working as a researcher for an anti-human trafficking NGO in Ho Chi Minh City. Furthermore, he established an additional collaboration with the university in An Giang with the plan to work closely with their researchers to secure support from the university's rector.

Familiarisation also played a pivotal role in recognising the police services implicated in his surveillance, comprehending their power dynamics, ascertaining the kind of information to disclose to them, and effectively leveraging their support in case of any challenges. After several discussions, Lainez discovered that his sponsoring university in Ho Chi Minh City forwarded his monthly activity reports to the Political Police Bureau and the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas.[iv] The provincial university did not have a structured procedure in place for this due to their inexperience in collaborating with foreign researchers. However, the local divisions of the Political Police Bureau and the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas became aware of Lainez's presence in the province. An agent from the Political Police Bureau requested his research assistant to report monthly about his research endeavours. The assistant also met with an officer from the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas who requested to stay informed about his progress. In addition, the local police from Châu Đốc assigned a young officer to monitor him, acting as a chaperone for a few weeks. The neighbourhood police force monitored his interactions with street sex workers in downtown Châu Đốc. Lainez became aware of this surveillance when a dispute arose among a group of sex workers who were also his informants. Unintentionally, he caused an altercation by refuting a false accusation made by one woman, who claimed to be involved in an affair with him. After this incident, a police officer contacted Lainez's assistant and requested their prompt appearance at the police station. In addition, the anti-trafficking NGO reported monthly Lainez's activities to the police service in charge of foreign organisations.

The uncertainty and concern that Lainez experienced upon his arrival in Vietnam gradually dissipated as he gained deeper understanding of the police surveillance framework, the expectations of various services, formal and informal channels for reporting, and the limited sharing of data among these services. Once he was more familiar with the system, he proceeded through trial-and-error to determine when and which data to provide and through which channels. Initially, he assumed that the Political Police Bureau and the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas from An Giang province would share information, but this was not the case, thus requiring separate reporting to each service. All police services involved in his supervision requested informants' names, addresses, and interview dates. This request posed a serious ethical issue. Lainez exercised great caution in deciding which information to disclose to each police service, carefully balancing their need to fulfil their responsibilities and the protection of identity of his interlocutors.

The power dynamics underlying these services became apparent when Lainez inadvertently crossed a red line. While in Châu Đốc, a cadre from the Cultural Affairs Office invited him to a nearby district to attend a Hòa Hảo celebration, a Buddhist group that had opposed the communists during the Vietnam War and was, therefore, off-limits to foreign scholars. Lainez had no intention of conducting field research. However, shortly after his arrival, the cadre received a phone call from the police, instructing us to leave immediately. In retaliation, the Political Police Bureau and the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas from An Giang province services threatened to restrict Lainez's access to the province. In response, Lainez argued that if his fieldwork was abruptly terminated without valid justification, they would have to provide convincing

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justification to the other police services involved in his supervision and the officials supporting his project, including the rector of the local university . This warning proved effective in resolving the situation. Additionally, the police service in charge of foreign organisations objected to Lainez's endeavours and expressed discontent with the anti-human trafficking NGO's director. In essence, the management of police supervision and the establishment of clear parameters for field investigations, including determining the boundaries between grey and red lines, proved to be a trial-and-error process. This required a comprehensive understanding of the police monitoring framework and operations to alleviate Lainez's concerns.

4 | NETWORKING

While becoming familiar with the institutions, actors, and application procedures is crucial, it does not guarantee field access. While applying for research permits, field researchers come across and establish trust-based relationships with individuals who may exhibit generosity and support while also protecting their interests and discretionary power (see Michaud, 2010). One may call them 'gatekeepers'; they are individuals who possess "the authority to grant access and facilitate the desired relationship and data collection necessary for immersing oneself in organizational life" (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016, p. 1653).

Gatekeepers can assume formal or informal roles (Bonnin, 2010, p. 183). Formal gatekeepers may include the head of the research department who acts as a sponsor and initiates research permit applications; university administrators who review, validate, and submit applications to local authorities; and authorities from People's Committees, police services, and local departments. Gatekeepers assuming informal and less visible roles can be community members with specialised knowledge in a particular subject who provide access to and data about informants. Developing trust-based and mutually beneficial relationships with gatekeepers raises ethical concerns about the balance between engagement and distance, as well as potential conflicts or role confusion between friendly and professional dynamics (Bonnin, 2013, pp. 123–124).

Building rapport with gatekeepers is a relational process (Feldman et al., 2003, p. vii) involving a trial-and-error approach. This includes establishing a network of contacts, identifying those who are capable and willing to assist, grasping their motivations and potential reciprocation, and seeking their support at the appropriate time, all while avoiding excessive demands or appearing excessively instrumental. Lainez experienced difficulties when attempting to gain access to Châu Đốc. His sponsoring university agreed to a revised version of his project and submitted a permit application to the Châu Đốc People's Committee along with a formal request for support. However, several months passed without receiving any updates. Lainez had to devise a strategy. Initially, he approached the anti-human trafficking NGO he was working with to inquire if they had any contacts in Châu Đốc. The director, who had an extensive network in the Mekong Delta, made inquiries on Lainez's behalf, but unfortunately, these efforts yielded no positive results. Lainez also contacted experienced foreign researchers, but none had connections in Châu Đốc. He explored other avenues.

While in France, Lainez fortuitously encountered a Vietnamese linguistics professor from his sponsoring university in Ho Chi Minh City, who happened to be visiting at the Parisian university where he was studying Vietnamese language. After the professor returned to Ho Chi Minh City, he met with Lainez and extended an invitation to join him for dinners with colleagues from various universities and research institutes every weekend. These gatherings (*nhậu*) were mainly attended by men and involved the consumption of alcoholic beverages and authentic local dishes.

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Lainez started attending these events and after several months of establishing trustworthy relationships, he confided in the guests about his challenges in gaining access to Châu Đốc. In the presence of everyone, the linguistics professor personally contacted an acquaintance, a former cadre from the Cultural Affairs Department in Châu Đốc. During the conversation, the professor introduced Lainez and sought assistance facilitating field access. Although the acquaintance agreed to help, it took several months and numerous phone calls from a senior French economist fluent in Vietnamese, who was based in Ho Chi Minh City and possessed expertise in gaining field access in rural areas, to persuade the former manager to arrange a meeting with him, Lainez and his colleague, and representatives from the Châu Đốc People's Committee.

In the end, Lainez and his colleague met with the Châu Đốc People's Committee, where he presented his research project and requested permission to conduct the ethnographic study. The meeting proceeded with intense eye contact and hesitant questions and answers, leaving the outcome uncertain. Eventually, the former manager stood up, approached Lainez, and warmly extended his hand, saying, "Welcome to Châu Đốc." This gesture was a relief to Lainez, as he hoped to receive an official letter with a red stamp outlining the parameters of his fieldwork. Unfortunately, no such letter ever arrived, leaving him without clear instructions on what he could or could not do. However, the cadre took him to the Women's Union office, a mass organisation dedicated to addressing women's issues, and requested that they assist him with his research. Over the next 18 months, a Women's Union officer served as his gatekeeper, introducing him to numerous impoverished families and their daughters, many of whom were involved in sex work.

The colleague who initially helped Lainez became a close friend whom he would seek out for advice and guidance in the future. The former cadre from the Cultural Affairs Department assumed the position of a paternal uncle (*bác*), serving as a trustworthy and dependable guardian, as well as a close friend. He was proud to assist a foreign doctoral student working with the leading university in social sciences in Ho Chi Minh City. From then on he consistently offered assistance and facilitate introductions to officials and influential individuals in Châu Đốc. Additionally, the director of the anti-human trafficking NGO became Lainez's protector, employer, and close friend. This collaboration with the development sector did not raise any ethical concerns, as the research priorities and perspectives of the director and Lainez were aligned and essential in addressing the issue of human trafficking. The director played a pivotal role in assisting Lainez in overcoming various challenges that arose over time, including the incident involving the police in the Hòa Hảo district. Throughout the years, Lainez developed trusting and mutually beneficial relationships with numerous other individuals. This often involved a trial-and-error approach, devoid of any prior knowledge regarding the potential evolution of these connections into formal or informal gatekeepers, or the exact nature of the ensuing relationship.

We now return to Pannier's struggle to obtain a research permit. He endeavoured to tackle this issue by leveraging existing connections and establishing new ones. When the provincial People's Committee rejected his application, his collaborators at the sponsoring university suggested that only a personal relationship could resolve the matter. Pannier initially attempted to reach out to a friend's wife. This gatekeeper had previously worked in the provincial International Affairs Department and had been a source of support for Pannier in the past. However, she had since changed positions and could no longer assist him. Pannier had also developed relationships with officials from the Cultural Department at the provincial People's Committee, but they had been transferred to Hanoi. This left him in a state of uncertainty. He was hesitant to contact a retired senior provincial official, with whom he had collaborated on multiple projects. Although this person held a high-ranking position and likely had influence, Pannier felt uncomfortable

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requesting help. Another reason for his hesitation is that he had been informed of the existing tensions between this contact and the prevailing authorities. This situation had the potential to have adverse consequences for him.

While attempting to gather information on the situation, one of his contacts eventually connected him with an administrator of the provincial People's Committee. This person proved invaluable, enabling Pannier to navigate the bureaucratic process. Through her assistance, Pannier discovered that his application had been blocked because the Cultural Department within the People's Committee had not been involved. Fortunately, Pannier had a pre-existing relationship with the Cultural Department, which he approached for support. He was introduced to an individual there who took charge of his case and obtained the necessary approvals from all relevant departments, thus securing the field access authorization.

When Pannier initiated his fieldwork, he took advantage of his official visit to the province to arrange an informal dinner with the woman and other colleagues from the Cultural Department. Establishing a solid rapport with her came naturally, given her background in social sciences and her enthusiasm for supporting academic research. Subsequently, she became Pannier's trusted ally and friend. Serving as an intermediary and gatekeeper for all future research permits, she deviated from the standard procedure by requesting that Pannier submit his requests via email instead of through postal services. This adjustment ensured prompt processing and the acquisition of all necessary red stamps. Additionally, she managed any obstacles and introduced Pannier to relevant officers. Pannier considered the most appropriate way to express his gratitude as their relationship became closer. Although a financial gesture could have ensured her long-term support, he knew it could potentially offend her and put their relationship at risk. She often emphasised that she was only fulfilling her professional obligations and aiming to support research in her province, downplaying her contributions. After thorough deliberation, Pannier decided not to make a payment to minimise the potential risk of jeopardising the relationship. Making a payment would have posed an ethical concern due to its potential interpretation as bribery. Instead, Pannier focused on maintaining a professional and friendly relationship by regularly inviting her to meals and celebrations, involving her in training programs, and gifting her academic literature.

In brief, establishing a network of contacts and gatekeepers is a labour-intensive endeavour characterised by a trial-and-error approach. This process is inherently relational as it requires field researchers to be open and receptive, while also learning from the individuals they engage with and observe, acknowledging that many may not become gatekeepers.

5 | IMPROVISATION

The concept of improvisation has its roots in musicology and art theory (Nettl, 1974). Over time, it has expanded into various disciplines within the social sciences, proving to be a valuable tool for studying socio-political practices and formations. Improvisation is considered integral to the broader human condition (Lewis & Piekut, 2016). By adjusting one's mindset to align with the given circumstances, improvisation can be characterised as engaging in iterative and spontaneous decision-making and experimentation, while utilising the resources and circumstances at hand (Richards, 1993). The concept holds significant importance in the realm of uncertainty as it encompasses the proficiency to effectively manage unforeseen circumstances, navigate contingencies, and interpret contexts and evolving environments to capitalise on opportunities (Pierrepont, 2021). We approach improvisation as “sequential adjustment to unpredictable conditions” (Richards, 1993, p. 67) and “real-time management of variability and stochastic

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events" (Crane et al., 2011, p. 180). It can be seen as a trial-and-error process wherein field researchers consider alternatives, resources, and circumstances to decide on the best course of action. It requires interpretation, ingenuity, adaptability, and reflexivity, as it can lead to errors, warnings, and penalties. However, improvisation can also present the opportunity to explore new avenues, experiment with unforeseen approaches, and circumvent regulations and norms. This highlights the inherent flexibility within seemingly rigid, uncertain, and arbitrary institutional and legal systems.

Pannier conducted a study on rice seed exchange networks in the northen uplands, deviating from the official permit application procedure. The study was sponsored by a local institute affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture. Although this institute had prior experience collaborating with foreign geneticists, it was unfamiliar with the permit application process for qualitative field research that involved an extended stay in the villages. Initially, Pannier visited the commune armed only with an introductory letter endorsed by the director. A geneticist from the partner institute, who accompanied Pannier for this preliminary fieldwork, assured him that the letter would suffice for gaining access to the field.

While Vietnamese researchers must only possess this document for field access, foreign researchers must have a valid research permit. Despite being aware of this requirement, Pannier decided to take a risk based on the assurance from the Vietnamese partner that the introductory letter was sufficient for preliminary fieldwork. This decision was made with full awareness of the uncertain outcome. Upon arrival, they fortuitously found a family in one of the villages that offered a homestay service and had previously hosted Western tourists. They chose to stay in that house, which made Pannier's foreign presence acceptable. Moreover, the host happened to be the secretary of the Party cell in his village, further legitimising their presence. They could conduct interviews and field observations without encountering difficulties for a period.

The lack of clarity regarding procedures for foreign researchers worked to their advantage until the day a district-level policeman summoned Pannier to the commune people's Committee. The policeman admonished Pannier for residing in a villager's homestay without proper registration with the local authorities. Subsequently, Pannier discovered that the policeman was settling a personal dispute with the villager, who had neglected the official registration process for his tourism activities. Unaware of Pannier's requirement for a valid research permit, the police officer did not reprimand him for conducting research without one. Ultimately, the police officer merely requested that Pannier find alternative lodging.

Having experienced a sense of autonomy within the commune, Pannier made the decision to work at a second field site in a nearby commune, renowned for its cultivation of a superior local rice variety. This relocation was a result of his improvisational skills and opportunistic mindset. Upon arrival, he conducted preliminary observations and later stopped at a roadside eatery where members of the commune People's Committee were eating. At this juncture, Pannier faced a pivotal decision – he could either proceed with his field investigations without official approval, risking potential admonishment, or he could introduce himself to the officials in an informal setting, establishing a friendly rapport and circumventing the bureaucratic formalities of paperwork and official meetings. He chose the latter option.

Following the meal, the officials invited him to visit the commune People's Committee. They enthusiastically supported his project as they were actively developing mechanisms to promote local rice varieties. The discussion then turned to practical matters, such as arranging accommodation. However, it was interrupted when a district police officer arrived and requested to examine Pannier's passports and visas. The officer instructed Pannier to lodge at a guest house in the district capital, forbidding him from residing within the commune. The officer contended that

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Pannier held a tourist visa instead of a research visa. However, the officer did not explicitly ask Pannier to provide a research permit or forbid him from conducting field research. Once more, Pannier found himself presented with a chance to take advantage of the ambiguous nature of the official protocols that govern the authorization of access to foreign researchers.

Upon arriving in the district, Pannier made an impromptu visit to the Agriculture Department, responsible for promoting the indigenous rice variety in the area. By chance, he had the opportunity to meet the director, who was acquainted with the former director of his sponsoring institute within the Ministry of Agriculture in Hanoi. The meeting went well and provided an unexpected opportunity for Pannier to clarify his research and his position in the studied communes. Recognising the significance of his research, the director promptly considered it a priority and suggested sending a colleague to provide on-site support and reassure the district police. However, he did not apply for a research permit, leaving Pannier in a precarious situation filled with ambiguity, as they enjoyed the support of the district authority but had no supporting documentation.

Faced with these risky yet favourable circumstances, Pannier seized the opportunity to return to the commune, stay locally, and conduct research. Negotiations were undertaken to secure accommodation at the eatery, owned by a member of the People's Committee, where they had initially had lunch. While the police temporarily granted authorisation for the team's presence and for Pannier to continue conducting field research, the exact duration of their stay remained uncertain. Subsequently, Pannier diligently completed all necessary official procedures to ensure more stable conditions and establish a lasting presence in the field until the study's conclusion.

This vignette illustrates Pannier's adeptness in navigating institutional uncertainty and arbitrariness through improvisation. He seized challenges and emerging opportunities within specific contexts, gathered on-the-ground feedback, leveraged relationships, and pushed boundaries. Moreover, it highlights the critical role of district police officers in remote ethnic communes, who enable the state to supervise activities and promote adherence to rules and regulations that individuals may choose to comply with or circumvent.

Lainez's field study on the migration of Vietnamese sex workers to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, undertaken in collaboration with the anti-human trafficking NGO in Ho Chi Minh City, offers an additional illustration of the uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the demarcation of police supervision and research parameters, especially in urban centres. Lainez shared his research plan and activity reports with the International Relations Office of his sponsoring university in Ho Chi Minh City, wherein they were subsequently disseminated to the Political Police Bureau and the Bureau of Internal Security and Cultural Ideas. In addition, he submitted a research plan and regular activity reports to the director of the NGO, who shared them with the police service in charge of foreign organisations.

Initially, Lainez intended to conduct interviews with sex workers, pimps, madams, and moneylenders. However, he encountered a lack of clarity regarding the limitations of his study. He was unsure whether he would be subjected to surveillance by the three police services or if he would cross any red or grey lines by interacting with presumed criminals. He also lacked clarity on the permissible topics he could explore. Consequently, he adapted his approach and began by conducting interviews with sex workers organised by social workers at the anti-human trafficking NGO office. Once he realised that he was not being monitored or controlled by the police, he proceeded to conduct interviews with sex workers, pimps, madams, moneylenders, and migration brokers in coffee shops throughout the city.

The interviews initially centred around mundane aspects of their lives, gradually transitioning to more sensitive subjects such as labour issues, moneylending, over-indebtedness, harassment,

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irregular migration to Singapore for sex work, and debt-financed migration. As Lainez expanded his network of informants and broadened the scope of his topics of investigation, he pushed the boundaries of his study and discovered the absence of defined limitations or monitoring systems in Ho Chi Minh City, in contrast to An Giang province. Moreover, he observed that not only did the police abstain from exercising control, but also a policeman from the police service in charge of foreign organisations requested the director of the NGO to encourage Lainez to gather data on the trafficking of Vietnamese sex workers in Singapore, essentially soliciting his collaboration. Through improvisation and trial-and-error, Lainez successfully expanded the boundaries of his research, resulting in the unexpected experience of freedom and autonomy.

6 | CONCLUSION

Vietnam is widely recognised for its intricate bureaucratic system, which greatly complicates and introduces uncertainty into the process of obtaining field access. Like other field researchers conducting qualitative field studies, anthropologists go through a trial-and-error process that is fraught with uncertainty. They begin by familiarising themselves with application procedures, the institutional setting, regulations, policies, and the key individuals involved. They then establish connections with university personnel and local authorities who can serve as gatekeepers, both formally and informally. Finally, they must improvise and develop strategies to overcome obstacles, identify opportunities, and navigate the ambiguities and arbitrary nature of institutional practices and government oversight. These proficiencies are paramount for conducting successful field research in such a context.

Given its inherent unpredictability and arbitrariness, we consider securing field access a separate and crucial stage in the research process. We thus argue that anthropologists and other field researchers undertake two distinct but interrelated investigations. The first involves comprehending and negotiating the necessary protocols for obtaining permits and complying with police oversight. The second investigation entails gathering data about the research topic. These two lines of enquiry are intricately connected, as the former delineates the parameters and boundaries of the latter. Moreover, this process offers valuable insights into the workings of the state, institutional structures, and social approaches to law and regulations.

Our discussion reflects a profound issue that both researchers and ordinary Vietnamese individuals face daily. The matter of securing field access is indeed intricate, as it becomes apparent through the processes involved in obtaining such access. Overlapping regulations and confusion within the administrative hierarchy contribute to institutional uncertainty and legal arbitrariness. University officials and local authorities can assert authority and control by invoking relevant regulations. However, they face uncertainty too, encountering difficulties in understanding application procedures and legal frameworks, and not knowing how to resolve administrative obstacles and legal conflicts. Moreover, the siloed structure of the Vietnamese administration, with its numerous institutions of highly particularistic natures (Gainsborough, 2010), presents communication challenges that can hinder the smooth process of gaining field access. Concurrently, universities and local authorities arbitrarily enforce the law, leaving researchers and citizens unsure of their rights and the most effective approach to navigating challenges and power dynamics.

Institutional uncertainty is a prominent feature of the Vietnamese governance system, which amalgamates tenets derived from socialism and neoliberalism (London, 2011; Nguyen & Chen, 2017; Pannier & Bruckert, 2024). This mode of governance, known as “regulatory uncertainty” (Endres, 2013, p. 358), is an effective method for the state to exert control over its citizens.

As Gainsborough (2010, p. 181) argues, "keeping people in a state of uncertainty about what they can and cannot do is a sure way of exercising power over them." Our experiences establishing field access confirm this use of uncertainty as a governance tool, necessitating the development of a range of trial-and-error-based strategies. Vietnamese citizens employ similar approaches to cope with the daily uncertainties they encounter when interacting with the administration and regulations.

The coercive dominance of the Vietnamese One-Party State is balanced by accommodation at the grassroots level. This creates a dialogic perspective and mediation spaces where everyday relations between the state and society are negotiated (Koh, 2006). Previous studies have shown how urban residents, traders and farmers navigate and take advantage of institutional uncertainty using negotiation, networking, rule circumvention, flexibility, and the performance of moral identity (Endres, 2013, 2014; Horat, 2017; Lam, 2019). These strategies align with our understanding of trial-and-error, involving familiarisation, networking, and improvisation. However, further exploration and conceptual development of these strategies within specific institutional and law enforcement contexts is required.

Overall, our argument that trial-and-error is a central mechanism for coping with institutional uncertainty and arbitrariness in everyday life offers valuable insights into the dynamics of institutions and society in Vietnam. These daily navigational strategies are not only limited by the constraints imposed by an authoritarian power. Uncertainty can also create opportunities and spaces of freedom. Similar to farmers and traders in the Red River Delta or small vendors on the Chinese border, inconsistencies and exceptions in the enforcement of laws offer negotiation spaces and windows of opportunity for individuals. This pattern reflects the broader social and political norms in Vietnamese society, which are governed by rigid frameworks but allow for flexibility and improvisation in their practical implementation.

While the process of trial-and-error enables us to acquire insights regarding everyday politics in Vietnam (Gainsborough, 2010; Kerkvliet, 2001; Koh, 2006), it also offers valuable information for contextualising the validity and significance of research data in relation to freedom and monitoring, red and grey lines, and ethical concerns. Proposing a comprehensive strategy for securing field access to research sites in an uncertain and bureaucratic setting that holds significant utility and academic relevance. In recent decades, international academic institutions and scholarly research have placed a high priority on ethical conduct. Particularly in studies involving human subjects or genetic resources, obtaining ethics approval from boards or committees has become an indispensable requirement. However, concerns have been raised regarding the suitability of ethics approval processes for social science research, citing a tendency towards risk aversion, excessive protection of research subjects, and overly stringent procedures that may hamper field investigations (Macnamara, 2024). While there is a standardisation of ethical protocols and procedures aimed at establishing secure field access and safeguarding research subjects at academic and institutional levels, there remains a lack of cohesive discussions on how to effectively build field access and navigate complex settings characterised by institutional uncertainty and arbitrariness.

The literature on field access in authoritarian settings in Asia, specifically in Vietnam, China, and Laos, as well as in other regions, offers extremely valuable insights, lessons, and practical recommendations (Le Meur, 2014; Michaud, 2010; Salemink, 2015; Turner, 2010, 2013c). However, there is a lack of studies that present comprehensive frameworks that can be applied in diverse contexts. This article contributes to ongoing discussions by presenting an all-encompassing strategy, focusing on securing field access and defining research parameters. If tested in other settings, this overarching strategy has the potential to be developed into a comprehensive framework. There are several areas that warrant further consideration.

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For instance, it is important to examine how researchers' positionality, including factors such as nationality, racial and ethnic background, gender, professional status, discipline, university of origin, funding, and the influence of supervisors for students, might impact trial-and-error dynamics at different stages of field access building. Specifically, it is crucial to consider the impact of these effects on key factors such as familiarisation, networking, and improvisation. Additionally, it is worth investigating whether the process of research co-construction between foreign and local researchers and institutions, which is currently emphasised in sustainability science, can facilitate or hinder field access in Vietnam and other (non)socialist and (non)authoritarian settings.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable—no new data generated.

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ENDNOTES

[i] It excludes research involving overseas students under the supervision of faculty.

[ii] Field investigations pose ethical challenges that researchers need to address. One such challenge is the protection of research subjects, who may face scrutiny from government officials as a result of their participation in the study. Additionally, researchers should carefully consider how to compensate informants for their contributions, whether through financial means or other appropriate methods, to address disparities in wealth (Turner, 2010). Offering compensation to participants in research studies raises ethical concerns regarding the necessity for informed consent and can potentially impact the recruitment of subjects as well as the data obtained (Head, 2009).

[iii] The People's Committee is responsible for organising and overseeing the implementation of the Constitution, laws, and written decisions of higher-level State authorities, as well as the resolutions of the People's Council at the same level of governance.

[iv] All police services are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Public Security and operate at provincial and district levels.

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