

RETHINKING POVERTY AND PEASANT IN VIETNAM AFTER
REVOLUTION AND WAR

by

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ABSTRACT

A discussion of rural poverty necessarily involves two slippery concepts: that of the peasant and that of poverty. The early 1970s marked the beginning of renewed interest among Western scholars in uncovering the nature of the peasantry. Their efforts focused on how to define the peasants as well as how to evaluate their behaviour. Today the debate between the "moral economist" and the "rational peasant" schools remains controversial. And as for poverty itself, there is no agreement among sociologists as to what is poverty and why poverty exists in almost all societies throughout time.

This M.A. thesis will examine the plight of Vietnamese intellectuals in post-revolutionary (1954) Vietnam in their attempt to solve rural poverty. Similar to Western sociologists, Vietnamese thinkers are in a quandary about the problem of poverty. The definition and solutions are not conclusive, and they change with the political climate. For the Vietnamese, however, the re-assessment of rural poverty presents a graver consequence: the re-defining of the nature of the peasantry. It is no longer satisfactory to view the peasants as the embodiment of communalistic traditions; the Vietnamese thinkers are conceding that perhaps there was never any innate qualities about the peasants that made them more inclined toward collectivization rather than private ownership. In effect, the re-evaluation of the nature of the peasantry is a challenge to the *raison d'etre* of the Vietnamese Socialist program and ultimately, the Socialist Revolution itself.

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INTRODUCTION

A discussion of rural poverty necessarily involves two slippery concepts: that of the peasant and that of poverty. The early 1970s marked the beginning of renewed interest among Western scholars in uncovering the nature of the Southeast Asian peasantry. Their efforts focused on how to define peasants as well as how to evaluate their behaviour. Today the debate between the "moral economist" school and the "rational peasant" school remains controversial.¹ And as for poverty itself, there is no agreement among sociologists as to what is poverty and why poverty exists in almost all societies throughout time.

The word poverty conjures up a variety of divergent images: famine in African countries, street children in Rio de Janeiro, homeless beggars in cities around the world, the slums of the American inner-cities, the Indians on North American reserves, as well as images of single mothers on welfare and the elderly on pensions. Not surprisingly, there is a lack of consensus among social researchers on a definition for this elusive concept. It is even more difficult for historians who try to study the nature and

¹ James Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976); Samuel Popkin, The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Journal of Asian Studies, vol 42(4) 1983, contains a symposium on the moral versus rational economic approaches.

causes of poverty in past societies, since many of the concepts used to measure poverty (such as the "poverty line") were developed at the turn of the century.²

This thesis will examine the challenge of Vietnamese intellectuals in post-revolutionary Vietnam in their attempt to solve rural poverty. Their struggle involves not only untangling the elusive concept of poverty, but also re-assessing the nature of the peasantry. Similar to Western sociologists, Vietnamese thinkers are in a quandary about the problem of poverty. The definitions and solutions are not conclusive, and they change with the political climate. For the Vietnamese, however, the re-assessment of rural poverty presents a graver consequence: the re-defining of the nature of the peasantry. In the 1990s as Vietnam's economy undergoes a major re-orientation away from the orthodox socialist path, it is no longer satisfactory to view the peasants as the embodiment of communalistic traditions; the Vietnamese thinkers are conceding that perhaps there were never any innate qualities about the peasants that made them more inclined toward collectivization rather than private ownership. In effect, the re-evaluation of the nature of the peasantry is a challenge to the *raison d'être* of the Vietnamese Socialist program and ultimately, the Socialist Revolution itself.

² Gertrude Himmelfarb, Poverty and Compassion (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 104.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first section will explore the various meanings of the concepts poverty and peasant. It will become clear that these two terms have contested definitions and explanations. In this section some explanations for Third World underdevelopment will also be briefly examined.

The second part will focus on selective Vietnamese writings about rural poverty in the period between the 1940s and the early 1970s. The mid-1930s to the mid-1940s saw an emerging sensibility among Vietnamese intellectuals toward the countryside and its inhabitants. During this period Vietnamese fiction flourished, with a great deal of the writings focusing on the lives and the poverty of Vietnamese peasants. I will present a small sample of the works of the Self-Reliance Literary Group (*Tu Luc Van Doan*). Through their literature members of this group such as Nhat Linh, Khai Hung and Thach Lam showed a deep concern for the peasants who suffered injustice and poverty under French colonialism. In addition, this section will examine the writings of the reform-minded, French-educated intellectuals in the journal Thanh Nghi. Published during the Second World War (1939 to 1945) this journal broke ground in its attempts to analyze poverty and to suggest concrete practical solutions for the problem. In contrast to the theorizing of non-communist thinkers, communists' explanations for poverty during this period emphasized imperialistic and capitalistic exploitation of the peasants. Consequently, the communists'

remedies for rural poverty centred upon land reform, which subsequently led to agricultural collectivization.

The third section of the thesis will focus on writings of the late 1970s to 1990s. By the late 1970s it had become evident that Vietnamese agricultural collectivization was not achieving success, for Vietnam's countryside was still underdeveloped and poor. This section will discuss the reasons for the failures of the agricultural collectivization policies as well as the challenges such failures meant for the Vietnamese communists' theories about poverty and the peasantry. A focus will be on the writings of Vietnamese historians in the book, Nong Thon Viet Nam Trong Lich Su, (Vietnamese Villages in History). This book, published in 1977, was the Vietnamese communists' last major scholarly attempt to bolster their collectivization-oriented theories about the nature of the peasantry, of the peasant economy, and of poverty.

The relative relaxation on censorship which accompanied Vietnam's major "renovation" in the 1980s and 1990s has led to a profusion of new discussion about rural poverty in contemporary Vietnam. The move away from a centrally planned command economy has allowed intellectuals to contemplate a more varied slate of causes and remedies for poverty. Thus the articles found in the academic journals in the 1980s and 1990s move radically away from the thinking of Nong Thon Viet Nam in the late 1970s. Indeed, in their admission that the earlier policies of collectivization were incorrect, the

Vietnamese thinkers are now reverting to explanations and solutions for poverty that had been advocated by earlier moderate liberal thinkers, such as those of the journal Thanh Nghi in the 1940s. It seems that Vietnamese thinking about poverty, peasantry and economic development has come full circle.

I. POVERTY, PEASANT AND UNDERDEVELOPMENT

The Concept of Poverty

The definition and explanations of poverty have perplexed sociologists of many countries throughout history. In the 1960s in the wake of Michael Harrington's The Other America--which publicized the problem of poverty in the affluent American society--there was a resurgence of interest in poverty research among North American social scientists. The great amount of research was undertaken to identify, measure, and fight poverty. The prevalence of the sociological writing also prodded the American and the Canadian governments to wage their respective "war on poverty". As of 1994, however, poverty has yet to be defeated, and indeed it may be escalating.

The poverty discussion had, in fact, begun much earlier than the 1960s. The intellectual historian Gertrude Himmelfarb's two large volumes regarding the notion of poverty in the early industrial and late Victorian England, reveal how much had been theorized, written, and debated on the concept of poverty in the nineteenth century. Himmelfarb observed that there was no linear development of the concept of poverty from regressive to progressive attitudes toward the poor. Instead, the historical changes in the conception oscillated like a pendulum between "punitive, repressive

policies and generous, melioratory ones."³ Himmelfarb also noted that in "tracing the history of the idea of poverty...one is startled to find how rapidly it changes".⁴ Surveys of more recent sociological works also show that the concept of poverty is still very tentative. According to the Chinese sociologists, Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing, there is no consensus among scholars as to the definition of poverty.⁵ The dominance of one view over another greatly depends upon the specific time and society that is being described.

Coupled with these different definitions are different theories for the causes of poverty. Consider American writing on rural poverty as an example. Explanations for American rural poverty went through three phases in the last 70 years.⁶ In the 1920s and 1930s rural poverty in America was believed to be caused by the undeveloped economic and political structure. This is referred to as the "regionalist" theory. Proponents of this school believed that the economic structure of the American South (where rural poverty was and still is a problem), was the result of its backward structure. The solution, therefore, was "economic restructuring". In the 1960s, a second phase and a

³ Gertrude Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, England in the Early Industrial Age (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 6.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵ Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing, "Zhongguo Xiangcun Pingkun Xianshi Jieshi Zhi Changshi" [The Attempts to Explain the Reality of Poverty in China's Countryside], Shehui Xue Yanjiu [Sociological Research], Beijing, (5) 1992, p. 91.

⁶ Alice O'Connor, "Modernization and the Rural Poor: Some Lessons from History", in Cynthia Duncan, ed., Rural Poverty in America (New York: Auburn House, 1992), pp.215-233.

new theory emerged which began to link culture with poverty. The "culture of poverty" theory is often associated with anthropologist Oscar Lewis whose research on poor Mexican families in 1959 first popularized this concept.⁷ This theory associates poverty with backward, pre-modern, traditionalist cultures. According to Eleanor Leacock, an American anthropologist, the "culture of poverty" assumes that an

autonomous subculture exists among the poor, one which is self-perpetuating and self-defeating. This subculture, it is argued, involves a sense of resignation or fatalism and an inability to put off the satisfaction of immediate desires in order to plan for the future.⁸

This line of reasoning focuses on aspects of a group's culture that do not resemble the culture of the "industrious" middle class and categorizes these cultural practices as negative. In the third phase, in the 1970s, American rural poverty was examined not as something peculiarly national but in light of theories for world poverty. The idea of a "vicious circle" became prominent during this time. It was thought that a society was poor because it lacked capital; and because it lacked capital it lacked education, social welfare, technology--all of which in turn made it difficult to accumulate capital. Therefore, according to this explanation, the causes and consequences of poverty were inter-changeable.⁹

⁷ Kenneth Deavers and Robert Hoppe, "Overview of the Rural Poor in the 1980s", in Cynthia Duncan, ed., Rural Poverty in America, p. 7.

⁸ Eleanor Leacock, ed., The Culture of Poverty (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), p. 11.

⁹ John Galbraith, The Nature of Mass Poverty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

It appears that the definition of poverty and the explanation for the problem change with the changing social values and times. Thus, depending on the socio-political climate, certain theories will take precedence over others. In addition to the changing definition of poverty through time, poverty is thought by some to be different for developed and undeveloped societies. D. Whyte stated that poverty is "phenomenologically" different in a modern industrialized society than in a pre-industrial or non-industrial society.¹⁰ Poverty of the non-industrialized countries tends to affect the masses, as opposed to affecting just pockets of under-privileged people as it does in industrialized countries. In addition, in the developing countries one is usually talking about "absolute" poverty. Sociologists often describe the present poverty in the developed country as "relative deprivation" because most poor people experience poverty in relation to others in society or to an expected minimum standard of living. Absolute poverty, on the other hand, is an objective condition. In terms of poverty in contemporary rural Vietnam, we are talking about absolute poverty. The Vietnamese researcher, Nguyen Sinh, made the definition more explicit; he classified the poor of 1992 as those who go hungry for three to five months a year.¹¹

¹⁰ Donald Whyte, "Sociological Aspects of poverty: A Conceptual Analysis", in W. E. Mann, ed., Poverty and social Policy in Canada (Toronto: the Copp Clark Publishing Co., 1970), p. 3.

¹¹ Nguyen Sinh, "Su phan hoa giao ngheo o nong thon hien nay", (The Present Disparity Between the Rich and Poor in the Countryside) Tap Chi Cong San, 9, 1992, p. 49.

Nguyen Sinh's definition of the poor fits into what sociologists call the "subsistence-level" approach to poverty. Proponents of this approach define poverty as the deprivation of the basic materials needed for life. The subsistence-level approach is associated with the late-nineteenth century social researcher Seebohm Rowntree who surveyed the working people's living conditions in the city of York, England.¹² According to Himmelfarb, it was Rowntree who first popularized the term "poverty line" which is still used today to measure poverty.

The subsistence-level approach has been criticized by poverty researchers such as Peter Townsend for its vagueness and arbitrariness with regard to what should be considered "adequate nutritional requirements",¹³ and by the Chinese sociologists Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing for treating people like animals and looking only at their biological needs.¹⁴ Amartya Sen, however, made an important point in defence of the subsistence-level approach. Sen reminded us that malnutrition is still central to the concept of poverty, especially when one is looking at the third world: "while it can hardly be denied that malnutrition captures only one aspect of our idea of poverty, it is an important aspect, and

¹² Himmelfarb, Poverty and Passion, pp. 169-178.

¹³ Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 12-13.

¹⁴ Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing, "Zhongguo Xiangcun Pingkun Xianshi Jieshi Zhi Changshi", p 97.

one that is particularly important for many developing countries".¹⁵

For our discussion about poverty in rural Vietnam, the use of the subsistence-level approach is more appropriate than other approaches such as the inequality approach. The inequality approach, advocated by S. Miller and P. Roby, focuses not on poverty but on the gap between the rich and poor.¹⁶ While it is true that with the recent economic changes there has been a growing disparity between the rich and poor in Vietnam, poverty existed even before the emergence of extreme inequality. Again, I will quote Sen who argued that the inequality approach does not deal adequately with poverty itself: "inequality is fundamentally a different issue from poverty ...Inequality and poverty are not, of course, unrelated. But neither concept subsumes the other."¹⁷ In some situations, inequality may partly explain poverty, but not all poverty is caused by inequality, and not all inequality results in poverty. In Vietnam factors such as overpopulation, land scarcity, foreign domination, war, natural calamities, and government mismanagement all, at different times and to different extents, played some role in contributing to rural poverty.

¹⁵ Sen, Poverty and Famines, p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

What is a Peasant?

In 1973, in an article entitled, "A Note on the Definition of Peasants", Sidney Mintz, quoting Teodor Shanin, stated that it is "amusing, if not grotesque" that scholars do not have an agreement on whether or not the peasant exists.¹⁸ It is not surprising that scholars are in this predicament with this term "peasant". In most of the non-western world, a large portion of the population is said to belong to this category "peasant". Thus scholars trying to define and describe a peasant are, in effect, trying to categorize a great number of the world's people under one term. Nevertheless, within the academic discourse this is a legitimate category, and scholars not only define peasants, but also attempt to explain their nature and actions.

According to some specialists on peasants (in particular, Teodor Shanin and Eric Wolf), the "critical diagnostic feature of peasant status" is their position as "underdogs" within the society.¹⁹ The common characteristics of a peasantry are: "cash-oriented agricultural production, structural subordination to the state and other external forces, small-community settlement, and a familial basis for economic activity."²⁰ These descriptions correspond closely to James Scott's view of the peasants.

¹⁸ Mintz, Sidney, "A Note on the Definition of Peasantries", The Journal of Peasant Studies, vol 1(1), 1973, pp 91-106.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

James Scott's name is intimately associated with the term "moral economy", a phrase coined by E.P. Thompson but developed by Scott.²¹ Other specialists on peasant society such as Eric Wolf and Barrington Moore have also espoused this line of thinking in explaining the peasants' world view, but it is Scott who formulated the moral economy theory, and it is his name that fronts the dispute against the likes of Samuel Popkin, the contender for the "political-economist" theory.²²

Scott maintained that precolonial village life was a closed corporate world in which complex social arrangements functioned to protect and preserve its integrity. These social relationships ensured the survival of the majority of its members as well as preserved the structure and culture of the society. Living within such social arrangements, peasants developed a certain "notion of economic justice" and "definition of exploitation" that Scott calls their "moral economy".²³ An important element of the peasants' moral economy is a "subsistence ethic". Scott argued that since living-conditions were precarious for many peasants, their first and greatest concern was day-to-day survival. Peasants' choices, therefore, tended to reflect this need for the security to subsist. Peasants, for instance, would

²¹ Charles Keyes, "Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies: Moral and Rational Economic Approaches -- A Symposium Introduction", Journal of Asian Studies, vol 42 (4), 1983, p. 754.

²² Samuel Popkin, The Rational Peasant.

²³ Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant, p. 3.

choose a more reliable crop strain over a profitable but risky one because in living near the edge of destitution, peasants would opt for "safety-first". For the peasants, the right to subsist had become a standard, the minimum guarantee they expected from their society. Scott maintained that when this right was infringed upon, when their social arrangements and rituals no longer ensured their survival, peasants would become angry, and rebellions would become imminent.

In Scott's theory the village plays an important role in providing peasants with guarantees for a minimum level of subsistence. In the traditional (ie. precolonial) village there was a "conservative egalitarianism" that insured that everyone had a place and a means to subsist, but not that everyone should have equal wealth.²⁴ This egalitarianism was enforced by tradition, village rules and public opinion. Thus Scott's theory suggests that the "ethics of subsistence and reciprocity govern the development of village welfare and social-insurance institutions as well as rebellion."²⁵

In reaction to Scott's explanation for peasant behaviour, Samuel Popkin's theory of the "rational peasant" portrays the peasants as individualistic, rational people who aim to maximize their own personal benefits and not those of the village. Popkin argued that what he meant by individualistic is not necessarily selfishness; peasants

²⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁵ David Feeny, "Peasant Strategies in Asian Societies", Journal of Asian Studies, vol 42 (4) 1983, p. 769.

might very well care for the village's welfare, but their prime concern lay with the well-being of their own family.²⁶ Therefore, even though it might have made sense to participate in village-based welfare arrangements, a peasant family might choose not to participate because of the uncertainties of such schemes resulting from the problem of "free-riders" and untrustworthy leadership:

whenever there is coordinated action to produce collective goods, individuals may calculate they are better off not contributing. As long as they cannot be excluded from the good, there is the potential for free riders, individuals who do not contribute to the provision of goods because they believe they will receive the gain or security even if they do not participate.²⁷

Thus in Popkin's "political economy" theory of peasant behaviour, the peasant is a rational economic maximizer, who is guided by "investment logic" and will only participate in collective activities that are secure and guarantee some concrete benefits to that particular individual.

At the heart of the "moral economy" versus "rational peasant" debate is, as David Feeny put it, the basic issue of "individual versus collective rationality and what motivates the individual's behaviour."²⁸ This basic issue of communalism versus individualism had been addressed by George Foster in an article written about a decade before Scott's and Popkin's debate erupted. Foster wrote: "People who see themselves in 'threatened' circumstances...react normally in

²⁶ Popkin, The Rational Peasant, p. 31.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 779.

one of two ways: maximum cooperation and sometimes communism, burying individual differences and placing sanctions against individualism; or extreme individualism."²⁹ According to Foster, peasants always chose the second alternative: individualism.

George Foster explained this peculiar disposition of peasants toward individualism with his theory, the "image of limited good".³⁰ According to Foster, peasants perceived their environment as a place in which good things were limited. As a consequence of this belief that there is limited good, peasants believed that any amount of happiness or wealth they received was gained at the expense of other people in the community. This world view translated into their suspicious nature, their distrust of collective activities, their tendency to gossip, and their inability to accumulate wealth. Consequently, this "mentality of mutual distrust" of the peasants insured that collective actions among peasants were difficult to organize.

There are many inconsistencies in Foster's theory of peasant world view. One problem concerns Foster's explanation of why peasants were poor. Foster argued that as a consequence of the belief in the "limited good", there were public sanctions against an individual's accumulation of wealth, and thus peasants who did come into riches felt the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 310.

³⁰ George Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good", Jack Potter, May Diaz and George Foster, eds., Peasant Society (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), pp 300-323.

pressure to neutralize this by throwing expensive feasts. This ensured that the status quo was maintained. Certainly, this redistribution of wealth had played an important role in Vietnamese villages as way to reinforce village hierarchy and customs. Nevertheless, community sanction in the form of "gossip, slander, backbiting, [and] character assassination,"³¹ would not have had much impact on people's behaviour if they were not dependent on their community. In other words, if peasants were as individualistic as Foster claimed, and if they lived with a greater degree of independence from their society than urbanites, then why would communal sanctions have affected them anymore than people in urban, industrial societies? Individualism (along with thrift and hard work) has always been a trait used to explain the prosperity in Western societies. And yet, among peasants, individualism was a trait that Foster claimed have stunted economic development because it made peasants distrustful of community welfare and capital accumulation.³²

Although there are many holes in Foster's universal explanation of the nature of the peasants, his image of the peasant is presented here because it is a recurring image found in Vietnamese theorists' works. In Vietnamese

³¹ Ibid., p.314.

³² Foster suggested that peasants' "limited good" world view also explains the popularity of lotteries in underdeveloped countries. According to Foster, peasants resort to lotteries because getting rich through luck does not threaten the status quo as much as when an individual becomes rich through their own efforts. It would be interesting to see how Foster would account for the enormous amount of money Canadians spend on national and provincial lotteries. Perhaps Canadians are all peasants.

communist and non-communist thinking the peasants are perceived as an "individualistic, suspicious, envious, and uncooperative"³³ class of people who resist and hinder community development and progress. Another image of the peasant, however, exists side-by-side with this individualist characterization. The peasant as victim image (as depicted by Wolf and Shanin) also features very prominently in the thinking about peasants in both communist and non-communist Vietnamese writings.

This contradictory view of the peasants as both aggressive individualists and passive victims, is not confined to Vietnam, as Charles Hayford's work on rural China shows. Hayford noted that since the mid-1930s, when Chinese peasants were being mobilized to fight the Japanese, the Chinese intellectuals' opinion about the peasantry changed: "the vast countryside became a resource, and the village no longer China's shame, but China's hope."³⁴ According to Hayford, the peasant moved from being despised in literature during the New Culture Movement (1917-1923) to being pitied as "victim of soluble oppression" in the literature of the 1930s.³⁵

Of particular interest to this discussion is, of course, the Marxist view of the peasants. It is well known that Marxist theory had predicted the disappearance of the

³³ Ibid., p. 296.

³⁴ Charles Hayford, To the People: James Yen and Village China, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, p. 111.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

peasantry as a productive class. Although it is debatable how Karl Marx himself felt toward the potential of Russian communes in the days before the emancipation of the serfs, the widely read works of Marx and Engels advanced the belief that the peasantry must necessarily be destroyed in the historical progress.³⁶ Opposite to this view were the populist beliefs of such Russian intellectuals as Alexander Herzen, M. A. Bakunin, and A.V. Chayanov who saw the Russian communes as an "embryo of 'complete socialistic self-government'".³⁷ Those champions of peasants argued that not only were village-based organizations more humane than capitalist-based ones, but that the peasant family unit provided a strong economic structure. Chayanov, for example, believed that because peasant families would exploit themselves in order to maintain their present status, peasant farms were (or could have been) more competitive than large-scale capitalist ones.³⁸

In a recent article on Chinese peasantry Myron Cohen revived the populists' appraisal of the peasant household. Refuting the image of the "backward" peasant, Cohen focused

³⁶ Robert Bideleux made an argument that in Marx's later writing he was more optimistic about the fate and potential of village communes than in the earlier works. Robert Bideleux, Communism and Development (London: Methuen and Co., 1985), ch. 1; Leonard Schapiro also suggested that Marx was more ambivalent toward the Russian communes than Engels. Leonard Schapiro, "Marxism in Russia", Ellen Dahrendorf, ed., Russian Studies (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), pp.131-155.

³⁷ Bideleux, Communism and Development, p. 31.

³⁸ D. Thorner, "Chayanov's Concept of Peasant Economy", in A. V. Chayanov, The Theory of Peasant Economy (Homewood, Ill.: R. D. Irwin, 1966), p. xviii.

on a positive aspect of the Chinese peasantry that has contributed to China's modernization: the peasant family.³⁹ Unlike Chayanov's victimized peasant family that exploited itself in order to survive, the Chinese peasant family, according to Cohen, is comparable to a business enterprise that has, since the late imperial period, been a flexible economic unit, straddling both agricultural and commercial sectors. Diversification has always been a part of a family's survival strategy, and thus "it was common for shops and firms to be run by families who also owned farms and had some of their members working them."⁴⁰ The deployment of family members in different economic sectors also meant that often not all members were working and living in the same area; a peasant family, for example, might have members working in the cities as well as working on the land. Cohen adroitly pointed this out in order to challenge the validity of the "peasant" category.

Cohen explained that the Chinese term for peasant, *nongmin*, did not appear in Chinese dictionaries until the recent decades.⁴¹ The adoption of the term "peasant", along with terms such as "feudal", "custom" and "superstition" to describe the traditional Chinese society, was part of the Chinese intellectuals' process of cultural invention in the twentieth century. According to Cohen, Marxist and non-

³⁹ Myron Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese 'Peasant'", *Daedalus*, vol 122 (2), Spring 1993.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

Marxist intellectuals needed to create a dichotomy between the "old" and "modern" societies so as to justify their desire for revolution. Thus, Cohen objected to other scholars' persistent use of the term "peasant" as a way to describe the Chinese countryside: "There were always many peasants who were not farmers; the fact that this is increasingly true does not yet appear to have altered perception of the countryside."⁴²

The challenge Cohen poses for scholars of peasant studies are many. First of all, with regard to the Chinese Communist Revolution, Cohen's article suggests that there was no "evil old society" from which to rescue the Chinese population, since the "old society" was part of the cultural invention of the Chinese intellectuals. On a more general level, the article suggests that peasants did not exist as an identifiable group of people, who could be categorized under one heading. Consequently, not only was there no "old society" to revolutionize in absolute terms, but there were also few stereotypical peasants to liberate.

For Vietnamese rural experts, the controversy does not revolve so much around "peasant" *per se*. The key term in the discussion about the countryside is "village". Like peasant, the term village in Vietnamese history conjures up a singular image: a closed, communally-oriented society protected by a

⁴² Ibid., p. 157.

thick bamboo wall.⁴³ Recent works of Vietnamese scholars, however, emphasize the complexities and differences among Vietnamese villages, especially the large differences between Northern and Southern villages. As the notion "peasant" has been challenged, so has the singular image of the Vietnamese village been under fire. At issue are the different origins of villages, the nature of landownership systems, and the diversity in organization and structure of villages. These issues will be discussed later. The point to be made here is that village study is critical in Vietnam, for the justification of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution hinges upon the definition of the nature of the Vietnamese village.

In a recent article surveying the achievements of Vietnamese rural historians, the author, Phan Dai Doan (a well-established state expert on the villages in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam) showed that although much has been done in the field, much is still not yet understood.

Phan Dai Doan wrote:

Village research is essentially the study of the Vietnamese society before capitalism; it is the search for understanding of the society the 'night before' our socialist revolution. It is, therefore, a task of great practical importance that urgently demands the research efforts of historians⁴⁴

In addition, the author added that the bitter (*gay gat*) experience of the 1970s has made the research into the

⁴³ This stereotype is based on Northern villages. Southern villages have been found to be more loosely structured and organized.

⁴⁴ Phan Dai Doan, "May Van De Ve Lang Xa-Viet-Nam" Nghien Cuu Lich Su, 1&2, 1987, p. 8.

village even more urgent. It appears that the bitter experience to which the author was referring was the failure of collectivization to transform the villages as expected, and the emergence of family-based economy (or small producer). According to Phan Dai Doan, since Vietnam did not go through a proper bourgeois revolution, much of the village's feudal heritage is re-emerging and affecting the present. Therefore, he felt that it was extremely important to pursue more research into the nature of Vietnamese villages, since--he warned the readers with the paradox--"the past is still the present".⁴⁵

The Poverty Issue in "Underdevelopment"

Connected to the discussion of poverty is the debate about development and underdevelopment. The term "underdevelopment" (or less developed countries--LDC) is often used to refer to the state of a country's economy, society and politics. The standards for judging a country's developed or underdeveloped status are set by the western democracies; indeed, the standards are the western democracies. The characteristics of developed societies supposedly are industrialization, modernization, economic growth, social mobility and political stability. Poverty is assumed to be part and parcel of the LDC's plethora of

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

problems. This section will examine some Western explanations for underdevelopment in Asia, and in particular, Vietnam. First, however, a brief look at how the concept of "development" has evolved.

H. W. Arndt in his book, Economic Development: The History of an Idea, stated that the term "development" has come to mean everything good: "everyman's road to utopia".⁴⁶ Arndt's book traces the changing trend of the concept of economic development. It was only after World War Two that the notion of economic development became thought of as a uniform global process.⁴⁷ Like the concept of poverty, the idea of development underwent many changes. According to Arndt, at the beginning of the 1950s development was believed to be synonymous with economic growth. Development policies, therefore, focused on the LDC's lack of capital, and economists concentrated on stimulating economic growth. In the 1960s the interpretation of economic development was widened to include human potential. Incidentally, this coincided with the popularization of the "culture of poverty" theory especially among American anthropologists and sociologists at that time. The emphasis, therefore, was directed toward educating, and providing technical assistance and training for the populations of the LDC.⁴⁸ In the 1970s, however, the developed countries and their institutions (such

⁴⁶ H. W. Arndt, Economic Development: The History of an Idea (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp 60-72.

as the World Bank) began to stress the problem of poverty as something that persisted even though there was economic growth. In other words, the Western economists were discovering that even though a country's gross national product (GNP) might be growing, poverty still remained a problem. Consequently, various organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) began focusing on "income distribution", and "inequality" and the organization launched programs aimed at providing the minimum requirements for people. The ILO's definition of basic needs went beyond that of the subsistence-level approach, including not only such things as food, clothing and shelter, but also humane treatment, freedom and political participation. Thus the concept of development has become more comprehensive, entailing social justice, political freedom as well as economic growth.

According to Gunnar Myrdal (the economist whose mammoth work on world poverty will be discussed in more detail further on), in the post-World War II period, Western economists only became interested in issues of underdevelopment because it was politically and economically profitable to do so.⁴⁹ In the era of Cold War rivalry, decolonization, and increasing demand for new markets, Western economists and politicians began to pay attention to the poverty of the LDC. Before World War II, during the

⁴⁹ Gunnar Myrdal, The Challenge of World Poverty, A World Anti-Poverty Program in Outline (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 6-7.

period of colonialism, for obvious reasons, few Western economists studied the underdevelopment of the colonies. Those who did usually blamed the climate and geography as causes of poverty. It was accepted that people were poor because they belonged to a "backward region":

It was taken as established by experience that the peoples in the backward regions were so constituted that they reacted differently from Europeans: they normally did not respond positively to opportunities for improving their incomes and levels of living. Their tendency toward idleness and inefficiency and their reluctance to seek wage employment were seen as expressions of their wantlessness, very limited economic horizons, survival-mindedness, self-sufficiency, carefree disposition, and preference for a leisurely life.⁵⁰

Such explanations for colonial poverty absolved the colonial powers from any blame. During the period of French colonization of Indochina two prominent European scholars, the French economist Charles Robequain and the Belgian geographer Pierre Gourou pioneered the examination of Indochinese underdevelopment.

To Charles Robequain, the cause the of miserable lot of Vietnamese peasants was quite simply overpopulation. Writing in 1939, Robequain ascribed to the Malthusian notion of poverty. The early nineteenth-century philosopher Thomas Malthus' formulation of poverty was of course based on the belief that the pressure of the population outweighs the power of the earth's resources: "'Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.4.

increases only in an arithmetical ratio'".⁵¹ Holding a pessimistic view that a human being's drive for food and sex is a basic law of nature, Malthus argued against extending relief to the poor because such a practice could cause more poverty. According to Malthus, what was needed was moral restraint in society.

Similarly, Robequain saw the need for restraint in the birth rate of the "natives" of Indochina. Robequain attributed the high increase in population to the French colonists who decreased Indochina's mortality rate with "a raised standard of living, the establishment of laws and order and above all, the curbing of epidemics by mass vaccination".⁵² Thus, by improving the living standard, the colonists had actually contributed to the increase in poverty. This created a dilemma for the French colonists: "This is a difficult problem to solve and one of the white man's greatest burdens. Will he not be worn out in his double attempt to increase the native's life span and feed him better?".⁵³ Robequain, therefore, suggested the Malthusian solution: "It may be that birth control is the only solution".⁵⁴

To be fair, Robequain was highly sympathetic to the plight of the poor "natives" under French domination. He was

⁵¹ As quoted by Himmelfarb, The Idea of Poverty, p. 105.

⁵² Charles Robequain, The Economic Development of French Indochina, trans. by I. Ward (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p.47.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 345.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

certainly aware that since the French had colonized Indochina, the problem of peasant indebtedness had increased. This indebtedness forced many peasants to sell their land to rich landlords.⁵⁵ Thus, the French had "unwittingly" increased the "so-called 'proletariat' class in Indo-China" by encouraging the policies of high interest rates and land speculation.⁵⁶ In other words, French colonial activities had led to an increase of those who were landless or did not have enough land for subsistence. However, despite this admission, Robequain continued to emphasize overpopulation as the main cause of not only poverty, but also of the deterioration of village social welfare. According to Robequain, "surplus" population growth saturated the village's ability to care for and to distribute communal land to the poor.⁵⁷

Thus in Robequain's analysis, poverty in Indochina could be solved without challenging French Imperialism, without challenging the social-economic structure, and without any redistribution of land or wealth. To Robequain, the solution lay in French technology and education: "Following the introduction of Western techniques which on the whole were beneficial even though they seemed brutal at times, the next step is to instil a new spirit in the native, to interest him in improved and more productive methods of work".⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 347.

Although most of Robequain's data on overpopulation came from the research of his contemporary Pierre Gourou, Gourou himself was less assertive about the connection between overpopulation and poverty. Although Gourou's geographical study of the Tonkin Delta showed that the Red River Delta was overpopulated, Gourou stated that there was no hard evidence to maintain that the Delta could not produce enough food for its population:

Does the Tonkin Delta bear more inhabitants than it can feed?...We cannot give any conclusive answer to this question because we have no definitive figure on the quantity of food products that the Delta supplies. Rice-production figures are not fully known; as we have seen, it can be in great excess of the official estimates.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, Gourou inferred that overpopulation decreased the standard of living for the Vietnamese peasant. Comparing the soil fertility and population density of Europe and the Tonkin Delta, Gourou surmised that the high population density in North Vietnam must lead to poor living conditions.

However, according to Gourou, overpopulation was not the only cause of rural poverty. Gourou stated that improved technology, industrial development and migration would only slightly decrease the pressure on the land. Prohibiting land accumulation would be more effective:

All in all, the enterprise which would be most useful for the peasant would be an arrestation [sic] of the development of large landholding, and even a suppression of the large landholding

⁵⁹ Pierre Gourou, The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta, vol 2, trans. by Richard Miller (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, Inc., 1955), p. 658.

that already exists, if need be by agrarian laws, in order to avoid by a rent system the further reduction of the small income the agricultural worker wrests from a narrow strip of land.⁶⁰

Thus unlike Robequain who advocated the need to regulate birth rates, Gourou saw the need to control land concentration and landlord exploitation of peasants.

There is little doubt that French colonial policies adversely affected the living conditions of Vietnamese peasants.⁶¹ According to Pham Cao Duong's book Vietnamese Peasants Under French Domination, which was first published in Vietnamese in Saigon in 1967, the peasants under French colonialism were much worse off than before. Relying on surveys and data collected by French economists, geographers and demographers (especially those of Paul Bernard, Pierre Gourou, Yves Henry and G. Kherian), Pham Cao Duong argued that French colonialism not only produced an increasing number of landless peasants, but it also increased the burden of demands on peasants' income.⁶² According to Pham Cao Duong, the precolonial village communal land system insured that poor peasants had land to till and that land would not be accumulated in the hands of the elite:

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 664.

⁶¹ Lisa Drummond's (UBC graduate student) paper on the immiseration of the Red River Delta peasants during French colonial period concludes that "the situation of the rural peasant in Tonkin had in fact deteriorated significantly under the French colonial administration, through the progressive lessening of the peasants' control of the means of survival, primarily the rice harvest.", "Rural Immiseration in Colonial Tonkin", unpublished paper, p.40.

⁶² Pham Cao Duong, Vietnamese Peasants Under French Domination, 1861-1945 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

...thanks to the *cong dien* and the *cong tho* [communal rice fields] the tilling masses could have access to ownership of property. Even the *cung dinh* ("miserables" or proletarians) could receive a rice field to cultivate...; this enabled them to pay taxes and so fulfill their duties to their village.⁶³

As a result of such a land system, which was maintained by the precolonial central state as a way to minimize challenges from powerful elites, there was "relative equilibrium" in the traditional Vietnamese village.

The "proletarianization" of peasants along with the burden of direct and indirect taxes under French colonialism led to peasant indebtedness and poverty. Using data collected on family income and food consumption, Duong showed that the income of Vietnamese coolies and poor and medium peasant were barely sufficient to cover expenses and rents. In addition, Duong also maintains that average annual rice consumption for Vietnamese peasants decreased from 226 kilograms in 1900 to 182 kilograms in 1937.⁶⁴ Interestingly, Duong suggested that the consequences of poverty were high birth and death rates. Duong's opinion corresponds with that of G. Kherian, who stated: "Mass poverty must be considered as the origin of the high birth rate."⁶⁵ Note that this is the reversal of the relationship between overpopulation and poverty that was suggested by Charles Robequain. In contrast

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ Duong used data collected by Y. Henry and de Visme which estimated that the optimal level of rice ration was 337 kilograms. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶⁵ G. Kherian as cited by Duong, *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147.

to Kherian and Pham Cao Duong, Robequain argued that high birth rate caused poverty.

Neither Duong nor Kherian, however, provided any explanations for why poverty would cause a high birth rate. It may be useful at this point to bring in the argument of Benjamin White who employed the theory of "demand for labor" to explain Java's high population density.⁶⁶ White suggested that the particularities of Dutch colonialism and wet-rice cultivation in Indonesia created a need for peasant labor which was fulfilled by an increase in births. Like Pham Cao Duong, White argued that Western colonialism did not improve the lives of the peasants; Dutch intervention in Indonesia, in fact, provoked the Java war of 1825-1830, which was made all the more bloody by Dutch technologically advanced weapons.⁶⁷ According to White, what had caused the rise in birth rate was that peasant families needed the extra labor capacity to replace those members who had been forced into sugar cultivation for the Dutch.

Although the anthropologist Clifford Geertz refuted this argument by showing that sugar cultivation was seasonal and that the Javanese re-organized cultivation so that both export and subsistence farming could be achieved⁶⁸, White, nevertheless, made an important contribution in challenging

⁶⁶ Benjamin White, "Demand for Labor and Population Growth in Colonial Java", Human Ecology, vol 1(3), 1973, pp. 217-236.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 221-222.

⁶⁸ Clifford Geertz, "Comments on Benjamin White's 'Demands for Labor and Population Growth in Colonial Java'", Human Ecology, vol 1(3), 1973, pp. 237-239.

the conventional assumption that Western "techniques" decreased the mortality rate in the colonies. White argued that precolonial Javanese society had practised different methods of birth control including infanticide, but did not use them in the nineteenth century because it was beneficial for peasant families to have many children who could help with the labor-intensive wet-rice cultivation. Thus, on the individual level, high birth rate was a strategy for coping with oppressive colonial policies and dwindling resources. In White's analysis it was not so much the European colonialists' science and technology but rather the colonials' pauperization of the colonial societies that led to high birth rates and overpopulation.

A more direct attack on European colonial policies was waged by Martin Murray in his highly sophisticated and theoretical work, The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina. Using the theory of dependency, first employed in 1957 by Brazilian economist Celso Furtado to explain the poverty of Latin America⁶⁹, Murray showed that economic development in Indochina was hindered by the intervention of French colonialism. Murray argued that the process of primitive accumulation of capital leading to capitalist development was impeded because Indochina was integrated into the capitalist market economy as a peripheral appendage of the colonist metropolis.

⁶⁹ Arndt, Economic Development: The History of an Idea, p. 120.

As a colony, Indochina's surplus-value had to be transferred to France, either "indirectly through unequal exchange, or direct through the repatriation of a large share of the profits earned locally".⁷⁰ This diversion of capital to the metropolis left little for development in Indochina. Furthermore, Indochina's class structure and the "form of production and exchange" were not transformed completely into the capitalist mode. The resulting "hybrid form of production and exchange" contained capitalist elements (such as private property, wage labour) as well as elements of the precolonial, "natural" economy (such as landlord-tenant production relations). These conditions, along with the fact that wage-workers were never completely separated from the material of production (ie. they were "temporary proletarians" who would usually return to their land), made the process of primitive accumulation of capital incomplete. Thus, Indochina was not able to achieve capitalist development and escape dependency.

In Murray's analysis, poverty, or more accurately, underdevelopment of Indochina was caused by the historical position of Indochina's incorporation into the capitalist world economy as well as the exploitive nature of colonialism. The problem at this point is how do we explain the present underdevelopment and poverty in Vietnam? It has been almost four decades since the French colonialists were

⁷⁰ Martin Murray, The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 163.

defeated; how much of Murray's theory can be used to explain the persistent problem of poverty?

In contrast to Pham Cao Duong and Murray's emphasis on the adverse effect of colonialism, Gunnar Myrdal approached the world poverty problem by focusing on the LDC's "non-economic" factors such as attitudes, institutions, and the low levels of living. Key to Myrdal's analysis of the causes of world poverty is the concept of a "soft state". Soft states were those that had a weak system of law and order, no mechanism of securing the obedience of public officials and elites, and a high level of corruption.⁷¹ Invariably soft states were also underdeveloped ones because the governments of these countries were unable to enforce any of the policies for modernization and reform. Myrdal explained that in the precolonial days, the South Asian societies were self-sufficient, operating on networks of obligations in which the "obligation usually fell most heavily on the poorer strata of the population" while the elite were indulgent and inefficient.⁷² During colonialism these networks were destroyed while no new structure was constructed. Thus, at the time of Myrdal's writing, the LDC still lacked the social discipline and organization needed for development.⁷³

Another major barrier to Third World development, according to Myrdal, was the anti-development attitude of the

⁷¹ Gunnar Myrdal, The Challenge of World Poverty, p.208.

⁷² Ibid., p. 211.

⁷³ For Myrdal development is the broad concept developed in the 1970s that includes social justice, political freedom and economic growth.

people which was reinforced by the institutions. The Third World institutions (along with Third World "soft state") in turn encouraged the anti-development attitude of the people. Interesting to this present discussion is Myrdal's characterization of the poor people of South Asia. According to Myrdal, most South Asians, being poor, were malnourished to the point of being apathetic, inarticulate, unproductive, and unorganized: "The poorer strata in the villages, in whose interest the [land] reforms were propagated and sometimes legislated, were mostly apathetic. They were not organized to perceive their common interests and still less to fight for them."⁷⁴ As a result of this indifference among the masses toward anti-poverty measures and improvement, and the inability of the South Asian governments to implement any significant changes, Myrdal advocated that reform be forced upon the South Asians by the West. Myrdal criticized the developed nations' "abhorrence of using compulsion and their determination to work only through the positive means of persuasion and incentives" in their attempts to help the Third World.⁷⁵ According to Myrdal, "there is little hope in South Asia for rapid development without greater social discipline, which will not appear without legislation and regulations enforced by compulsion."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Myrdal, The Challenge of World Poverty, p. 103.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 215.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 216.

While Myrdal showed great awareness of the rationalizations the West has been using in order to exploit the Third World and evade its responsibility, the solution he posed shows complete faith in the ability of the West to rescue the Third World. If, as Myrdal suggested, Western economists had been opportunistic in their analyses of Third World poverty since the days of European imperialism, then why did he believe that forceful Western intervention in the LDCs would reverse (and not exacerbate) the exploitive and opportunistic trend that had existed between the developed and undeveloped countries?

Although Challenge of World Poverty was published in 1970, the tone of the book and the stereotypes of the peoples of the underdeveloped countries employed in the work would make us believe it was written during the days of Charles Robequain and Pierre Gourou.⁷⁷ In Myrdal's work the Third World peasants were neither Scott's moral economists nor Popkin's rational economic maximizers. They were too hungry and weak to be aware of their oppression, and in any case, too inarticulate and unorganized to do anything about it.

The notion that poverty somehow makes the peasant alien, beyond understanding--that somehow poverty leads to degeneration and demoralization in such a way that poor peasants no longer have the same wants and expectations as

⁷⁷ For a more informed critique of Myrdal's work written by an authority see Clifford Geertz, "Myrdal's Mythology, 'Modernism' and the Third World", Encounter, vol 33(1), July 1969.

the rest of society--has recurred in a number of theories we have examined thus far about peasants, poverty and underdevelopment. Whether they be village underdogs, cautious communalists, rational economic maximizers, suspicious individualists, feudal traditionalists, or unorganized, malnourished victims, peasants remain, in the intellectuals' perception, an entity of their own, on the fringe of society. Not surprisingly, in Vietnam these divergent images of peasants and their poverty also recur in political-economic theories. The role of peasants in Vietnamese history, however, has given the Vietnamese peasant another image--the potent image of the peasants as the force of history, and as the moral spirit behind the Vietnamese resistance wars, rebellions and revolutions. And it is to these different portrayals of peasants and poverty in Vietnamese writing that we now turn.

II. BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

In this section we will examine selective Vietnamese works written several decades before the Communist Revolution succeeded in the North. The first group of works comes from the *Tu-Luc Van-Doan* (Self-Reliance Literary Group) whose members produced some of Vietnam's finest pre-World War Two fiction. The second group of writers resemble the *Tu-Luc* group in their liberal and moderate outlooks; they were the writers of the journal, Thanh Nghi (Clear View), perhaps the most important journal of social and economic criticism in Vietnam between 1939 and 1945. In contrast to these two groups of writers, the Vietnamese communists advocated more radical solutions for peasant poverty. Despite the communists' different analysis of poverty, however, some of their perceptions of, and prejudices against the peasants were similar to those of the moderate-liberal writers.

The *Tu-Luc Van-Doan* Writers

In the 1930s the *Tu-Luc Van-Doan* was formed. Led by popular fiction writers such as Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, this group sought to reform the Vietnamese language. The group aimed to make Vietnamese more concise by adopting French syntax and abandoning the tradition of using Chinese literary

allusions.¹ The *Tu-Luc Van-Doan* wanted to reform not only the Vietnamese language, but also what appeared to them as the backward customs and traditions of rural Vietnam. The *Tu-Luc* writers, for instance, were highly critical of Vietnamese superstitious beliefs, practices of divination, arranged marriages, and the individual's submission to the ancestry and family. They were particularly concerned about the inferior role to which women were relegated in the Confucian scheme of things.

Professor Hue-Tam Ho Tai in her work on Vietnamese radicals, noted that in Nhat Linh's (one of the founders of the *Tu-Luc* group) stories "making revolution seems to have been an expiatory device rather than a systematic effort to create a new order."² According to Tai, some of the *Tu-Luc* group's stories reflect the shame and guilt of the children of the wealthy, who had become aware of the misery of the vast majority of the people. The Vietnamese youth's sense of guilt, as depicted in the stories of the *Tu-Luc* group, resembles that of the the young Russian intellectuals in the late eighteenth century. The young Russians' emerging social awareness and political education led to the *Narodnik* movement (Going to the People) in which thousands of youth

¹ Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, an Introduction to Vietnamese Literature, trans. from French by D. M. Hawke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 119.

² Hue-Tam Ho Tai, Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 250.

went to live and work among the peasants. Leonard Schapiro wrote of the *narodniki*:

This faith of the *narodniki* was in part inspired by the long tradition of revolt which existed among the peasants; and in part by a belief that the Russian peasant was a socialist by instinct. Mingled with this faith was a passionate sense of guilt on the part of the intellectual *narodniki* because their own comparatively privileged position in society had only been inherited at the price of the suffering of the peasants, and the debt had to be repaid.³

Although some Vietnamese intellectuals did feel the duty to return to the countryside, no comparable "Going to the People" movement developed in Vietnam. In fact, the opposite happened for the majority of youth--Vietnamese youth fled from the countryside in what Alexander Woodside termed, "going out to the provincial capital movement".⁴ The literature of the *Tu-Luc* group, however, attempted to bridge this distance between the urban intellectuals and the rural masses. By depicting life in the countryside with all its backwardness, the authors wanted to help the urban population understand and appreciate the peasants.

Rural reform movements in China during the same period were inspirations for the Vietnamese writers. In the early twenties Chinese reformer James Y. C. Yen "went to the people" with his Mass Education Promotion Society with the hope of uplifting the peasants with literacy, hygiene and

³ Leonard Schapiro, "The Role of the Jews in the Russian Revolutionary Movement" in Ellen Dahrendorf, ed., Russian Studies (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p.269.

⁴ A. Woodside, Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), p. 127.

modern habits.⁵ The *Tu-Luc* writers were very well aware of Yen's reform work among the villages. Yen's Dingxian county experiment in North China, in fact, inspired the one *Tu-Luc* writer, Hoang Dao, to hope for the same to happen in Vietnam. Hoang Dao wrote in the late 1930s:

I began to think in a dream-like way about our own country...The people of our country are just like the people of China, degenerating by degrees. The words of this Chinese youth can be words capable of arousing us, we must begin to carry out social enterprises.⁶

Unfortunately, Hoang Dao's dream was never realized. Woodside explained that "the gap between knowledge of such reform movements in China and the real enactment of 'social enterprises' in this Chinese image in Vietnam was never crossed."⁷

Although it is evident that the *Tu-Luc* writers were sympathetic toward the peasants, their writings display traces of disdain for the peasants' ignorance, backwardness and superstitious beliefs. In an article commemorating Thach Lam, a prominent *Tu-Luc* writer, the writer of the article, in an attempt to convey how much Thach Lam loved the poor people, wrote: "Thach lam looked down (*cui nhìn xuống*) at the wretched and poor lives in order to describe them with compassion..."(my emphasis)⁸ The idea of "looking down" conveys not only the intellectuals' feeling of superiority

⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

⁶ Hoang Dao as cited by A. Woodside, Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Nguyen Tuong-Lan, "Thach Lam", Thanh Nghi, July 1942, p. 15.

vis-a-vis the peasants, but their perception of the peasants as a separate, unknowable group of people--the "other". In the preface of Phi Van's book, Dong Que (Countryside), the publisher stated that Phi Van's description of country life in its fullness and colourfulness, made readers appreciate, love and tolerate the peasants.⁹ Again the assumption is that the readers could not have had any identification with the peasantry, which made up about eighty percent of the population. In Nhat Linh's book, Xom Cau Moi (the New Bridge Neighbourhood) he compared the poor families who settled around the New Bridge to drifting duckweed (*beo giat*) that had clung to the bridge: "These 'drifting duckweed' lives gather in the small neighbourhood like the drifting duckweed that come...and cling onto the foot of the bridge, then it will float away, following the water current to an unknown destination."¹⁰ It was these "drifting duckweed" lives that the *Tu-Luc* authors and various other social-conscious writers attempted to fathom.

Most of the *Tu-Luc* writings about the poor are descriptive--the writers wanted only to show readers what it is like to be poor. Thach Lam's collection of short stories, Gio Dau Mua (The First Wind of the Season), for instance, contains several stories describing the lives of the poor.¹¹

⁹ Publisher's note in Phi Van, Dong Que, 5th printing (n.p.: Lua-Thieng, n.d.).

¹⁰ Nhat Linh, Xom Cau Moi, vol. 1, (Lancaster, PA: Xuan Thu, n.d.) [First published in various Vietnamese literary journals in 1949-1957], inside cover page.

¹¹ Thach Lam, Gio Dau Mua (n.p.: Doi Nay, ca. 1937).

"Nha Me Le" (the Family of Mrs. Le) describes the struggle of a mother and her eleven children. We are given a vivid description of their lives, but are not told how they have sunk to such deprivation. Thach Lam's "Hunger" provides a gripping description of what it is like to be starving. The protagonist's wife is driven by poverty to prostitution, while he, in spite of his anger for his wife's action, goes on a feeding binge on the food she was able to buy. In his blinding hunger, the protagonist abandons his principles and dignity.

In Nhat Linh's story, "Dau Duong Xo Cho" (In the Streets and Market Corners), poverty is linked with the sordidness and demoralization of the peasants.¹² The narrator of the story lives with his sister who sells opium. The narrator describes the desperation of the poor in his neighbourhood, in particular his beautiful neighbour whose husband is an opium addict. Most of the money he earns pulling a rickshaw goes to feed his addiction. One time when they were short on money and her attempt to borrow from the narrator was refused, the neighbour stole a rooster to sell. The rooster happened to belong to the narrator and the neighbour, in her guilt, spilled the opium she had just bought. The result was that her husband beat her. The narrator states that the moral of this experience was: "If people are to be virtuous, then something has to be done to get them out of poverty and

¹² Nhat Linh, "Dau Duong Xo Cho", in Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, Anh Phai song (Darling, you must live), (n.p.: Doi Nay, ca. 1932), pp. 109-116.

misery. A poor society can always easily become a shameful society."¹³

Another of Nhat Linh's stories, "Nuoc Chay Doi Dong" (Water Flows in Twin Streams) deals with the perception of poverty.¹⁴ The narrator of the story is the young son of an official who met the daughter of a ferry owner one evening when he was crossing a river. The narrator felt sorry for this attractive young girl who was fated to continue the life of poverty. Ten years later the narrator meets up with the girl again on the ferry. Both now have families of their own. The narrator realizes that this woman for whom he felt pity, is actually content with her lot in life. He guesses that she probably is not aware of her poverty and does not question her fate. The narrator's realization here is similar to the "judgement value" theory on poverty. This theory, advanced by Mollie Orshansky, suggests that "poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder".¹⁵ The implication of this theory is that poverty is a subjective judgement--that poverty is not something concrete, but an experience subject to interpretation. It is probably safe to say that this is a theory that only people who are not themselves poor can espouse.

¹³ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁴ Nhat Linh, "Nuoc Chay Doi Dong", in Nhat Linh and Khai Hung, Anh Phai Song, pp. 117-125.

¹⁵ Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 17; Qiu Zeqi and Li Ningjing, "Zhongguo Xiangcun Pingkun Xianshi Jieshi Zhi Changshi" (The Attempts to Explain the Reality of Poverty in China's Countryside), Shehui Xue Yanjiu (Sociological Research), Beijing, (5) 1992, p.92.

In the second half of Ngo Vinh Long's book, Before the Revolution, he presents his own English translations of some famous Vietnamese works written during the colonial period on the poverty of the Vietnamese peasant. Long translated two short chapters from Phi Van's famous novel Dan Que, the third novel in a series of four on the peasantry.¹⁶ In these two chapters Phi Van revealed the oppression that landlords and officials had inflicted upon the common peasants in the villages. With their power and connections, the landlords and officials could indulge in bribery, corruption, molesting the female tenants and bullying the men.

In a similar fashion, Long's translation of part of Ngo Tat To's famous 1939 novel, Tat Den (When the Light's Put Out) shows how much the peasants suffered under the unreasonable tax laws of the French colonialists and the corruption of the Vietnamese elite.¹⁷ The protagonist of the story is reduced to selling her beloved daughter and dogs in order to pay the fines for her husband. Her husband was thrown in prison earlier that day for not being able to pay his taxes. After suffering the pains of selling her own daughter to the rich landlord, and enduring the humiliation in the encounter with the landlord and officials, the protagonist finds that the landlord has cheated her and that

¹⁶ From 1943 to 1949 Phi Van published Dong Que (The Countryside), Tinh Que (Love of the Countryside), Dan Que (The Peasants), and Co Gai Que (The Country Girl). Ngo Vinh Long, Before the Revolution (Cambridge: MIT press, 1973), pp.146-159.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 162-175.

the uncompassionate tax official demands that she pay taxes for her dead brother.

The few stories briefly discussed here show that the *Tu-Luc* writers were highly concerned with the problem of rural poverty. It appears that the writers made a direct link between poverty and moral and social degeneration. In their view poverty acted as a barrier to the modernization of the rural area. Although the novels and short stories of the *Tu-Luc* group were greatly influential in raising awareness of the situation in the countryside, the stories only describe poverty--they offer no concrete explanations or remedies for the problem.

Thanh Nghi

During the early 1940s the journal Thanh Nghi set a new standard for discussions of Vietnamese social problems in the Vietnamese language, by a new generation of Vietnamese lawyers, economists, educators and historians trained in Paris and Hanoi. The editor of Thanh Nghi, Vu Dinh Hoe, along with the contributors regarded the journal as a way to educate and enlighten the Vietnamese masses with Western, "modern" ideas and knowledge.¹⁸ The journal offered a forum for discussing economic and legalistic issues, as well as providing writings on political and economic theories,

¹⁸ Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature, p. 128.

debates on women's roles, and information about health and nutrition. The journal also had a strong focus on poverty and the social and economic problems in the Vietnamese villages. Thanh Nghi represented the first serious attempt by the non-communist Vietnamese intellectuals to analyze and suggest remedies for rural poverty.

In the analyses of the writers for Thanh Nghi, rural poverty was caused by a variety of factors: corruption, a low level of education among the peasants, backward village customs and habits, and exploitive lending policies. As these intellectuals were moderate reformers, their analyses and solutions for village poverty did not reach below the superstructure of culture, institutions and policies. In other words, their analyses did not directly challenge French colonialism of Indochina or the socio-economic structure. Moreover, Thanh Nghi intellectuals did not call for radical redistribution of wealth or land as way to eradicate poverty. Instead, many of the Thanh Nghi writers focused on educating and modernizing peasant thinking and habits. These writers believed that the villages could prosper if villagers adopted a more rational and efficient village-level tax system that could be used to fund community projects, and if they formed mutual aid groups that could actually raise the level of income. The Thanh Nghi articles on rural poverty can be divided into three types.

The first type of articles about village poverty are ones that describe rural poverty in an attempt to raise

awareness among the urban dwellers. In this sense, these Thanh Nghi articles resemble the *Tu-Luc* novels and short stories in their descriptions of poverty. One suspects, however, that the Thanh Nghi writers took their writings on poverty to be more serious, sober, and scientific than those of the novelists, and consequently, they believed their work to be more useful in solving the problem than the novelists' romantic depictions.

An example of Thanh Nghi's portrayal of rural poverty was found in the May and June 1942 issues which contained a two-part article describing the lack of sanitation in the rural areas.¹⁹ The author, Vu Van Can, bemoaned the fact that the villages did not have sewage systems and that the villagers were ignorant about health issues. The article called for extensive education and village organization around this problem. Later that year there was a two-part series examining the nutritional intake of the Vietnamese people. The author took pains to explain what the various nutritional elements (such as vitamins and proteins) required by the body were, and how much was the recommended intake.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the author's study showed that an average Vietnamese person's diet was low in proteins and fat as well

¹⁹ Vu Van Can, "Ve-sinh o thon que", (Sanitation in the Rural Hamlets) Thanh Nghi, May 16, 1942, no. 13, pp. 6-7; second part in June 16, 1942, no. 15, pp. 19-20, 30.

²⁰ Nguyen Dinh Hao, "Luoc khao ve cach an uong cua nguoi Viet-Nam" (Research into the Eating Habits of the Vietnamese People), Thanh Nghi, Nov 16, 1942, no. 25, pp 15-16; second part in Dec 1, 1942, no. 26, pp 14-15.

as having a low calorie count. He estimated that an average Vietnamese person ate only 1,880 calories a day, much below the 2,415 calories recommended by the French Governor General in 1927.²¹

Another example of this genre is Le Huy Van's article assessing the expenditure and income of one peasant family.²² Le Huy Van concluded that this extended family of parents, four sons and their wives and children, had just enough to survive. The family's main occupation, rice cultivation, could not support the family adequately. The contribution from the women's activities such as raising silk worms, helped make ends meet. Thus Le Huy Van emphasized the importance of secondary trades such as handicraft, and the growing of marketable crops such as beans, in boosting peasant families' income. Citing H. Yves and P. Gourou, Van stated that rice cultivation provided the peasants with work for only 136 days out of the year, thus peasants should resort to handicraft as a way to increase their incomes. Another of Van's observations was that this peasant family managed better because they lived and worked as a collective unit. Had they functioned as nuclear families, their level of living would be much lower. Thus Van concluded: "We can say that this collective system is suitable to our society, and it must not be abandoned."²³

²¹ Ibid., p. 15.

²² Le Huy Van, "So chi thu mot gia dinh lam ruong" (The Expenditure and Income of One Peasant Family), Thanh Nghi, Dec. 1941, no. 7, pp. 14-17.

²³ Ibid., p. 17.

Nghiem Xuan Yem's 1943 article, "Poverty in the Rural Hamlets" was also an attempt to raise consciousness about the state of the rural inhabitants. In his article Nghiem Xuan Yem was addressing youth who were planning to return to the village out of deeply-felt duty that they must connect with the peasants (similar to the Russian *Narodniki* and the Chinese rural reformers). The author warned the youth that they would be shocked by the extent of the peasants' poverty. He stated that when the youth had actually lived in the village among the people then they would

realize that the poverty that had been described in the novels is only a poetic scenario of poverty, a picture of peaceful poverty that makes the youth, tired of fame and wealth,...yearn to be that poor. But the poverty that we will note in those hamlets, is a piercing poverty, a scene of cruel and tyrannical poverty."²⁴

Yem provided some examples of the "piercing poverty" found in the countryside. The first "tragic" (*tan bi kich*) scene the youth would witness was that of a peasant woman, her son, her daughter-in-law, and daughter hitched to a plow driven by her husband. Under the weight of the plow, the row of human beings, acting in place of a buffalo, would use bamboo sticks to help maintain balance. According to Yem, the most these peasants could wish for was to buy an eighth of a buffalo ("half of a buffalo's foot") with their neighbours, which

²⁴ Nghiem Xuan Yem, "Canh ngheo o thon que" (Poverty in the Rural Hamlets), Thanh Nghi, Oct 1943, no. 47, p. 3.

would mean that they would have the use of a buffalo one out of every eight days.²⁵

Dramatic displays of misery were accompanied by descriptions of how difficult it was for the majority of the peasants to make ends meet. Yem described how one particular tenant family, despite their hard work and frugality, could not make enough to eat. Although this family cultivated nine *mau* (32.4 sq km) of rice, after paying the land and buffalo rent and temporary helpers the family was left with only enough for two meals a day for five months. For the rest of the year the family members worked as labourers when they could find employment. Yem was convinced that upon witnessing the reality of the peasants' poverty, youth would forget their own personal problems and would be concerned with only the questions: "Why are the peasants poor? How can this poverty be solved?"

It should be noted that Nghiem Xuan Yem depicted the peasants as an unknown, alien group of people. He assumed that the urban youth would be at a loss when they entered the village because they were not familiar with the rural lifestyle, language, and customs. More importantly, Yem believed that the youth would not be able to relate to the peasants' poor and miserable lives, and thus he stated: "perhaps the first task that us youth must do...is to understand the poverty of the peasants".²⁶ According to Yem,

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 2.

poverty was the barrier that prevented the urban youth from being able to relate to the peasants. The reason for this is that poverty caused the demoralization of the peasants, a connection that was also made by *Tu Luc* writer Nhat Linh. Yem contended that Vietnamese peasants were "stupid, feeble, lazy, dependent, weak and sickly, dirty and addicted to gambling" because they were poor. Furthermore, "when [people] are poor in food and clothing then [they] are also poor in life spirit, fighting spirit, competitiveness and social and national spirit."²⁷ It appears from Yem's writing on poverty that poverty produced a certain negative culture among the rural inhabitants that inhibited them from escaping their predicament. It is interesting to note that Yem's explanation bears resemblance to (but predates) the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty" theory of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Another focus of the Thanh Nghi articles was on the causes of poverty. An example is the September 1941 article of Vu Dinh Hoe in which he cajoled the educated youth to return to the villages in order to save the villages from further dilapidation.²⁸ Describing the situation in the villages, Hoe stated that the villages had stagnated, experiencing no changes for the last sixty to seventy years. In effect, Hoe believed that the villages were "uncivilized"

²⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁸ Vu Dinh Hoe, "Anh em thanh-nien! Nay den luc ta ve lam viec lang" (Youth! It is Time We Return and Take Up Village Work), Thanh Nghi, Sept 1941, pp. 2-5, 29.

having no amenities such as sanitation. Hoe denied that this backwardness of the countryside was caused by a simple lack of funds:

[Is this condition] caused by the poverty of the peasants? Is it because the village coffer has no money to build roads, dig wells, establish schools...The village officials would say this. But they do not tell us that the village coffer is empty because of the large holes in their own pockets!²⁹

Hoe encouraged the youth to return to the villages and participate in the administrative process. He believed that an uncorrupt village administration that would lift the peasants from their backwardness would bring the villages into step with the modernizing cities.

Although Hoe showed concern for the well-being of the peasants, he had no faith in them. He was highly critical of the law (1925-1941) that allowed the peasants to vote for the village administration. He stated that the decision to give peasants the vote was like allowing children to play with a sharp knife. To Hoe the peasants were like children who needed to be educated by the enlightened intellectuals and protected from the corruption of the village notables.

In another issue published in May 1942, Vu Dinh Hoe once again showed how the peasants were being exploited, this time by money lenders.³⁰ Hoe pointed out that in the developed countries borrowing money is a way of enlarging one's capital in order to do business or to improve one's production. In

²⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

³⁰ Vu Dinh Hoe, "Van de di vay doi voi dan que" (The Issue of Borrowing Money for the Peasants), Thanh Nghi, May 1942, No. 12, pp. 13-15.

contrast, Vietnamese peasants borrowed in order to survive. Unlike the people of the developed countries, Vietnamese peasants lived day-to-day with just enough to eat. Peasants had to borrow in times of emergency or when they needed money to tide them over until harvest. Loans were usually given at very high interest because peasants had virtually nothing on which to guarantee their loans. Usually they pledged their next harvest's crop.

According to Hoe, of the three different types of lenders (the Indian, the Chinese and the Vietnamese landowners), the Vietnamese landowners were the most dangerous. Unlike the others, the Vietnamese lenders coveted the peasants' land and thus when the peasants could not pay their debts, the lenders would turn the peasants from their land, pauperizing the peasants further. In addition to this, the Vietnamese lenders were regarded as village bullies, who believed they owned the indebted peasants. During festivals the peasants owing money had to come bearing gifts to pay respect to the lender. Hoe maintained that this exploitative practice was a major limitation for economic development in the countryside.

In addition to village administrative corruption and exploitative lending practices, land scarcity and primitive methods of production were also cited as causes for peasant poverty. In one article of the December 1941 issue of Thanh Nghi, Pham Gia Kinh noted that the production level of Indochina was much lower than other countries. According to

Kinh, the Japanese farmer could produce 2.8 times more per acre than the Indochinese peasant; while the Italian could produce 4 times more.³¹ To solve this problem Kinh did not advocate mechanization of the agricultural process because it was neither financially feasible nor suitable for the farming practices in Indochina. What Kinh did suggest was for the government to provide better irrigation systems, educate peasants in agronomy, encourage the planting of industrial crops, and create incentives for peasants to migrate into the sparsely-populated highlands.

Dinh Gia Trinh (December 1941) also believed that encouraging peasants to move into the mountains would alleviate many of the hardships of the rural area.³² Trinh denied that overpopulation in itself was a problem for Indochina. What was problematic was that a large portion of the population was concentrated in the Red River Delta. Trinh disagreed with the economists who advocated controlling the birth rate as a way to relieve the pressure on the land. Trinh stated that the population of Indochina was not too great if we compared total population with the total amount of land. According to Trinh, there was an abundance of raw material and natural resources that could be exploited to provide employment and improve the lives of the peasants.

³¹ Pham Gia Kinh, "Nong Nghiep Dong Duong hien tai an tuong lai" (The Present and Future Situations of Indochina's Agriculture), Thanh Nghi, Dec 1941, no. 7, pp. 12-13, 36.

³² Dinh Gia Trinh, "Dan so va cac giai-cap xa hoi o Dong-Duong" (Population and Social Classes in Indochina), Thanh Nghi, Dec 1941, no. 7, pp 18-20.

Trinh's insistence that controlling the birth rate is not effective in solving rural poverty is the opposite of what the French economist Charles Robequain claimed, as we have seen. Evidently, Robequain's work caught the attention of Vietnamese intellectuals. A review of his book appeared in Thanh Nghi in 1941. It is interesting to note that the reviewer of Robequain's book de-emphasized Robequain's stress on controlling the birth rate while emphasizing his call for more investment in the economy and education.³³ In fact, Dieu Anh, the reviewer, stated emphatically that Robequain did not believe that controlling the birth rate would alleviate poverty.³⁴ Praising the book for its scientific approach and lack of prejudiced views, Dieu Anh wrote that Robequain maintained that increasing capital accumulation, development, immigration and education would be the key to improving peasants' lives.

The third type of articles on rural poverty provided suggestions to remedy poverty and improve the lives of peasants. Many of the suggestions concerned the formation of cooperatives and mutual-aid associations. Duy Tam wrote two articles regarding the advantages of consumer cooperatives.³⁵ Living in the early years of the Second World War, Duy Tam

³³ Dieu Anh, "Doc quyen: 'Su tien hoa kinh te cua xu Dong-Phap' cua Robequain", (Reading Robequain's The Economic Development of French Indochina), Thanh Nghi, Dec 1941, no. 7, pp. 21-22.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁵ Duy Tam, "Muon tranh su sinh hoat dat do, mot phuong phap: tieu thu hop tac xa" (The Only Way to Avoid High-Cost Living: Consumers' Cooperatives), Thanh Nghi, June 1941, pp. 2-3, 32; second part in July 1941, pp. 11-12.

proposed the setting up of cooperatives as a way to deal with war-time difficulties. Duy Tam, however, stated that there were people who believed cooperatives could be an important part of the peace-time economy.³⁶ Duy Tam's vision of cooperatives, however, was limited to consumers' cooperatives that would help people avoid inflation. Using examples of successful cooperatives in Manchester, England and in France during the First World War, Duy Tam encouraged Vietnamese people to pool money together and buy their goods directly from manufactures and producers to sell to the cooperatives' members at market prices. This would remove the middleman and give consumers more "buying power".³⁷

Along the same line as Duy Tam's proposal, Le Huy Ruat's article encouraged the formation of a new type of mutual-aid group that would have solely one aim: to help poor people avoid high-interest loans.³⁸ Le Huy Ruat's article is of interest, for he examined all the traditional mutual-aid groups of the villages (neighbourhood groups, clans, literary groups, etc.) and assessed them as being in effect "eating clubs" (*hoi an uong*) rather than self-help groups that have communal benefits.

³⁶ Ibid., July 1941, p. 11

³⁷ Ibid., June 1941, p. 3.

³⁸ Le Huy Ruat, "Nhưng 'hoi tuong-tro' o thon que" (Mutual-Aid Associations in the Countryside), Thanh Nghi, April 1942, no. 11, pp. 16-19.

According to Ruat, a small neighbourhood mutual-aid group spent on average 300 piasters per year on feasts.³⁹ In 1941 (a year before this particular article was written) 350 piasters would feed a family of fourteen for an entire year.⁴⁰ It appeared to the author that helping one another was a secondary function of these mutual-groups.⁴¹ Moreover, whenever a wealthy group had an annual surplus, the members would usually want the money divided up among them, as opposed to using the money to construct something beneficial to all. Thus the author applauded the government's request for the formation of a new group: a "Nghia xuong"⁴² or "charitable" mutual-aid group. This group would store a certain amount of rice for low-interest loans to poor peasants who might need to borrow in order to make ends meet or to pay their taxes. In this way the author believed the fate of poor peasants could be helped.

It appears that Ruat's perception of peasant behaviour anticipated those of George Foster and Samuel Popkin. According to Ruat, the peasants' world views are narrow--they were only concerned with their family's interests and not

³⁹ According to Ruat, 150 piasters were spent on four large feasts for 160 people, and the rest of the money took care of 20 small ceremonies. Ruat did not indicate how many people participated at each of these 20 ceremonies. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Le Huy Van, "So chi thu mot gia-dinh lam ruong" (The Expenditure and Income of one Peasant Family), p. 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴² It is unclear why Le Huy Ruat used the expression "nghia xuong". According to Professor Woodside, "nghia truong" means charitable granaries, along the line of the traditional Chinese welfare institution. My own parents who remember the 1940s well, have never heard of the expression "nghia xuong".

those of the village's. The organization of mutual-help groups could bring great benefits to the community as a whole and could help the poor peasants, yet because of the peasants' narrow self-interest and suspicion of each other, the mutual-help groups functioned only as "eating clubs".

Similar to the *Tu-Luc* writers, the contributors to Thanh Nghi showed a heightened awareness of and concern for rural poverty. The Thanh Nghi intellectuals, however, were systematic in their analyses of poverty and they went beyond the mere description of rural poverty. In their admiration for Western rationality and science, the Thanh Nghi writers attempted to be objective and methodical in their examination of village poverty. Their explanations for the causes of poverty were administrative corruption, peasants' lack of education, lack of government regulations against usury, and Vietnam's primitive level of agriculture. Consequently, these explanations called for technological development, administrative reforms, and modernization of rural traditions. Unlike the communists' proposals (which we will examine in the next section) the Thanh Nghi solutions for poverty did not directly challenge French imperialism nor did they call for social revolution and wealth redistribution.

As moderate as these Thanh Nghi remedies for poverty were, they had little chance of being instituted. Similar to the *Tu-Luc* writers, Thanh Nghi intellectuals were unable to do much about village poverty. Most of Thanh Nghi's publications were produced during World War II, under both

Japanese and French control of Indochina. In war time under the yoke of two colonial powers, Vietnamese intellectuals had little power in bringing about reforms for the countryside. It was, nevertheless, significant that village poverty was being discussed for the first time in a systematic and serious manner, in a major urban Vietnamese language periodical.

The Communist Analysis

Of the Vietnamese intellectuals who were concerned about peasant poverty, only the communists were eventually able to achieve power and put into practice some of their theories about how to solve poverty. Unlike the *Tu-Luc* novelists and Thanh Nghi journalists, the Vietnamese communists had a definite agenda; they sought to destroy imperialism and capitalism in order to rescue the peasants from oppression and poverty.

According to Ho Chi Minh, the founder of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), the misery of the rural population was brought about by the exploitation of the French colonialists. In Ho's analysis, it was not overpopulation that caused the peasant landlessness and poverty, but the theft of land by the French and Vietnamese landlords. Ho explained in 1924:

During the French conquest, military operations drove the peasants away from their villages. When they returned they found their lands occupied by colonists who had followed in the wake of the occupying troops and who had shared

among themselves the land that the native peasants had cultivated for generations. Thus, our peasants were turned into serfs forced to cultivate their own lands for foreign masters.⁴³

It was through this process, Ho claimed, that the peasants, who made up ninety percent of the population, had only thirty percent of the arable land, and it was precisely this lack of land that made the peasants "work hard all the year round and suffer poverty all their lives".⁴⁴ Thus the ICP advocated land reform to eradicate poverty among peasants. To a large extent, it was this promise that won the Viet Minh peasant support in the resistance war against the French.⁴⁵

In 1937 Truong Chinh, the Vietnamese communist theoretician and the Party's secretary-general from 1941-1956, and Vo Nguyen Giap, then a middle-school history teacher and later the commander-in-chief of Vietnam's People's Army, and the mastermind behind the victory against the French at Dien Bien Phu, co-authored a book entitled, The Peasant Question.⁴⁶ These two highly-educated members of the Indochinese Communist Party wrote the book for the urban readers; they wanted to alert the cities about the situation in the countryside. This work had a great influence in shaping the future policies of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VPC). In short, this book explained peasant poverty as a

⁴³ Ho Chi Minh, Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), pp. 30-31.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 164.

⁴⁵ Andrew Vickerman, The Fate of the Peasantry (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p. 45.

⁴⁶ Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, The Peasant Question (1937-1938), trans. by Christine Pelzer White (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1974).

result of the double yoke of colonial and feudal oppression, and that the remedy for rural poverty is to give peasants land to till.

Truong Chinh and Giap examined the different ways in which the peasants were exploited, such as the unregulated rent system, usury, heavy taxes, and government monopolies of salt and alcohol. Most injurious of all, they thought, was the accumulation of land by the French and Vietnamese elites. The resulting effect of this exploitation was poverty. According to their estimation, every year the poor agricultural laborer would go hungry for seven to eight months, while some middle peasants would go hungry for three to four months.⁴⁷

With respect to the social and cultural aspects, the rural population was deprived of education, sanitation, and good leadership. Truong Chinh and Giap believed that the backwardness of the peasantry was a serious problem that must be addressed. According to the authors, the peasants had the "mentality of private ownership"; in other words, these people were prone to individualism and bourgeois tendencies.⁴⁸ They were suspicious of collective work, and had no social consciousness. According to Truong Chinh and Giap, the peasants would only participate in communal activities if they could benefit directly:

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

Traditional peasant organizations, such as pig-raising groups, house-building common fund societies, lending societies, and organizations for funeral and wedding expenses, etc., are all characterized by individual profit for each member of the group. None have a social nature, ie., a common advantage for the entire group or for society, in which the individual also gains.⁴⁹

The early communist depiction of the peasants, therefore, resembles that of George Foster and Samuel Popkin in the later post-war Western debate on the nature of the peasant. The peasants were understood as individualistic petty bourgeoisie; moreover, the peasants were also believed to be limited by feudalistic, backward thinking which led them to accept readily the feudal hierarchical structure in which they were the servants to the landlords and notables of the village.

In the 1930s there was no mention of agricultural collectivization in the communists' analysis of poverty. It appears that "land to the tiller" was the only agricultural reform advocated. There was little written against private ownership of land. On the contrary, the Vietnamese village's communal land system was criticized by Truong Chinh and Giap. Writing about Vietnam's communal land system--a system in which each village had a certain amount of communal land which was distributed among the villagers every three or six years--the authors noted how this system of communal ownership of land was often abused and misused by the village elites. Truong Chinh and Giap wrote:

⁴⁹ Ibid.

There are many people, especially foreigners, who are very enthusiastic about the communal land system. They think that communal land partially guarantees the livelihood of the peasants. However, in reality each peasant receives only very little communal land...⁵⁰

It appears that this abuse of communal land occurred even in the precolonial period. Under French colonialism, however, land became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the elite.⁵¹ Thus Giap and Truong Chinh saw nothing virtuous about the Vietnamese village structure. The communal land system which Pham Cao Duong described as a way to maintain "relative equilibrium", and which James Scott argued was a means to insure "conservative egalitarianism", was viewed by these prominent communist theorists in the 1930s as a feudal vestige with no socialistic character.

Despite this negative assessment of the peasantry and its tradition, the authors recognized that the peasants could be an "invincible force" if and when they became conscious and organized.⁵² This recognition of the peasants' potential, however, was not given much attention in the early days of the ICP. According to A. Woodside, before the 1940s Ho Chi Minh had rarely publicly alluded to the revolutionary potential of the Vietnamese peasants or to its historical tradition of resistance:

What was particularly remarkable, both in this and other writings of the time, was Ho's avoidance of any mention of traditional Chinese and Vietnamese peasant uprisings, his avoidance of any discussions of historical traditions of

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵² Ibid., p. 22.

peasant activism in East Asia. The Vietnamese communist movement's development of its remarkable populist historical vision, brimming with the feats of centuries-old mass movements, did not really begin until after 1940.⁵³

It was only after 1940 that communist propaganda began emphasizing the peasants' "latent qualities of courage and resourcefulness" and attributing to them an important role in the communist revolution.⁵⁴ According to David Marr, in 1944 the ICP began re-interpreting certain peasant traditions as positive; peasant folk songs and poems were used by the communists intellectuals "to demonstrate that Vietnamese peasants had an essentially optimistic, struggle-oriented, patriotic character regardless of time or place."⁵⁵

Despite the communists' wartime discovery of the peasants' revolutionary potential, they continued to remain suspicious of the individualistic quality of the peasantry. Hence, in 1955, one year after the communists established full *de jure* control over North Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh called for the promotion of mutual aid teams as precursors to the establishment of cooperatives. Ho deemed this necessary because the Vietnamese peasants, in his estimation, were individualists when it came to production: "In order greatly to increase production, we have to work collectively. But our peasants are accustomed to individual work, each

⁵³ Woodside, Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam, p. 170.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 220-221.

⁵⁵ David Marr, Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-1945 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 282.

household working separately. They have not the habit of collective and organized work."⁵⁶

This ambivalent attitude toward the peasants remains, even to this day, an element in Vietnamese communist thinking. On the one hand, Vietnamese communists perceive themselves as Marxists who embrace modernity, scientific and technological development and the virtues of the militant working class, rather than the old-fashioned ethics of the villages.⁵⁷ On the other hand, about eighty percent of Vietnam is made up of the peasants, and the subsequent wars against the French and later against the Americans relied heavily upon the support of the peasants. Thus in 1960 Ho Chi Minh wrote:

Guided by Marxist-Leninist theory, we have realized that in a backward agrarian country such as Viet Nam, the national question is at bottom the peasant question, that the national revolution is, basically, a peasant revolution carried out under the leadership of the working class and the people's power is essentially worker-peasant power. [my emphasis]⁵⁸

It thus appears that one way around this thorny issue was for the communist theorists to emphasize the "worker-peasant alliance". Le Duan, the Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Workers' Party in the later stages of the Second Indochina War, emphasized the importance of such an alliance, since the Vietnamese working class was young and "hardly

⁵⁶ Ho Chi Minh, Selected Works, vol IV (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), p. 81.

⁵⁷ Christine White, introduction, Truong Chinh and Giap, The Peasant Question, p. ix.

⁵⁸ Ho Chi Minh, Selected Writing, p. 242.

developed" while the peasants, though lacking in political consciousness, were a powerful force.⁵⁹ According to Le Duan, the peasants were a revolutionary force only under the guidance of the working class: "By following the lead of the working class, the peasants develop their great revolutionary potential to the utmost. The *worker-peasant alliance* is the basic condition insuring victory for the revolution.[Le Duan's emphasis]"⁶⁰

This attempt to use the notion of "worker-peasant alliance" to smooth over the contradictory status of the peasantry in the Vietnamese communist revolution, however, did not resolve the issue for all communist intellectuals. Tran Huy Lieu, for example, returned to this issue in 1969 in an article about patriotism versus ethnic chauvinism (*dan toc hep hoi*).⁶¹ Tran Huy Lieu, the Director of the Ministry of Propaganda in 1945 and a major communist theoretician thereafter, asked in 1969 whether or not there was a difference between the wartime patriotism exhibited by the Vietnamese people and ethnic chauvinism. To Lieu, patriotism, unlike chauvinism, did not entail racism; patriotism did not contradict the goals of international proletarian revolution while ethnic chauvinism did.⁶² Lieu

⁵⁹ Le Duan, The Vietnamese Revolution: Fundamental Problems and Essential Tasks (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 15-16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶¹ Tran Huy Lieu, "Phan biet chu nghia yeu nuoc voi chu nghia dan toc hep hoi" (The Difference between Patriotism and Ethnic Chauvinism), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, no 121, April 1969, pp. 1-2, 40.

⁶² Ibid., p. 1.

suggested that Vietnam's long history of being invaded by foreigners had led its people to develop a strong sense of ethnic identity that included, beside love for the country, xenophobic, revengeful and shallow sentiments. Lieu argued that only under the working class's revolution did patriotism emerge in its true form within Vietnamese society.

The implication of Tran Huy Lieu's argument is that the Vietnamese peasants' revolutionary potential was based upon narrow, selfish, and chauvinistic thinking. The immense force of the peasants was rooted in archaic chauvinism that was irreconcilable with modern socialist revolutions. The image of the peasantry as depicted by Tran Huy Lieu in 1969, then was one that resembled Truong Chinh's and Giap's 1937 portrayal: the peasants were backward, individualist and feudal in their nature. Other communist theorists' attempts to endow the peasants with revolutionary potential by emphasizing their history of foreign resistance were challenged by this article. Because if prior to the emergence of a militant working class, the peasants' resistance was a manifestation of their ethnic racism, and if the Vietnamese revolution was based on this peasant force, then the basis for the revolution was seriously flawed. In short, the article challenged the Vietnamese communists' faith in the revolutionary nature of the peasants.

III. IN THE AFTERMATH OF REVOLUTION AND WAR

The remainder of this thesis will examine the emergence of some new conceptualizations about the peasantry among the Vietnamese communist theoreticians. The communist intellectuals' need to re-assess their theories about peasants arose from the Vietnamese communist state's failure to solve the problem of rural poverty during the first three decades of its existence. Those failures could be linked, at least in part, to doctrinaire over-simplifications of peasant life by elite theoreticians, such as described in the previous chapter.

In 1986 the Vietnamese government announced a program of comprehensive "renovation" of the economy. This new direction, called *Doi Moi*, coincided with the Soviet Union's own launching of *Perestroika*. Few Vietnam experts would deny that the events in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China had great impact on the types of reforms pursued by Vietnam and how these reforms were received by the country's politicians, intellectuals and military brass.¹ Although the international situation provided the backdrop and examples for *Doi Moi*, Vietnam's own internal turmoil provided the impetus and motivation for such reforms. As the Editor-in-

¹ William Turley and Mark Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), passim.

Chief of Vietnam's main economic journal, Nghien Cuu Kinh Te, Chu Van Lam remarked, "the abandonment of the old economic model and the construction of a new one was a process that arose from our own search, spontaneous in its origins and realization, and paid for by ourselves. *Doi Moi* in agriculture was simply a natural historical development."²

Indeed, the origins for *Doi Moi*, or more precisely, the need for renovation, stemmed from the Vietnamese Communist Party's (VCP) failure in economic development, especially in the rural sector in the period between 1954 and 1986. This section will look at the problems with Vietnam's agricultural collectivization attempts and how this road toward socialist construction did not solve the problem of rural poverty. The second half of this section will examine how renovation is reconciled with the VCP's Marxist-Leninist ideology. Chu Van Lam's statement that *Doi Moi* was a "natural historical development" hints at how the communist intellectuals attempt to weave reform into their own adapted version of Marxist-Leninism.

Collectivization and its Failure

During the resistance war against France between 1946 and 1954, the Communist Party advocated land reform as a means to help poor peasants. Land reform gave poor peasants land to till as well as freed them from their debt and rent

² Chu Van Lam, "*Doi Moi* in Vietnamese Agriculture", in William Turley and Mark Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, p. 162.

payments. Although these policies delivered a marked increase in agricultural production, they also led the communist leaders to fear the re-emergence of class and household differentiation among the people.³ This fear was connected to the communists' prewar perception of the peasants as individualists, petty bourgeoisie, and the belief that peasants, left on their own, would become small producers and would not develop along socialist lines. Consequently, land reform was abandoned and agricultural collectivization began in 1958.

Another important motive behind the switch to collectivization was agricultural development. The Vietnamese communists believed that collectivization would both modernize and socialize the rural economy. According to Christine White, for the Vietnamese communists socialism equalled industrialization and industrialization equalled large-scale production, and thus, "the larger the productive unit, the more socialist it is".⁴ Andrew Vickerman in his book, The Fate of the Peasantry, gave the following as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) rationale for collectivization : "that collectivization was more productive than private agriculture; that they [cooperatives] would prevent differentiation, leading to capitalist

³ Ibid., p.151.

⁴ Christine White, "Recent Debates in Vietnamese Development Policy", in Gordon White, Robin Murray, and Christine White, eds., Revolutionary Socialist Development in the Third World (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1983), p. 244.

agriculture; and, that they would secure central State control over agricultural production and surplus".⁵ Underlying these rationales was the assumption (held also by the Soviet Union and China) that agriculture would finance industrial development. In other words, the communist leadership believed that collectivization would help industrialize Vietnam and would solve Vietnam's poverty and underdevelopment. According to Vickerman, the DRV pursued economic development under this assumption, even though there was no evidence from the Soviet Union or Chinese experiences to suggest that agricultural output made any significant contribution to the capital investment in industries.

As it turned out, collectivization also did not make state procurement of the agricultural surplus an easy task. Alexander Woodside cited an example of the procurement problem the state faced:

Vinh Phu peasants decided to yield only small parts of their sugarcane harvest to the state. They artfully concealed the fact that they were growing more sugarcane than they were actually delivering to tax collectors by boiling it and making wine from it, which they could then drink themselves or sell for better prices on the black market.⁶

This type of resistance, which James Scott called "everyday forms of peasant resistance", involved "the prosaic but constant struggle between the peasantry and those who seek to

⁵ Andrew Vickerman, The Fate of the Peasantry (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p. 157.

⁶ Alexander Woodside, "Peasants and the State in the Aftermath of the Vietnamese Revolution", Peasant Studies, vol 16 (4), Summer 1989, p. 284.

extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them", using such tactics as "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth".⁷ In both North and South Vietnam peasants resisted the communist state's procurement of farm produce by mixing their rice with sand and husks, wasting rice in distilling of alcohol and in feed for pigs and ducks, and by refusing to work hard.⁸

Christine White maintained, however, that the early years of the collectives were not as brutal as the experience had been in the Soviet Union. For one thing, unlike the Soviet Union, the industries did not drain resources from the collectives. Vietnam's initial industrialization was supported by Chinese and Russian aid.⁹ In addition, the collectives provided an important organization structure during wartime. White, in fact, argued that the collectives were crucial to North Vietnam's war effort: "They [the collectives] provided the institutional network for maximum local level economic self-sufficiency along with decentralization of political decision-making and initiative which are crucial ingredients for the success of a people's war."¹⁰ After 1975, however, not very much can be said in

⁷ James Scott, The Moral Economy of the Peasant (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 29.

⁸ Vo Nhan Tri, Vietnam's Economic Policy Since 1975 (Pasir Panjang, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), pp. 80-81.

⁹ White, "Recent Debates in Vietnamese Development Policy", p. 241.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 251; This view is shared by Mark Selden who wrote: "In my view collective agriculture was one institutional factor that prevented the collapse of the Vietnamese rural economy and assured subsistence for

defence of the collectives, as peasant resistance and low economic gains became strikingly obvious.

Adam Fforde maintained that although the communist leaders were aware of the peasants' dissatisfaction with collectivization, they continued to pursue this line of development and even began collectivization in the newly conquered South Vietnam after 1975. Fforde suggested that in losing sight of the goals of socialism, the leaders had become fixated by the means. In other words, they had become more concerned with how orthodox the cooperatives were, as opposed to how efficient and productive they were. Thus orthodox cooperatives, no matter how unproductive and inefficient, could not be criticized. Clearly the Party's efforts at agricultural collectivization did not benefit the peasants for if they did, "peasants would hardly have spent so much energy trying to avoid implementing central directives".¹¹

In the initial phases of the collectivization movement, the communists leaders continued praising peasants' communalistic and patriotic qualities, as they had done in the 1940s. In speeches and writings peasants' willing participation in this collectivization effort was assumed

women, children, and the elderly in time of war." "Agrarian Development Strategies in China and Vietnam", in Turley and Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, p.225.

¹¹ Adam Fforde, The Agrarian Question in North Vietnam 1974-1979 (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), p. 189.

because of the previous demonstration of their loyalty to defend the country. Ho Chi Minh wrote in 1960:

Simply by re-organizing, and improving technique and management, we can already get a higher productivity than the individual farmers. Our peasants are aware of this. They have, besides, revolutionary traditions and great confidence in the Party, and are ready to respond to its call. That is why they are enthusiastically joining the work-exchange teams and the agricultural co-operatives and taking the socialist path.¹²

In reality, however, the Vietnamese communists still had little faith in the peasants. They continued to hold the view espoused by Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap in 1937 that peasants were narrow-minded and suspicious of collectivism. In the official writings, however, peasants' communalistic and patriotic heritage continued to be emphasized. Myron Cohen has suggested that the Chinese communists had invented the oppressed, backward peasant in order to justify the need for destroying the old and bringing in a new order.¹³ In a similar way, the Vietnamese communists invented their own sort of peasant. In contrast to the Chinese invention, the Vietnamese peasant was supposed to be fervently patriotic, altruistic and communalistic. It was believed the peasants were this way during the Indochina Wars and would be this way throughout the socialist construction of Vietnam. Only by mythologizing Vietnamese peasants as courageous, patriotic heroes could the Vietnamese communists justify why they had

¹² Ho Chi Minh, Selected Writings (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977), p. 240.

¹³ Myron Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China; the Case of the Chinese 'peasant'", Daedalus, Spring 1933, vol 122(2), pp. 151-170.

veered away from classic Marxism and had attempted to build socialism on the backs of allegedly conservative, feudalistic peasants.

By 1977 half of South Vietnam's peasants were organized into agricultural collectives. During this time, however, there were many problems in the agriculture sector. In 1978 and 1979 there were drastic reductions in the delivery of staples to the central government. By 1979 many collectives had begun to disintegrate while much of the North was living "on the edge of famine"¹⁴. No doubt Vietnam's external problems (war with China, invasion of Cambodia, US trade embargo) at the time--a mere four years after a decade of war against the United States--had adversely affected Vietnam's economy.¹⁵ To what extent Vietnam's rural crisis was caused by either external troubles or internal mismanagement is not the focus of this discussion. What is relevant here is the fact that by the late 1970s peasants were no longer willing to sacrifice and endure poverty as they had done during the war. Forced by the subsistence and surplus-extraction crises, the government in 1981 issued the Instruction 100 CT/TU which allowed the collectives to contract output quotas to individual families. The families were able to keep the surplus to consume or sell.¹⁶ This reversion to family

¹⁴ A. Woodside, "Nationalism and Poverty in the Breakdown of Sino-Vietnamese Relations", Pacific Affairs, 11(1979), p.396.

¹⁵ A. Woodside in fact argued that poverty was one of the reasons behind the dispute between Vietnam and China. Ibid.

¹⁶ David Wurfel, "Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective", in Turley and Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, p.24.

production went against the Party's push for socialist large-scale production, but because Vietnamese agriculture was in a crisis, and the practice brought an increase in production, this policy direction was pursued.¹⁷

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During the disruption in the Vietnamese countryside, there was pandemonium among rural specialists in their bid to assess the implications of this retreat to family production with regard to their theories about the Vietnamese peasantry. The resurging debate about the nature of the Vietnamese peasants and village in the late 1970s was intimately tied to the problem of poverty, since the discussion was initiated by the failure of the communists' collectivization policies to solve rural poverty. As I have already mentioned earlier (p. 22), the prominent government anthropologist, Phan Dai Doan, believed that the "bitter" experience of the collectivization made it imperative for Vietnamese theoreticians to come up with new explanations about the countryside, for the old stereotype could no longer explain peasants' resistance against the state's collectivization. In this urgency, two conferences were held in the mid-1970s to discuss the nature of the Vietnamese village. The conferences produced two volumes entitled, Nong Thon Vietnam Trong Lich Su (vol 1 & 2) (The Vietnamese Villages in History). Phan Dai Doan praised

¹⁷ Ibid.

these two volumes as outstanding in comparison to virtually all the work done before them: "Overall, the authors of the two volumes in the mid-1970s have gained a new fresh perspective that will help many people understand deeply the Vietnamese traditional society in the process of building and defending our country."¹⁸ The first volume of essays especially, published in 1977, was an attempt to re-formulate the official portrayal of the peasantry so that the image would correspond to the new economic changes. In other words, these debates were not academic, but highly political in nature, for they were attempts either to justify or repudiate the prevailing Party line about peasant, poverty and economic development.

The first article of this volume was an introductory piece written by Van Tao, the former Editor-in-Chief of Nghien Cuu Lich Su (Historical Study Review). In this article Van Tao emphasized how important it is to understand the peasants.¹⁹ He argued that the Vietnamese working class was closely related to the peasants. Having come from the villages, the workers still carried many traits, beliefs and habits of the peasants. Contrasting how the working class was created between the West and Vietnam, Van Tao suggested

¹⁸ Phan Dai Doan, "May van de ve lang xa Viet-Nam" (Some Problems of Village Vietnam), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, 1(232-233) January-February 1987, p. 7.

¹⁹ Van Tao, "May suy nghi buoc dau ve giai cap cong nhan va lang xa Viet Nam." (A Few Preliminary Thoughts About the Working Class and the Vietnamese Village), Vien Su Hoc (The Institute of History), Nong Thon Vietnam Trong Lich Su (Hanoi: Nha Xuat Ban Khoa Hoc Xa Hoi, 1977), pp. 17-45.

that the Vietnamese working class was created by French colonialists' exploitation of peasants. French colonialism on the one hand, deprived the peasants of much of their land while on the other, did not expand industrial or commercial development. The destitute peasants found themselves both without enough land and without secure, well-paying employment. Thus what was created was a class of rural semi-proletarians. This is the same class that Martin Murray referred to as "partial peasants" or "temporary proletarians".²⁰ According to Murray, the European employers did not take the responsibility of "reproducing the working class". The wages were so extremely low that the worker could not support a family. Usually the male member of the family would go to work in the mine or factory, earn a sum of money and then return to the village where his family continued to farm.

According to Van Tao, the negative aspect of the close connection between workers and peasants was twofold. On the economic side the workers did not become specialized; they did not acquire specific skills or technology.²¹ On the social side, the workers continued to harbour the allegedly narrow-minded and regional thinking of small producers and did not develop a proper working-class consciousness. Van

²⁰ Martin Murray, The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 214.

²¹ Van Tao, "May suy nghi buoc dau ve giai cap cong nhan va lang xa Viet Nam" (A Few Preliminary Thoughts About the Working Class and the Vietnamese Village), p. 26.

Tao did, however, also see a positive aspect; he believed that the peasants' love for their village and country, and their collective tradition, could be transformed into a patriotic and revolutionary spirit among the workers.

Note that Van Tao's emphasis is on the influence of the village on the working class, and not vice versa. In the early 1960s when Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan had spoken of a worker-peasant alliance, they had perceived the workers influencing and modernizing the peasants rather than the peasant culture and mentality being reproduced in the workers. So there had been an important shift in viewpoint in the span of time from 1960s to the 1970s. The fact that village traditions had survived the communist revolution and continued to influence urban as well as rural life, posed a challenge to the rural specialists in their attempt to reassess the nature of poverty and the peasantry. For how can the communists hope to eradicate poverty when their programs for socialist development had been predicated on unrealistic and inconsistent stereotypes of peasants?

Although certain village traditions were celebrated because they had helped in both wars against the French and Americans, overall Van Tao felt that they were outweighed by the negative aspects and on the whole, were hindering socialist development. The tradition of identifying oneself and one's loyalty with the family and native village was useful in the war of resistance, but now this practice had hindered the development of collective attitudes and

loyalties toward the nation. In 1977 Van Tao also cited the peasants' "egalitarianism" as a negative aspect, because in socialist collectivization the rule was supposed to be to "do according to one's ability and receive according to one's ability" (*lam theo nang luc huong theo kha nang*).²² In effect, fighting foreign encroachment and building a socialist nation required very different attitudes and customs. Thus Van Tao concluded that in order to prepare the village for socialist development, new traditions must be created in the village. Among these new traditions were the spirit of collective ownership and enthusiasm for socialism. These were to be regarded as a new morality to replace that of family and village loyalty. In addition, Van Tao emphasized the need for "planning and order" in agricultural development.²³ According to Van Tao this economic planning would defend Vietnamese agriculture from the production of small producers who were incoherent and unsystematic in their production.

It is clear from this article that for Van Tao, Vietnam's agricultural economy in 1977 was in serious trouble, and that rural poverty was still a grave problem. Moreover, the peasants appear backward, uncooperative, and obviously not cut out for the task of socialist development. Nevertheless, Van Tao, like many of the writers of this book, Nong Thon Vietnam, still maintained in 1977 the importance of

²² Ibid., pp. 39-40.

²³ Ibid., p. 41.

large-scale socialist development that included central planning and collectivization.

The debate over land-ownership patterns in the pre-colonial period remained important in the discussion about collectivization and peasant traditions. In Nong Thon Vietnam six articles were devoted to this landownership issue. All six writers admitted that much was not known about the pattern of landownership in the earlier periods of Vietnamese history. The reason why such Vietnamese scholars were concerned about the nature of land ownership in the village was that land ownership was believed to reflect the very nature of the village and peasants. In an article published in the June 1981 issue of the top Hanoi historical journal, Nghien Cuu Lich Su, Nguyen Khac Dam made clear the underlying assumptions about the relationship between land and people. The author stated that the positive and negative aspects of the Vietnamese peasant could be traced to the existence of both privately and communally owned rice fields.²⁴ The positive qualities of a peasant, according to Nguyen Khac Dam, were: the spirit of patriotism, cooperation, independence, and democracy; while the negative qualities were: revengefulness, factionalism, narrow-mindedness, and backwardness. While the author did not specify which land-owning system was responsible for which

²⁴ Nguyen Khac Dam, "Ve van de ruong cong va ruong tu trong lich su Viet-Nam" (The Issue of Communal and Private Rice Fields in Vietnamese History) Nghien Cuu Lich Su, (199) June-July 1981, p.21.

set of qualities, it is safe to guess that he believed the communal land system gave rise to the positive aspects of the Vietnamese peasant, while the private land system was responsible for the negative aspects.

Of the six articles in the crucial 1977 Nong Thon Viet Nam debate on land ownership, we will examine three, those of Nguyen Dong Chi, of Truong Huu Quynh, and Le Kim Ngan. According to Nguyen Dong Chi the earliest information about types of land ownership in Vietnam dated back to the beginning of the nineteenth century.²⁵ Chi's main argument was that although private landownership was becoming a strong tendency throughout history, many villages were able to resist this tendency.

According to Chi, from 1871 onward communal rice fields became the object of greed for the wealthy and powerful. In 1871 the Tu Duc imperial court considered selling off the communal fields in order to raise money for military supplies to fight the French invaders. Under French colonialism communal rice fields came under direct attack.²⁶ Despite this, however, the villages were still able to protect the institution of common rice fields. Nguyen Dong Chi attributed the villages' ability to protect communal rice fields to the peasants' conservatism and traditionalism.²⁷

²⁵ Nguyen Dong Chi, "Vai nhan xet nho ve so huu ruong dat cua lang xa o Viet Nam truoc Cach manh" (Some Observations about Ownership of Rice Fields in Vietnamese Villages Before the Revolution), Nong Thon Viet-Nam, pp. 47.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

The writer also pointed out that both private and communal ownership of land co-existed, but that the notion of private ownership was limited by the power of the monarchy and the village. In times of trouble the Vietnamese king and village could confiscate individual peasants' land for the sake of the country or village. Nguyen Dong Chi also gave examples of when a village suffered a loss and all villagers were asked to give up a portion of their land to help the village re-build. This implied that the system of private land that had existed in traditional Vietnamese villages was not the same in nature as the modern capitalist system of private landownership.

Nguyen Dong Chi showed that the system of communal landownership--the creating of communal rice fields and the parceling out of these fields--was based on feudal, hierarchical traditions as well as egalitarian concerns.²⁸ One method of increasing communal rice fields was through a tradition of "*ruong hau*" (posterity rice fields). Wealthy and high-ranking villagers would donate a plot of land to the village in order to insure that proper ceremonies would be performed in their honour after their death. This practice of "*mua hau*" (buying posterity) was limited to people who could afford to give away land, and also people of prestige

²⁸ The contradictions that existed within village traditions and structure have also been examined by University of Toronto professor, Hy Van Luong in his work on the village revolutionary mobilization. "Agrarian Unrest From An Anthropological Perspective: The Case of Vietnam", Comparative Politics, vol. 17 (2), Jan 1985, pp. 153-174.

and rank. Thus while this practice provided land for the village, it was also a symbol of status and honour for the donors. In the process of parceling out land, rank and status also had a great role. The best land was given to the high-ranking villagers and officials. The ordinary peasant received less in terms of quantity and quality than the elites of the village. This again shows that communal ownership of rice fields served to equalize wealth within the village to a certain degree, but it also served to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the village. Consequently, although the existence of the communal land system had helped provide a minimum level of subsistence for poor peasants, it was also a feudalistic tool used in maintaining elite domination within the village. Perhaps Nguyen Dong Chi was suggesting a parallel between the double-edge sword effect of communal lands of the past and that of the present; although agricultural collectivization provided a protective net, it was also a tool for the central state to control the peasants.

In the article written by Truong Huu Quynh, a specialist in Vietnamese Medieval landowning systems, the communal and private land ownership had a more complicated and convoluted development than was claimed by other writers.²⁹ At the beginning of his article Truong Huu Quynh emphasized the

²⁹ Truong Huu Quynh, "Ve nhung quan he so huu trong bo phan ruong dat cong o lang xa Viet Nam co truyen", (Ownership of Communal Rice Fields in Traditional Vietnamese Villages), Nong Thon Viet-Nam, pp. 65-77.

diversity in village structure and systems of landownership. The stress on diversity was by itself destabilizing, given the Hanoi government's previous reliance upon one stereotypical conception of the peasantry. His first point was that not all villages had the same origin. Of the 20,000 villages that existed in Vietnam at the end of the eighteenth century, some were created in ancient times, while others were established in the recent centuries and or were created by the modern state. The various origins naturally gave rise to many different patterns of landownership. Truong Huu Quynh noted that there was always more than one type of landownership system in the villages at any given time.

According to Truong Huu Quynh, there were two different types of communal rice fields: Those which were owned by the central state and those owned by the villages. The tension between the village and the state over the control of village common rice fields came about in the fifteenth century as the premodern state became more centralized and powerful.³⁰ Since taxes and duties were owed not to the village, but to the state, Truong Huu Quynh suggested that in effect the state had become the landlord of village land. The state's encroachment on village land became more intense as the central government became stronger. In 1430 (during the later Le dynasty) for example, the "*quan dien*" was promulgated by the central state to restrict the ways in

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

which village rice fields were divided. The "*quan dien*" (equal field system) provided uniform rules for giving out village rice fields. Before this, different villages had different rules in the parcelling out of village land. The state also demanded that the barren fields of one village must be given to another if there was a shortage of fields in the neighbouring village. This law violated the village's tradition of "*ruong xa nao, dan xa ay huong*" (the village's fields will be used only by its own members).³¹ Furthermore, the central state's interference in the village land system created a group of corrupt officials who used the land the state gave them to become rich and further cheat and bully the villagers. Thus in some instances, village communal fields became *de facto* private holdings for the corrupt officials; the growth of the premodern state contributed in this way to rural poverty.

In conclusion, Truong Huu Quynh emphasized that even though the system of communal rice fields was maintained in the villages, the nature of this system had been perverted so that it became a tool for the feudalists to increase their own wealth and tie the peasants to the rural area. It held back any escape from poverty while at the same time hindering agricultural development.³²

Contrary to the argument of Truong Huu Quynh, Le Kim Ngan maintained that the disintegration of the system of

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

common village rice fields was not caused by the actions of the central state.³³ Le Kim Ngan argued that it was the transformation of the economy from a peasant economy to a commodity-based economy that brought about the change in the landownership system. According Ngan, in the first half of the nineteenth century there was a great change in the socio-economic situation with the emergence of a division of class, a division of labour in agriculture, and family handicraft industry. With the development of a commodity economy, the middle class and the rich wanted more money to spend on commodities and thus there were more incentives to steal communal land. These changes affected the various villages in different ways, depending on the socio-economic organization of the individual villages.

One important aspect of Ngan's essay is the author's argument that this movement toward private landownership was a step toward progress, modernity and capitalist development. As well, this was a movement toward greater poverty for many and greater ruthlessness of the "haves" against the "have nots".³⁴ Quoting Lenin, the author emphasized that the emergence of privately-owned land and small producers were signs of capitalism. The traditional system of communal rice fields, in contrast, was a backward economy that "had no historical role", but only one purpose, "that was to maintain

³³ Le Kim Ngan, "Mot so van de che do so huu lang xa nua dau the ky XIX" (Some Issues in Village Land Ownership System of the First Half of the Nineteenth Century), Nong Thon Viet-Nam, pp. 78-96.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

an economy that served the entire feudal officialdom".³⁵ For this reason, the Nguyen kings put great effort into restoring and maintaining the common rice field system. Le Kim Ngan condemned their attempt to do so as a backward move that had hindered the development of "independent producers".³⁶

The implication of Le Kim Ngan's article is that peasants were (and possibly still are) natural small producers who acted rationally in order to optimize their returns. The Vietnamese peasants and the development of a modern economy were held back, in his view, by the action of the feudal state; but there were implied reservations here as well about the actions of the collectivizing modern state. For historical writing in Hanoi is almost always political discourse about the present as well.

In Truong Huu Quynh's article, communal land had long lost its communalistic qualities because of the central state's control; while Nguyen Dong Chi showed that communal land was used to reinforce village hierarchy. From these articles, it is apparent that the communal aspects of traditional villages were hollow, either because communal fields were *de facto* private land or else they were tools used by the feudal state and elite to assert their power. This pessimistic characterization of traditional village communalism in the mid-1970s reflected the bitter experience of the Communist era. Vietnamese peasants had resisted the

³⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

state's socialistic collectivizing gospel and were (and are) attempting to operate as small producers. It was still assumed, in 1977, that this was bad.

In a discussion about the nature of village communalism, politically conscious scholars could not leave out the villages' ability to remain independent and fight foreign invasions. In Nong Thon Viet Nam there were four articles (by Le Van Lan, Pham Van Cuong, Pham Dai Doan, and Nguyen Huu Hop) dealing with the villages' role in armed struggles and resistance wars.³⁷ These four articles followed the convention dictated by the Party in their unreserved praises for the villages' strength, independence and cohesion. Yet upon closer scrutiny, we see that the sources of village strength, as depicted in the articles, were regionalistic sentiments, kinship ties, and peasant submissiveness to village leaders, rather than a nationally orchestrated communalism by elite figures in the capital city. For the modern Vietnamese communists as of 1977, these things still reeked of oppressive feudal relations and traditions.

Moreover, as the introductory article by Van Tao pointed out, the qualities needed for fighting foreign aggressions

³⁷ The four articles are: Le Van Lan, "Ve vai tro cua lang xa trong su nghiep dau tranh vu trang giu nuoc o Viet Nam thoi xua" (The Role of the Village in the Task of Armed Struggles to Defend the Country in Vietnam's Ancient Period), pp. 232-258; Pham Van Cuong, "Lang xa trong cuoc khang chien chong xam luoc Nguyen Mong" (Villages in the Resistance Struggle Against the Mongolian Invasion), pp. 259-274; Pham Van Doan, "Mot so lang chien dau trong khang chien chong Minh dau the ky XV" (Villages Fighting in the Resistance War Against the Ming Forces in the Fifteenth Century), pp. 275-290; Nguyen Huu Hop, "Moi quan he giua khoi nghia Tay Son voi lang xa" (The Relationship Between the Tay Son National Revolt and the Villages), Nong Thon Viet-Nam, pp. 291-302.

and for building socialism were not the same. The traditions of village self-sufficiency, loyalty, and cohesion were, in fact, negative qualities in socialist development, even if they were positive in fighting foreign aggression. This was similar to the point of view of Tran Huy Lieu, whose article on the difference between patriotism and ethnic chauvinism was discussed earlier. In Lieu's assessment, the village's ability to defend itself did not stem from patriotic sentiments, but rather from localistic xenophobia.

The handful of articles we have examined from Nong Thon Viet-Nam make it clear that this work was an attempt by the scholars to re-assess the theories concerning the Vietnamese countryside, against the background of the failure of farm collectivization policies which had been imposed on the villages from above. Although the articles celebrated the villages' long-standing traditions of patriotism, collectivism, independence, egalitarianism and strength, there was much ambivalence in them about what these qualities actually meant for the building of socialism, and thus for the eradication of poverty. It is obvious that by 1977 the scholars were increasingly unsure about the history of landownership in the villages and even more uncertain about what the historical existence of communal and private land said about the nature of the peasants. Did the long-standing existence of communal fields mean that the peasants were somehow innately communal in nature? Or did communal fields represent the vestiges of a feudalism that had escaped

destruction because Vietnam did not go through a capitalist phase of development? This debate is reminiscent of the one between the Marxist and the Russian populists of nearly a century ago on the nature of the Russian peasant communes. It is clear that by 1977 when the age-old problem of lack of food--the subsistence problem--came to a head in Vietnam's countryside, stereotyped views of Vietnamese peasant behaviour had come under unprecedented questioning in Hanoi.

More Uncertainties in the 1980s

In 1980 an interesting article appeared in Nghien Cuu Kinh Te (Economic Research Journal) in which the author, Nguyen Tran Trong, argued that Ho Chi Minh had envisioned collectives as a way to "enrich the people and strengthen the country". Writing this in 1980, a period when the advocates of the Stalinist-Maoist road of development were losing ground, Trong was in fact indirectly criticizing the management of collectives, since they did not make the peasants rich or strengthen the country. Quoting "Uncle Ho", Trong reminded the readers that improving the lives of the people was the highest goal of the revolution. Therefore, the author continued, "whatever activity that lowers the income of the collectives, that causes difficulties for the peasants, even if these activities increase the income of the cooperative and the state, these [activities] would be

wrong."³⁸ Trong went further to assert that the principles Ho felt were important for collective organizations were volunteer membership, benefits for all members, and democratic management. The precepts Trong believed Ho advocated for collective organizations were gradual progression, sincere (not nominal) action, and small-scale organizations.

The actual process of rural collectivization in Vietnam had been quite opposite to Ho's precepts and principles. Indeed, the process was forced, rapid, large-scale, and undemocratic, and most of all, it did not make the peasants rich. Whether the author meant this article to be a criticism of the collective effort and an endorsement of the changes promulgated during the sixth plenum (1979), or as an affirmation that collectivization was still the correct path toward socialism or that the new changes were more orthodox, is difficult to tell. Whatever his intentions, the article has cleverly summed up many of the problems of the collectives, and the discrepancy between collectivization and the end of poverty.

Thus in the 1980s amid the disintegration of collectives and a movement returning to family production, rural specialists continued to theorize about the nature of the Vietnamese peasant. In 1981 Truong Huu Quynh (the Medieval

³⁸ Nguyen Tran Trong, "Bac Ho voi hop tac hoa nong nghiep" (Uncle Ho and Agricultural Collectivization), Nghien Cuu Kinh Te, 3(115), June 1980, p. 11.

specialist whose contribution to Nong Thon Viet Nam we have already examined) explicitly admitted that there had been a chronic lack of understanding about the nature of the peasantry. Commenting on the fact that over the last twenty-five years (1954-1979) there had been more than one hundred and fifty dissertations published in Communist Vietnam on peasant movements or peasant politics during the precolonial era, Quynh made the devastating admission that there were many essential issues about peasants not clearly understood. Quynh began his article with a subtle reminder to readers that historical discussions in Vietnam were not merely academic; Quynh stated that in the struggle against capitalist historical interpretations of Vietnam's heroic past, "history had become a tool for an ideological war."³⁹

One important gap in Vietnamese knowledge about the peasantry, according to Quynh, was the issue of landownership. Quynh asserted that there was little evidence for historians to really know what types of land systems existed in the precolonial period. Stating that "history never developed in a straight line", he ruled out the notion that the development of the landownership system had progressed linearly, as Marxists like to think, moving into different stages characterized by different production

³⁹ Truong Huu Quynh, "Hai muoi lam nam nghien cuu van de ruong dat va phong trao nong dan trong lich su che do phong kien nuoc ta", (Twenty-five Years of Study on the Problem of Rice Fields and the Peasant Movement in the Feudal History of Vietnam), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, 4(199), 1981, p. 2.

relationships such as lord-serf and landlord-tenant relationship. A large part of the reason for Quynh not to accept such an evolution of land-ownership system was that historians had no evidence to ascertain when private ownership of land actually emerged:

According to the calculation of Le Kim Ngan, [at the beginning of the 19th century] communal land accounted for only seventeen percent of the total cultivable land of the entire country, thus we see clearly that private ownership of land had become the trend before the 19th century.⁴⁰

Quynh's claims were, therefore, quite the opposite of what Vietnamese Marxist historians had conventionally believed--that private ownership of land emerged with the encroachment of French colonialism. Quynh asserted that "during the ten centuries of independence [from Chinese colonialism], in the Vietnamese society the system of state-ownership had always existed in parallel with private-ownership of land and public communal land."⁴¹ Historians did not know how these systems interacted or how varying political currents influenced how the state regarded these different types of ownership. In short, the history of landownership was very complicated and could not be used as a basis for constructing stereotypes about peasants or for formulating anti-poverty policies in the twentieth century.

Moreover, the lack of understanding of the land system also jeopardized the Vietnamese Communists' conventional

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 5.

interpretation of peasant movements. Quynh noted in 1981 that recently some scholars had questioned whether certain peasant rebellions could be categorized as nationalist revolts or mere riots involving robbery and pillage. According to Quynh, in order to answer this we would have to examine the extent to which the issue of land was a part of the rebellion. And all this, of course, required a thorough and clear understanding of the landownership system. Thus, the uncertainties with regard to the nature of communal and private land put into question not only the communalistic nature of peasants, but also the patriotic nature of their uprisings. The state orthodoxy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, at the time he wrote, still depended heavily upon unquestioned assumptions about such things.

In this article Truong Huu Quynh came short of denouncing Marx. Quynh argued that the existence of both private and communal rice fields in traditional Vietnamese villages made Vietnam's villages unique, unlike those villages of Europe and India to which Marx often referred when he theorized about peasant societies.⁴² This denial of similarity was subversive, for it implied that Marxist analysis was irrelevant in rural Vietnam. The implication of Quynh's claim is that Vietnamese villages, unlike those in India, were not bases for "oriental despotism" and enslavement of peasants' economic potential. Consequently,

⁴² Ibid., p. 3.

the Vietnamese communists were wrong in their attempt to destroy peasant family-based production and impose centralized agricultural collectives. Accordingly, they would have done better by using peasant family units rather than collectives as the basis for rural development and for solving rural poverty.

The uncertainties about the historical nature of the peasants, indeed, paralleled attacks on contemporary Vietnam's agricultural policies. In 1988, two years after Vietnam's official adoption of *Doi Moi*, Dinh Thu Cuc assessed what went wrong with the collectivization movement. In Dinh Thu Cuc's explanation, blame for the failure in collectivization lay in both the Party's irrational agricultural policies and the emergence of oppressive local leaders, the "new village bullies" who appropriated or wasted the people's wealth. As we have seen (p. 55) village bullies had been an alleged feature of precommunist villages for Thanh Nghi writers in the 1940s. According to Cuc the re-emergence of such a class of oppressors resulted from the low-level of culture among the peasants. Cuc noted that although there had been significant progress in the peasants' world view, "nevertheless, the traditional way of living is still deeply ingrained in their psychology, habits, customs, thinking and activity".⁴³ According to Cuc, these traditional

⁴³ Dinh Thu Cuc, "Nong dan va nong thon Viet-Nam hien nay; nhung van de can quan tam" (Present-day Vietnamese Peasants and Villages: Problems That Need Attention), Tap Chi Cong San, 5, 1988, p. 44.

ways--one of which was the acceptance of village leaders' and officials' authorities--had given rise to the powers of the "new village bullies".

Although it might have been the peasants' feudalistic beliefs which gave rise to the class of village bullies, it was the new political structure created by the Party which deterred the peasants from resisting the oppressors. In comparison to those in pre-revolutionary villages, the new village bullies were beyond the village's censorship, beyond the village's censure of checks and balances. Professor Woodside explained that:

The traditional 'bullies' or 'strongmen' accompanied the communal solidarity psychology of Vietnamese villages, or at least did not permanently erode it. Their power was at least created by inside-the-village historic processes which seemed an authentic part of the community...The people whom Cuc calls the 'new strongmen' have power which is far more externally created...Even more crucial, the 'new strongmen' also defend their power...by criteria and sanctions external to the village which imply extracommunal forms of coercion to an unprecedented degree.⁴⁴

What this had led to, Dinh Thu Cuc charged in 1988, was an erosion of village community as well as apathy and resignation on the part of the peasants: "In the past the peasants were able to unite to fight village bullies, but now many people consider this an inconvenience, and do not dare to resist because they fear being accused of resisting the

⁴⁴ Alexander Woodside, "Peasants and the State in the Aftermath of the Vietnamese Revolution", Peasant Studies, vol. 16 (4) Summer 1989, p. 296.

Party and government".⁴⁵ Thus the peasants no longer regarded the building of the village as their collective responsibility. Instead, they now retreated inwardly, looking out only for their own family members.

Implicit in Dinh Thu Cuc's analysis is that this erosion of village community, and the peasants' apathy and private interests, were obstacles in (and indeed, results of) the Party's effort to transform the rural economy into a large-scale socialist collective production. Her enthusiasm for the ability of the peasants to develop a "spirit of collective mastership" and to fight poverty, had waned considerably since 1976. For in an article written during that earlier time, the same Dinh Thu Cuc maintained that the peasants' spirit of collective mastership had been formed and developed: "One important firm achievement of the three revolutions in the rural area has been: the formation and development of the peasants' spirit of collective mastership".⁴⁶ This "spirit of collective mastership" was the acceptance that the interests of the cooperative and the cooperators are one and the same; consequently, this acceptance would allegedly lead peasants to assume the roles as masters of their collectives. Cuc had believed in 1976

⁴⁵ Dinh Thu Cuc, "Nong dan va nong thon Viet-Nam hien nay; nhung van de can quan tam" (Present-day Vietnamese peasants and villages: problems that need attention), p. 45.

⁴⁶ Dinh Thu Cuc, "Buoc dau tim hieu ve qua trinh thanh va phat trien tu tuong lam chu tap the cua nguoi nong dan Viet-Nam" (The Early Study of Processes of Formation and Development of the Vietnamese Peasant's Spirit of Collective Mastership), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, 2(167) March-April 1976, p. 42.

that only when the majority of peasants came to accept this collective mastership that socialist large-scale production would arrive. Twelve years later, Cuc conceded that many feudalistic, individualistic, backward traits still remained strong among the peasantry, and had in fact been amplified by collectivization.

Therefore, the failure of collectivization to improve the living standard of the peasants had grave implications. For sensitive rural specialists such as Dinh Thu Cuc, the failure meant a re-assessment of how far the peasants had moved from their feudalistic roots. The peasants' unwillingness to sacrifice for the good of the collectives dampened Cuc's hope that they would develop the "spirit of collective mastership". For Truong Huu Quynh, the failure of the collectivization movement confirmed his suspicion that private land ownership was just as much a part of the peasants' tradition as communal ownership, despite what the state orthodoxy presumed. Essentially, therefore, the inability of the Vietnamese Communist government to eradicate poverty with their Stalinist model of forced rapid collectivization and industrialization had challenged the Vietnamese communists' entire concept of the nature of the peasantry.

Poverty and inequality in the 1990s

In the early 1990s, in the aftershock of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Vietnamese Communist Party was in a panic to assure its dominance and extinguish any opponents' hope that the Party would follow the Soviet Union's demise. In 1990 the General-Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Van Linh, reassured the public that the collapse of European communism was caused not only by errors of the various European communist leaders, but also by the "violations against Marxist-Leninist principles and the imperialist forces' sabotage activities".⁴⁷ This signaled the intention of the VCP not to detour any more than necessary from its task of socialistic construction. But the road to socialism was left uncharted. In the Vietnamese communists' point of view, the earlier attempts in Europe had proven to be unsuccessful, thus the burden fell upon them (and on the Chinese) to map out the way. As of the early 1990s, the VCP affirmed its commitment to socialistic development through "state-initiated capitalism."⁴⁸

Among the many changes entailed by the VCP's "state-initiated capitalism" are the decollectivization of agriculture, and the elimination of price control, government subsidies and monopoly.⁴⁹ Such drastic changes ushered in a

⁴⁷ David Wurfel, "Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective", in Turley and Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, p.39.

⁴⁸ William Turley, "Introduction", in Turley and Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

host of new social-economic issues, the most hotly debated are those of poverty and inequality. The new orientation toward a market economy has allowed daring entrepreneurs to get rich, and thus there has emerged a problem of inequality which, according to official Party line, had not been a problem in the pre-reform days. Furthermore, the new liberalization of the media has allowed scholars to focus on the country's poverty problem and to suggest some very radical explanations for its existence. In short, the collapse of the state orthodoxy's stereotyped assumptions about the peasantry has allowed a rebirth of the multifaceted discourse about rural poverty which the Thanh Nghi writers had begun in the 1940s.

Recently the problems of poverty and inequality were discussed with a new frankness in Vietnam's leading academic and political journals. The communists' main journal, Tap Chi Cong San, in September 1992 published an article revealing the shamefully large number of poor people in rural Vietnam. According to the author, Nguyen Sinh, the census of 1990 indicated that 55.06 percent of the rural population were considered poor. Of this group of poor peasants, 9.44 percent were considered destitute and starving.⁵⁰ Although Sinh did not provide any measure for the income of the poor, another writer Quyet Thang suggested that the poor were

⁵⁰ Nguyen Sinh, "Su phan hoa giao ngheo o nong thon hien nay" (The Present Disparity Between the Rich and Poor in the Countryside), Tap Chi Cong San, 9, 1992, p. 48.

generally those unemployed for three or more months, with an annual income level of under 500 thousand piasters (about 48 US dollars).⁵¹ Thang showed that at the beginning of 1992 there were 105,000 (30 percent) households in Vinh Phu province alone who lacked food, and of these, 32,000 were starving.

As early as 1988, the question of how to solve poverty in a non-ideological way became a concern of Dao The Tuan, the Director of the Agricultural and Technological Sciences Institute. He began one of his discussions with the question, which was also the title of an important article, "Is the Red River Delta capable of producing enough to eat?"⁵² His answer was a resounding: yes. Similar to the opinions of the Thanh Nghi writers of the 1940s, Dao The Tuan dismissed the factor of overpopulation as the cause of poverty in the Red River Delta. Using examples of populous and yet also booming economic centres such as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, the Netherlands, and Zhejiang, Dao The Tuan argued that a high population density could be an advantage.

Tuan also argued that the other conventional reasons for explaining poverty (adverse climate, lack of capital) did not adequately explain the situation of the Red River Delta, for both of these factors could be solved if policy makers were

⁵¹ Quyet Thang, "'Xoa doi, giam ngheo' o vinh phu dang o trong tam tay" ('Eliminate Hunger, Reduce Poverty' is Within Reach in Vinh Phu), Nhan Dan, Jan 8, 1993.

⁵² Dao The Tuan, "Dong bang Song Hong co the san xuất đủ ăn được không?", (Is the Red River Delta Capable of Producing Enough to Eat?), Nhan Dan, October 21, 1988.

imaginative and organized. With regard to lack of capital, for example, Tuan urged that the focus not be completely on foreign money which usually was invested in water resources, chemical fertilizer and insecticides. These types of investments have limited advantages because after a period, more investment is needed without increasing productivity. Instead, attention should be on mobilizing capital investment from the people to be used in more effective ways.

One of the most important goals for the development of the Red River Delta, according to Tuan, was not high production (as proponents of the "Green Revolution" had advocated in the past), but stable production. Tuan wrote: "The goal of the agricultural system is not only to achieve high productivity, but the rate of development and the stability also have great economic effects..."⁵³ Tuan's solution for the Red River Delta was a strategy he called, "Systems Effects" (*hieu ung he thong*), which perceived various agricultural sectors as a holistic system. Developmental plans should consider the interaction of the components such as production of food crop, export crop, animals, and secondary agricultural goods. Thus, improvement to one component will increase productivity in the other. In order for this system to work, the management and communication systems must be improved. Tuan perceived the agricultural collectives' managers as ones who would organize

⁵³ Ibid.

and coordinate the different sectors and establish the infrastructure in which peasants could produce, sell and buy needed merchandise. In Tuan's system, individual households would be the main players. It should be up to them to decide what role to play in the development of the agricultural system. The state, in the meantime, should provide structure and facilities, and should allow individual households the freedom to pursue their own activities.

Thus Tuan believed that with some imagination, rural researchers could find remedies for the problems of the country's most infamous poverty-ridden area. The solutions Tuan proposed were sensible in that they would not endanger the environment nor put Vietnam at the mercy of foreign aid. In addition, they emphasized the importance of the family units while relegating the state to a minor role as facilitator and coordinator in Vietnam's rural economic development.

In 1993, five years after Tuan wrote his proposal for solving the Red River Delta's poverty, Dao The Tuan's own investigation showed that the shortage of food was still the major problem in Vinh Phu (a province in the Red River Delta) and that thirty percent of the peasant households were poor.⁵⁴ In this article Tuan suggested that the problem was that peasants were not familiar with the market economy. With the

⁵⁴ Dao The Tuan, "Giai quyét nhung kho khan hien nay cua nong dan nhu the nao?" (How to Solve the Present Difficulties of the Peasants?), Nhan Dan, January 12, 1993.

decollectivization process virtually completed, many peasants were without any guidance or protection, and without any experience in producing in a market economy. Tuan suggested that research be done to find out what the peasants were capable of doing and allow them to pursue these tasks, and for the tasks they were unable to perform, help organize them so that they may progress.

Here interestingly enough is another portrayal of the peasants: honest hardworking without any innate capitalist instinct. Gone from this article is the image of peasants as individualist economic maximizers who must be guided by the working class into socialism. In fact, Tuan suggested that peasants should resort to a form of cooperative trades association to provide support for each other. For example, potato producers' associations would help each other by stabilizing the price of potatoes, and avoid flooding the market, as well as helping each other with logistics such as getting their goods to market. Furthermore, peasants could help each other by forming credit cooperatives or by pooling their assets in order to get a loan. Tuan's suggestion in 1993 that peasants form a sort of mutual aid associations bears strong similarities to suggestions made by Thanh Nghi writers, Duy Tam and Le Huy Ruat, who proposed in the 1940s that consumer cooperatives and mutual aid associations would help peasants escape poverty. It is also interesting to note that during the early land reform period in the DRV, similar types of credit and producers association had operated along

with the mutual aid teams (MATS). These associations, however, were perceived by the DRV leadership to be transitional organizations that would help ease peasants into collectivized farms. The MATS, therefore, were soon disbanded and peasants were forced to join collectives.⁵⁵

Although Dao The Tuan believed that the new market economy had caused difficulties for the peasants, he denied that the reforms themselves caused poverty. In his view, poverty had been a factor within Vinh Phu even before the reforms. In fact, Tuan stated that "through natural development there was already a number of poor people."⁵⁶ It is unclear what Tuan meant by "natural development". Perhaps Tuan was suggesting that poverty is a natural element in human society, not caused by class oppression or exploitation. If this interpretation of Tuan's writing is true, then does it imply that poverty is part and parcel of a society's development and thus it will never be eradicated?

A similar point of view about the natural existence of poverty is found in an 1991 article of Bui Ngoc Trinh.⁵⁷ Bui Ngoc Trinh's article alarmed the reader about the low educational, cultural and health levels of the rural population. Trinh urged the government to deal with the problem decisively, rather than continuing to view the rural

⁵⁵ Vickerman, The Fate of the Peasantry, ch. 4.

⁵⁶ Dao The Tuan, "Giai quyét nhúng kho khan hien nay cua nong dan nhu the nao?" (How to Solve the Present Difficulties of the Peasants?).

⁵⁷ Bui Ngoc Trinh, "Nguoi ngheo o nong thon va chuong trinh quoc chong doi ngheo" (Poor People in the Countryside and National Anti-poverty Programs), Tap Chi Cong San, 11, 1991.

poor in contradictory terms. According to Trinh, the rural poor had been regarded by the communist leadership, on the one hand, as the moving force for revolution yet on the other hand, as a burden on society.

Although these conflicting views of the rural poor had been imbedded in social policies, Trinh denied that poverty was caused by incorrect policies of the Party: "It is correct that because we were impatient, subjective and poor managers, that the movement to collectivize was not able to produce wanted results. However, that movement absolutely did not create more numbers of rural poor than before."⁵⁸ On the contrary, Trinh asserted, poverty had been deeply rooted in the history of Vietnam, from the days when Vietnam was first established: "During the period of Chinese domination [111 BC to 967 AD] in the entire country there were a few dozens officials and generals who actually had enough to eat and wear."⁵⁹ Trinh also pointed to the geographic and climatic factors as causes of the present poverty. She stated that the poor "on the large part live in areas where land and climatic conditions are not favourable".⁶⁰

These explanations for the cause of poverty clearly break with the Marxist argument (and also that of Martin Murray) that feudalistic and capitalistic class relations caused dependence, underdevelopment and impoverishment.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

Trinh's (as well as Tuan's) insistence that poverty was a natural phenomenon is a far cry from the points of view of the historians writing in 1977, whose work in the volume, Nong Thon Viet Nam Trong Lich Su, we have already examined. Implicit in the discussions in this volume of essays about landownership systems and village resistance capability, was the unquestionable assumption that village poverty was caused by some form of oppression, be that of the central state, the village elite, or the imperialist invaders. Even the subversive Truong Huu Quynh, who in 1981 went so far as to suggest that Vietnamese villages did not fit into Marx's model of pre-modern, oriental peasant societies, did not hint at the possibility that poverty could be a natural part of peasant life.

As for fighting poverty, Bui Ngoc Trinh suggested that the government provide an infrastructure for development and investment in agriculture, help the rural cultivators with tax relief and tax breaks, and help them market their produce. Trinh's perception of the role of the state in economic development resembles that of the liberal academics of Thanh Nghi, who on the whole accepted the existence of poverty as natural, but still believed that the state could help alleviate some of the miseries and help prevent more people from becoming poor.

In the assessment of Nguyen Sinh, the vast majority of the poor were unskilled workers who lacked capital and labour capacity. No longer under the protection of the collectives,

these people have been left to live in poverty. According to Nguyen Sinh, other reasons for poverty, especially among ethnic minorities of the highlands, were poor land and bad climate. According to Sinh, only a small minority of the poor were poor because of their own laziness and wantonness.

Like Bui Ngoc Trinh, Sinh called for some form of national strategy to help the poor. Sinh, however, also saw the need to "resolve the land issue" which involved the recognition that land is a commodity. Sinh made the bold statement that, "land is not a 'god given' thing, but is a type of merchandise".⁶¹ According to Sinh, giving land monetary value as such, would provide a system for land transfer and rental, and a method to protect the value of land. It also would allow for the "agglomeration and concentration of land" which would make people rich. Implicit in his suggestion was that land be made a private commodity that could be sold and rented according to market value. The underlying purpose of making land privately-owned is to "make the peasants feel assured about the government's land policy, and to overcome the situation in which land is exploited with little intention of reforming the land, and increasing its fertility".⁶²

These solutions suggested that a reversal to the pre-revolutionary production relations (where there was private

⁶¹ Nguyen Sinh, "Su phan hoa giao ngheo o nong thon hien nay" (The Present Disparity Between the Rich and Poor in the Countryside), Tap Chi Cong San, 9, 1992, p. 50.

⁶² Ibid.

ownership of land and of the means of production) would help solve the poverty problem. Here again, comparison with past explanations shows how full circle theories about poverty had evolved. As we saw in chapter one, Pierre Gourou and Pham Cao Duong pointed to the accumulation of land and proletarianization of peasants by French colonial practices as the main causes of Vietnam's poverty and underdevelopment. Ho Chi Minh, no less, had spoke fervently against how the French and their Vietnamese lackeys stole land from the peasants, thus pauperizing them. In 1992, however, Nguyen Sinh was suggesting that the inability to accumulate land in Vietnam caused economic instability and stagnation.

The landownership issue remains extremely controversial among Vietnamese social researchers and policy makers. Proponents of land privatization advance the argument made by Nguyen Sinh. Others who oppose such a move argue that private ownership of land would lead to land fragmentation, "land wars" and worsening rural differentiation.⁶³ According to Ngo Vinh Long, the opposition to privatization of land came mainly from the Northern and Central provinces where collectives had been the strongest and from people such as families of veterans who benefitted from the guarantees of the collectives.⁶⁴ As of July 1993 the VCP still maintained that "land belongs to the people" and is under state

⁶³ Ngo Vinh Long, "Reform and Rural Development: Impact on Class, Sectoral, and Regional Inequalities", in Turley and Selden, eds., Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, pp.191-192.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 193.

management. The Vietnamese government, however, guarantee those who presently have land the long-term rights to the use of that land, and the right to transfer, exchange, inherit, rent and mortgage their land-use rights.⁶⁵

Another issue being discussed by Vietnamese social scientists is the newly emerging social inequality. Understandably many writers blame the "new system" for causing this inequality. One author stated in a 1993 Nhan Dan article:

In the last few years, in the process to achieve a new system [co che], the disparity between the rich and poor has become glaring. There are those average households who have become rich or have fallen into poverty; there are families who were poor in one month, and who became rich in the next."⁶⁶

Pham Van Phu's article in 1991 was a particularly important voice in the debate because it was part of an unprecedented Vietnamese ethnographic exploration of poverty such as would not have been possible in the more ideological era before 1986. The article was based on extensive surveying, and shows how the recent reforms had created social stratification in the northern rural sector. In Pham Van Phu's point of view, however, differentiation did not result exclusively from the policies of *Doi Moi*. Even during the heyday of collectivization there was inequality. According to Phu, collectivization destroyed private

⁶⁵ Editorial, "Dinh huong xa hoi chu nghia trong phat trien kinh te-xa hoi nong thon" (Socialist Orientation in Agricultural Economic and Social Development), Tap Chi Cong San, 8, 1993, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Quyet Thang, "'Xoa doi, giam ngheo' o vinh phu dang o trong tam tay" ('Eliminate Hunger, Reduce Poverty' is Within Reach in Vinh Phu).

ownership and class differentiation. It did not, however, destroy differentiation based on people's labour capacity and skills.⁶⁷ Thus within one particular collective sixty percent of the people harvested 300 kilograms of rice per person per year, while a minority harvested 200 kilograms and a tiny percent (1.5) harvested 400 kilograms. In addition to these three groups, there was also a class of cadres and managers who did not participate in the actual labour and yet whose lives were better off than the rest.⁶⁸

With the introduction of *Doi Moi* policies, however, this differentiation became more prominent. Factors responsible for social differentiation now included capital accumulation, labour capacity, business acumen, technological skills and level of diversification. According to Pham Van Phu's research, households that remained exclusively within the crop cultivation sector tended to be poor, while households that ventured into handicraft, skilled trades, and business tended to prosper. Phu's findings are similar to those of the Thanh Nghi writer, Le Huy Van whose 1941 survey of one peasant family's income had shown that income from rice cultivation alone was not enough to support the family. Thus similar to the liberal-reformist Thanh Nghi

⁶⁷ Pham Van Phu, "Phan tang xa hoi trong cong dong nguoi Viet o nong thon mien Bac hien nay" (Social Differentiation in Vietnamese Collectives in the Northern Countryside Today) Tap Chi Dan Toc Hoc (Journal of Ethnology), 2(70) 1991, p.29.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

intellectual, Pham Van Phu was advocating diversification as a way to enrich the peasants.

The table below sums up the six different classes Phu found in the three northern provinces of Thai Binh, Ha Bac, and Ha Nam Ninh⁶⁹:

TABLE I Stratification in Three Vietnamese Villages

class	% population **	annual average income per person (piaster)
1. The small owners	4.1	600,000
2. The well-to-do	18	300,000
3. Those with enough to eat	55	200,000
4. Those without enough to eat	16	?(data not provided)
5. The poor and miserable	8	7,000
6. The managers	.5	?(data not provided)

** The percentages Pham Van Phu provided add up to 101.6

In general, the people of group one were contractors, factory owners, money lenders, and traders. Those in groups two and three participated directly in production and their activities were diversified among the different sectors: agriculture, handicraft, trade and business. The poor peasants of groups four and five lacked experience, capital or/and labour. The eight percent in the category of poor and miserable generally went hungry for three to five months out of a year. The poor of groups four and five spent eighty-five percent of the income on living expenses, leaving only

⁶⁹ The specific villages Pham Van Phu studied were Dong Duong and Nguyen Xa in Thai Binh, Tam Son and Dinh Bang in Ha Bac, and Nam Giang and Hai Van in Ha Nam Ninh. The data summarized in the table can be found in pages 33-34, Ibid.

fifteen percent to be used in production. In contrast, the first and second groups had at their disposal, fifty percent of their income. Thus Pham Van Phu demonstrated that the rich were getting richer while the poor were getting poorer, because the rich could continually improve and increase their productions and businesses. The last category (group number six) included those who worked as managers in the political and economic life of the villages. The people in this group were very mobile, continually moving up to join the groups of small owners and the well-to-do.

Ironically, many people of the poorest twenty-four percent surveyed by Pham Van Phu suffered the same dilemmas as their poor brethren did in the pre-revolutionary days. Many poor peasants of the 1990s, for example, must rent out their labour capacity (ie. work for other people). In Pham Van Phu's data for four villages, Hai Van village had the highest percentage (68.4%) of households whose members worked for someone else for wages.⁷⁰

In addition, poor peasants of the 1990s also found themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of having to borrow money at high interest rates (12-20%) to make ends meet and then spending a good portion of their incomes from the next harvest to repay the loans.⁷¹ As we have already seen, usury

⁷⁰ Data for Tam Son (Hai Bac Province) was 35%; Dong Duong (Thai Binh Province) was 25%; Dinh Bang (Ha Bac) was 35.3%. These percentages represented wage employment in all sectors of the economy. *Ibid.*, table 5, p. 33.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

had been a grave problem for peasants during the period of French colonialism. Writers we have examined in the previous chapters, such as Charles Robequain, Pierre Gourou, Pham Cao Duong, the *Tu-Luc* novelists, the Thanh Nghi writers, as well as the communist theorists, Truong Chinh and Vo Nguyen Giap, all had cited the problem of usury as a factor in the pauperization of peasants. The consensus among the pre-revolution writers was that the French colonialists were much to blame for not regulating lending practices better and for allowing such exploitation of poor peasants to take place. In the 1990s there is no longer the French colonialists to blame.

As disheartening as the emerging inequality is for many researchers, it seems that they accept it as a part of the economic developmental path Vietnam has taken. In fact, Pham Van Phu stated that the government should encourage such social stratification in order that the trickle effect will eventually improve the lives of the majority of the people who have just enough to eat or who are poor. Although Pham Van Phu conceded that inequality is a necessary evil, he did not believe that social differentiation equalled exploitation. Phu suggested that the government take an active role in deterring the exploitation of the poor by regulating interest rates, setting up a credit system to enable the poor to get credit, and creating some system of labour codes so that peasants will not be exploited by their employers. Thus very similar to the Thanh Nghi writers of

the 1940s, the rural specialists of the 1990s, readily accepting that inequality is a "natural" aspect of economic development, are urging the government to regulate this social cleavage so that the poor will not become too poor.

It is clear that in the last few years the problem of poverty has received its share of public debate and radical solutions. Many of the radical solutions endorsed by the Party elite in the 1990s, however, show a striking resemblance to those suggested by Thanh Nghi bourgeois intellectuals of the 1940s. In August 1993 in the VCP's main journal, Tap Chi Cong San, a Party official, Nguyen Thi Hang,⁷² outlined her recommended strategies for Vietnam's anti-poverty war, which is officially termed "Eliminate Hunger and Reduce Poverty" (Xoa Doi Giam Ngheo).⁷³ On the whole, Nguyen Thi Hang's anti-poverty recommendations reflect the trend in contemporary Vietnamese poverty research in that there is an implicit acceptance that poverty is a natural phenomenon, not caused by class exploitation. Like the Thanh Nghi writers of the 1940s, Hang's suggestions are moderate involving such measures as protective policies against usury, technological and skill training for the poor, and institutions providing credit and low-interest loans to poor

⁷² Nguyen Thi Hang is the Party's Central Committee Commissioner and the Undersecretary for the Labour-Disabled Veteran-Social Ministry.

⁷³ Nguyen Thi Hang, "Nhưng giải pháp vi mô xóa đói giảm nghèo" (The Solutions for Eliminating Hunger and Reducing Poverty), Tap Chi Cong San, 8, 1993, pp. 7-9.

peasants. Gone from Vietnamese communists' remedies for poverty in 1993 are radical land and wealth redistributions.

Of interest to this present discussion is Hang's focus on the land issue. Her first recommendation is that the government should provide land for poor peasants and guarantee them long-term rights to its use. Hang stated that unlike in other developing countries, the majority of Vietnamese peasants have land to cultivate. There were, however, about two to five percent of the peasants who did not have land and who must work for others.⁷⁴ According to Hang, there were also about twenty to forty percent of the peasants who lost portions of their land because they were unable to pay their debts or fulfill their production contracts with the cooperatives. These peasants who did not have land or who lost some of their land (or more precisely, their rights to land use) usually fell into destitution. She recommended that the government help provide land to the poor so that they would have a chance to escape poverty. However, this should be done in a way that accumulation of land by the successful and productive peasants would not be discouraged or hindered. Hang wrote: "At present many households skillful in their work want more fields to carry on business. This is a healthy matter, worthy of encouragement."⁷⁵

Connected to this lack of land issue is her recommendation for encouraging peasant migration into the

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

sparsely-populated highlands as a way to fight poverty.⁷⁶ Hang suggested that the government encourage the poor who were without land or with very little land to migrate into the highlands. Clearly this is the same recommendation Western and Vietnamese researchers, whom we have discussed in chapters one and two, had suggested in the 1930s and 1940s. The geographer Pierre Gourou along with Thanh Nghi writer, Pham Gia Kinh, for example, both made references to migration as a possible solution for reducing poverty in the populous Red River Delta. Unlike Nguyen Thi Hang, however, they also pointed out the problems with such a policy, mainly that peasants were attached to their ancestral land and did not want live in the strange highlands which were infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes.⁷⁷

Another example of how Vietnamese communists' remedies for poverty resemble those suggested in pre-revolution period is Nguyen Thi Hang's focus on high birth rates among the poor. Hang did not go as far as Charles Robequain in his Malthusian suggestion that high birth rate caused poverty, but she did try to make a connection between poverty and population. Hang wrote that a trend existed: "where there is a great number of poor people, there is a high birth

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁷ Pierre Gourou, The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta, vol. 1, trans. by Richard Miller, (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1955), p. 238; Pham Gia Kinh, "Nong-nghiep Dong Duong hien tai va tuong lai" (The Present and Future Situations of Indochina's Agriculture), Thanh Nghi, December 1941, no. 7, p. 15.

rate."⁷⁸ Hang believed that for the poor having many children was an extra burden. The state, therefore, should educate the poor in the problem of overpopulation and teach them about different methods of birth control and family planning. There is an assumption on Hang's part that the poor did not already know about controlling their fertility and family size, and that they did not plan to have a large family. As we have seen in chapter one, Benjamin White's work on Javanese peasants suggested that in some cases, having many children was a strategy for the poor, because it provided extra labour. Perhaps we should therefore question the extent to which Hang is truly in touch with such intimacies of the peasants' lives.

One important recommendation of Nguyen Thi Hang, which had not been touched upon by the other poverty researchers discussed in this thesis, is for the government to focus some of its anti-poverty policies exclusively on women. According to Hang, twenty percent of the households in Vietnam were headed by women, and many of these households were poor. Hang noted that in general women suffered more hardship and discrimination than men, thus their poverty was more "bitter" (gay gat). Hang's recognition that the impact of poverty differentiates along gender line adds another aspect to the Vietnamese communists' new multidimensional concept of poverty.

⁷⁸ Nguyen Thi Hang, "Nhưng giải pháp vì mô xóa đói giảm nghèo", (Solutions for Eliminating Hunger and Reducing Poverty), p. 9.

The strategies outlined by Nguyen Thi Hang, a Party official, show how much has changed in communist thinking about poverty and economic development in the last decade. The new theories on poverty now show a strong continuity with the discussion that began among Western and Vietnamese social scientists in the 1930s and 1940s.

The failure of the VCP's agricultural collectivization policies to eradicate poverty required that social scientists find new ways to explain poverty, just as the failure required new strategies for economic development, and consequently, new perceptions of the peasantry. Vietnamese communist theorists are now pointing to climatic, environmental, institutional, cultural, and regional factors as well as aspects of gender, race and age in explaining poverty. Some are suggesting that poverty is a natural aspect of human societies. Dao The Tuan, for example, asserted that poverty has been a feature of Vietnamese rural society long before the reform period of 1985 ushered in the issue of inequality. Others went further like Bui Ngoc Trinh who stated that poverty has always been an aspect of Vietnam since time immemorial. The researchers' emphasis on the continuities of the poverty problem is an attempt to make the disruption resulting from the renovation policies more palatable. The elite's new gospel--poverty is a historical given since time immemorial--alleviates some of the blame for the persistence of poverty from the Party's former agricultural collectivization policies, as well as makes the

emerging inequality caused by the present *Doi Moi* policies more acceptable. Seen in this light, the movement away from collectivization and toward a market economy and private business becomes less like a break from the VCP's previous policies, but rather like a new phase in the Party's developmental plan. Similar to poverty and inequality, the policy of "state-initiated capitalism" is depicted as a "natural development" in Vietnam's continuing trek toward socialism.

CONCLUSION

In an article criticizing the VCP's agrarian reforms, the prominent historian Van Tao; who had spent decades defending such reforms, now in 1993 argued that the main error the Party made was to use the peasants as the guiding spirit for the Socialist Revolution.⁷⁹ According to Van Tao, the bourgeois revolution did not have a chance to develop to its fullest in Vietnam, thus the rural population did not have time to modernize. Despite this shortcoming in the peasant class, the Party still wrongly upheld the peasant rather than the working class as the revolutionary model. For example, within the power structure of the collectives, the Party had held in the 1950s that two-thirds of the positions must be occupied by poor peasants, and one-third by middle peasants.⁸⁰ In other words, the Party had glorified the political purity of the poor peasants. The failure of the Party's collectivization policies, therefore, showed that the reliance on the backward, uneducated peasants in the construction of a modern, industrial socialistic society was disastrous and that poverty was not politically virtuous after all.

⁷⁹ Van Tao, "Cai cach ruong dat--Thang qua va sai lam" (Agrarian Reform--Results and Errors), Nghien Cuu Lich Su, 2(267) III-IV, 1993, pp. 1-10.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

This criticism struck at the heart of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution. Van Tao was not simply challenging the direction of the revolution, but the underlying foundation of Vietnam's Socialism. For if the Vietnamese peasants were not ready to forge revolution, then the revolution was premature. Moreover, the revolution did not have a mandate--if the peasants were still politically and socially immature, on what basis, then, did the VCP wage a socialist revolution?

It is apparent that the persistent problem of poverty in Vietnamese rural areas had created a crisis in the ideological foundation of Vietnamese communism. First of all, it put in question the communist thinkers' analyses and solutions for poverty. Secondly, since the Vietnamese communists' anti-poverty policies (which were at the heart of the revolution) were intimately connected with their theory about the nature of the peasantry, the communists' understanding of the peasants was consequently challenged. With the nature of the peasants challenged, the entire foundation of the revolution becomes very shaky, as Van Tao's article shows.

This thesis has shown that poverty theories among Vietnamese thinkers have come full circle. In the mid-1930s and the 1940s non-communist Vietnamese novelists and academics had first opened the discussion about rural poverty. The *Tu-Luc Van-Doan* writers provided heart-wrenching descriptions of the miseries of Vietnam's rural

population. Their concerns about rural poverty were those of romantic idealists who saw the existence of absolute poverty as an injustice, and yet, their work did not provide any analyses or remedies for the problem. The Thanh Nghi articles of the 1940s, in contrast, provided the first systematic, non-communist, analyses of rural poverty. On the whole, the Thanh Nghi writers accepted that poverty and inequality existed as natural part of social development, but they also believed that government and the enlightened elite could (and should) alleviate some of the miseries of the poor. The remedies suggested by the Thanh Nghi writers centered around government regulations to curb exploitations and reduce destitution, but not to eradicate inequality or relative deprivation.

In contrast to the liberal moderate views of the Thanh Nghi intellectuals, the Vietnamese communists in the late 1930s and the 1940s believed that poverty was an unnatural phenomenon caused by exploitations in feudalistic and capitalistic class relations. Once these exploitative relationships were destroyed, poverty would be eradicated. After the communists' successful revolution in North Vietnam in 1954, they enthusiastically pursued agricultural collectivization as a means to develop Vietnam's economy as well as erasing poverty and class differentiation. Since over three decades of socialist large-scale development did not rid Vietnam's countryside of poverty, the new dialogue in the 1990s about rural poverty bears many resemblances to that

of the Thanh Nghi writers of the 1940s. As the thesis showed, the new approach to explaining poverty is to suggest that poverty is "natural", existing since the time Vietnam was founded. Environmental, demographic and climatic factors now play an important part in Vietnamese communist explanations of poverty. As well, the importance of educating poor peasants (either about the workings of capitalism or about technological and scientific developments) now feature prominently in the social researchers' remedies for rural poverty. The government's role is no longer perceived as the director of the economy, eradicating poverty and injustice. Instead, it is seen by the Vietnamese intellectuals in the 1990s as a facilitator whose job is to ease some of the miseries caused by abject poverty and inequality.

1986 represented a turning point for Vietnamese socialist development. The drastic reorientation toward a market economy not only represented a new direction in economic development, but new conceptualizations about the historical causes of poverty and the historical role of the Vietnamese peasants. The re-assessment of economic development, poverty and peasants, inevitably challenges the *raison d'etre* of the Vietnamese Socialist Revolution. The recent collapse of European communism, however, has given Vietnamese communist leaders an opportunity to claim that they are sailing uncharted water toward a unique form of

Vietnamese socialism. How Vietnamese socialism is to be defined is beyond the scope of this thesis. Regardless of what Vietnamese socialism is envisioned to be, the resulting social and environmental problems left in its wake resemble very much those found in the non-socialist developed and developing countries. Those problems are poverty, inequity, unemployment, environmental degradation, corruption and various forms of drug abuses. The fact that poverty and disparity exist and are becoming more prominent in such places as the United States--the archetype of the "developed" West--leaves little hope that Vietnam will one day eradicate poverty. With the utopian socialist dreams abandoned, the Vietnamese policy makers are now focusing on pragmatic solutions for reducing poverty. The extent to which such pragmatic anti-poverty measures will be successful is in part dependent upon the policy makers' accurate estimation of the peasants' productive potentials and aptitudes. But as we have already seen, the nature of the peasantry is far from being understood in Vietnam.

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