

Reframing the “Traditional” Vietnamese Village: From Peasant to Farmer Society in the Mekong Delta

*Repenser le village vietnamien « traditionnel » : d'une société paysanne à une
société d'agriculteurs dans le delta du Mékong*

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Reframing the “Traditional” Vietnamese Village

From Peasant to Farmer Society in the Mekong Delta

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With a history of more than three centuries of ethnic Viet settlement and land exploitation, the Mekong Delta of Vietnam is now the largest agricultural production area of this Southeast Asian country. Gathered in village communities alongside rivers and canals, from generation to generation, peasants of this region engaged very early in a market economy which operated mostly far beyond the boundaries of their own resident villages.

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This paper is aimed at studying the main features of economic behavior of the Mekong Delta peasants in the context of their “open” villages, presupposing that their economic behaviors are predominantly shaped by specific socio-historical traits of this social institution, in contrast to the traditional village model of the Viet people. The paper’s main argument is that Mekong Delta villages are the vivid expression of a “farmer society”, departing completely from the “peasant society” of traditional villages, according to concepts put forward by Eric Wolf.

In a paper published in 1955 concerning the peasantry in Latin America, Eric Wolf (1955: 462) discerned two types of peasantry: a “corporate peasant community” and an “open community.” A corporate peasant community consists primarily of the peasantry, and usually “emphasizes resistance to influences from without which might threaten its integrity.” On the other hand, through diverse socio-economic activities, an open community integrates the peasant segment with other social segments and with “the larger sociocultural whole”; it “emphasizes continuous interaction with the outside world and ties its fortunes to outside demands.” Contrary to the corporate community, an open community “permits and expects individual accumulation and display of wealth” and moreover “allows this new wealth much influence in the periodic reshaping of social ties.” In other words, “the character of the outside society was a major determinant from the beginning” of the establishment of an open community (ibid.: 462).

Moreover, Wolf proposed an interesting distinction between two typical agricultural characters: the “peasant” and the “farmer”. A *peasant* mainly “aims at subsistence, not at reinvestment,” and “generally retain[s] much greater control of [his] processes of production,” except when he sells his farm produce on the market (Wolf 1955: 454); or in the words of Robert Redfield (1989, 2nd part: 18), “their agriculture is a livelihood and a way of life, not a business for profit.” Meanwhile, a *farmer* “views agriculture as a business enterprise” and his aim is not subsistence, but reinvestment (Wolf 1955: 454). Thus a peasant society belongs to the “corporate community” type, and a farmer society corresponds to the “open community” type.

However, it is worth noting that unlike the interpretation of Wolf’s ideas by William Skinner (1971) who maintained that the differences between open and closed communities could be described as “different points on the same continuum of change,” Terry Rambo insisted that Wolf’s theoretical frames of these two types should rather be comprehended as “different social type[s]” or “ideal types” (Rambo 1977: 179, 181-182).

Concerning the rural society in Vietnam, theoretical attempts to interpret the Vietnamese peasantry in socio-historical contexts of rebellion and revolution in the 20th century have led to a debate between the moral economy approach of James Scott and the political economy approach of Samuel Popkin.

According to James Scott in his book *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (1976), the analysis of “peasant politics” in Southeast Asian precapitalist rural society should start from the “subsistence ethic” of peasants who, living close to the subsistence margin, always tended

to risk aversion and failure avoidance within a “safety-first principle”, as their “primordial goal” was a reliable subsistence instead of the “scope for the profit maximization calculus” (Scott 1976: 3-5). It is the village community who assure a minimum income to its inhabitants with its wide array of “social arrangements” such as “patterns of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing” (ibid.: 3, 5), following the principle “All village families will be guaranteed a minimal subsistence niche insofar as the resources controlled by villagers make this possible” (ibid.: 40). Scott noted that

[t]he social strength of this ethic, its protective power for the village poor, varied from village to village and from region to region [...], strongest in areas where traditional village forms were well developed and not shattered by colonialism – Tonkin, Annam, Java, Upper Burma – and weakest in more recently settled pioneer areas like Lower Burma and Cochinchina. (Ibid.: 40.)

The main cause [...] provok[ing] resentment and resistance” amongst peasants, according to Scott, was precisely the fact that colonialist systems in Southeast Asia had “undermine[d] radically the preexisting social insurance patterns and [...] violate[d] the moral economy of the subsistence ethic” (Ibid.: 6-7).¹

On the other side, Samuel Popkin in his book *The Rational Peasant. The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (1979) put forward a political economy approach which “emphasizes individual decision making and strategic interaction” (Popkin 1979: 30), considering the peasant as “a rational problem-solver, with a sense both of his own interests and of the need to bargain with others to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes” (ibid.: ix). However, Popkin stressed that the notion of rationality should not be equated with self-interest because “a peasant is primarily concerned with the welfare and security of self and family”; the rationality here consists in the fact that “individuals evaluate the possible outcomes associated with their choices in accordance with their preferences and values” (ibid.: 31). One of the main points in this approach is the belief that “villages are best viewed as corporations, not communes, and that patrons with multistranded ties to peasants are best seen as monopolists, not paternalists” (ibid.: 4). Popkin criticized the fact that “moral economists base many of their claims on unsupported or unexamined premises and [...] crucial parts of their view of peasant institutions are without foundation” (ibid.: 3), although he recognized that not all of his findings conflicted with the moral economy approach and in some areas he “merely attempt[ed] to expand and clarify observations made by moral economists” (ibid.: 5).

Commenting on the two above-mentioned works relating to peasant protest movements in Vietnam, Pierre Brocheux wrote: “In fact, Scott and Popkin are not always speaking of the same thing or of the same period. One is concerned with the revolts of 1930-1931 in northern Annam, and the other focuses on southern Vietnam at a later period” (Brocheux 1983: 795). This author stated that “[b]oth Scott and Popkin lost sight of the interrelationship between villages and the rest of the society and its institutions” as “[t]hey almost eliminated the national dimension of peasant life from their analyses” (ibid.: 799). In the view of Brocheux, “there

is no inherent opposition between a moral-economy and a political-economy approach” (ibid.: 801-802) as both “have their rationality” and should be used “in conjunction with each other to produce an analysis that conforms with history”: “The former approach is not associated with a triumphant modernization, and the latter is not necessarily tied to a past that has ended or is about to end” (ibid.: 802). We support the point of view of Brocheux, and this paper will cite at relevant places some ideas or statements of both Scott and Popkin without implying that we adopt one approach and refute the other.

The argument of this paper will be developed in the following order. First, we will sketch out in section I some main contrasting features of the Vietnamese traditional “corporate” village versus the “open” village in Nam bộ (southern region),² and some specific historical traits of land tenure in this rural region. Afterwards we will present in section II data concerning the land ownership of households in the Mekong Delta, and in section III, characteristics of the delta’s agricultural households as concerns labor use, market decisions regarding agricultural production and the use of loans, by comparing data from recent surveys of rural households in the two main deltas of Vietnam, namely: our 2014 survey in two Mekong Delta provinces (total sample: 480 households),³ and the 2009 survey in two Red River Delta provinces (total sample: 1,000 households) conducted by Bùi Quang Dũng as principal investigator.⁴

In fact, villages in the Red River Delta nowadays are no longer identical to the traditional village model and an observer may witness tremendous changes in their life and their structure during the last three decades since 1986. But the question of the “ideal type” of contemporary northern villages is beyond the scope of this paper. Through comparisons with northern peasants, we will try only to bring out and underline the specificity of Mekong Delta peasants’ economic behaviors and to argue that those behaviors point exactly to the characteristics of a “farmer society” type as conceptualized by Eric Wolf.

VILLAGE INSTITUTION AND LAND TENURE IN NAM BỘ IN HISTORY

Traditional “Corporate” Village vs Open Village

One of the most typical institutions of ancient Vietnamese society was the village (*làng* or *làng xã* in Vietnamese). The traditional Vietnamese village was characterized by its existence as a kind of “little state” (Ory 1894: 136; Nguyễn Văn Huyền 1944: 81), or a sort of “small court” (Phan Khoang 1966: 49-50) as expressed in an old Vietnamese adage *hương đảng, tiểu triều đình* (the village association is a small court) (Woodside 1971: 154).

According to Pierre Ory (1894: 3), the Sino-Vietnamese term *xã* (社, *shè*) originally meant the god of the earth,⁵ and later designated a place where people gathered to live and to sacrifice to the spirits. Alexander Woodside (1971: 143,

153) indicated that *xã* (village or commune) is the “basic unit of settlement in the Vietnamese countryside,” which “owned some property in common and which shared a common place of worship and of social consultation, the *đình*.”⁶

As Trần Đình Hượu wrote (1995: 320), all over the country was “a large ocean of discrete hamlets,” or Paul Mus, “Việt-Nam is a network of villages” (1952: 240) and “thus it was villages that produced Việt-Nam and it was in them that one learned to apprehend it, at decisive times, in its national spirit” (ibid.: 21).

The village was an autonomous social unit, having only responsibilities of tax collection and labor *corvée* administration for the state; otherwise it could freely resolve internal affairs outside of the state’s intervention. The state dealt with the village as an entity, not with its individual members (Đào Duy Anh 1951: 126, 129). As a Vietnamese saying goes, *phép vua thua lệ làng* (the laws of the emperor are less than the customs of the village) (Woodside 1971: 154). Every village had its own lands, including uncultivated lands, its own property and its own justice, customs and cult (worship of benevolent spirits or benefactors of the village), its own surveillance team and its own village charter (*hương ước*) (Phan Khoang 1966: 42-43). As an “isolated island”, the traditional village is characterized by “a closed life, so closed that the village becomes a separate world in which everyone feels sufficient and could live well leaning on village institutions, community ethos” (Trần Đình Hượu 1989: 20). Hidden itself behind its bamboo hedge, “relatively immobile villages” had their social structure coagulated in fixed and pre-determined social positions (Li 1998: 110; see also Đào Duy Anh 1951: 125-126).

That being said, it should be noted, however, that there may be a misconception about the “traditional” Vietnamese village if one “overstat[es] its high degree of autonomy, [and] downplay[s] thereby the interaction between the state and the local social units” during different historical periods (Nguyễn Thế Anh 2003: 101-102). Contrary to Popkin’s opinion maintaining that “Vietnamese villages of the nineteenth century possessed the essential characteristics of what Eric Wolf has termed a ‘closed corporate community’” (Popkin 1979: 88), Brocheux contended that “[t]he Vietnamese village [...] had ceased being an autonomous entity long before the beginning of French colonialization” as it was always shaped by a relationship to the state (Brocheux 1983: 791).

The question we are asking here is whether Nam bộ villages follow that “isolated island” ideal type with all those traits of a “traditional” Vietnamese village. Most research until now has asserted that this is not the case.

Since the early 17th century in the first waves of southward migration to clear uncultivated lands and form new, settled communities (*khẩn hoang lập ấp*), the structure of Viet villages in Nam bộ already possessed new traits quite different from the traditional model as found in the Red River Delta, as well as in the central region at that time (Phan Đại Doãn 1992: 84, Nguyễn Thế Anh 2003: 111). Resident settlements were gradually formed along rivers and canals in order to facilitate farming activities, with houses without fences, and villages without a bamboo hedge;⁷ villages having their own communal house or village charter are quite

rare (Đỗ Thái Đồng 1995: 17). Nam bộ villages were not based on communal lands; they didn't have the responsibility of controlling and distributing land exploitation rights, or the function of water resource regulation (Nguyễn Công Bình 1998: 26). They had "neither customs of post-worship and promotion celebration banquets or ranking order systems [within the village], [...] nor an autonomous mentality as in those other regions" (Phan Khoang 1966: 48).

Nam bộ village members don't discriminate against strangers or newcomers (*dân ngụ cư*) and in favor of permanent residents as in old traditional villages in the North (Ngô Văn Lệ 2011: 254). The small landowner, although still a member of his village, was never bound tightly to the traditional typical relation *trong họ ngoài làng* (always within one's own lineage and village), thanks to his private property rights recognized by the laws (Nguyễn Công Bình 1998: 27). According to Đỗ Thái Đồng (1990: 11), "there existed no symbols of village culture in Nam bộ" because the village here was mainly "an administrative unit rather than a production organization as in the northern or central region."

The old traditional village in northern region consisted of "a combination of lineages" (Trần Đình Hượu 1989: 20), therefore the lineage system and village institution usually overlapped each other, so that blood relationships were interwoven with territorial relationships in community life (Phan Đại Doãn 1992: 94). According to Luong Hy V., if "the social networks within northern and the majority of central coastal Vietnamese villages were tightened by a high degree of village endogamy" as well as "by the proliferation of local and nongovernmental organizations such as same-age associations and alumni associations" (Luong Hy V. 2003b: 100; see also Gourou 2003: 252-253), the contrasting situation could be found in Nam bộ, "where community exogamy was preferred and where nongovernmental associations were not as prevalent" (Luong Hy V. 2003b: 101). That is probably also one of reasons why the "traditional" village institution could not be integrally reproduced or transferred into this southern region, due to specific features of different southward migration waves which were composed mainly of individuals or separate families, rather than large groups of kinship relation or entire villages.

Private Land Tenure in Nam bộ during 17th and 18th Centuries

The most important economic basis of the peculiarity of Nam bộ villages consists in their private land ownership system. This feature dominated all the history of land tenure in this region. In 1776, the historian Lê Quý Đôn (1973: 439-440) wrote that at the beginning period of land reclamation (from the early 17th century), Đồng Nai territory was still covered by "wild thick forests of thousands of square miles," and "migrants have struggled to fell trees, cut down bushes and transform lands into level ground and fertile soil"; the Nguyễn lords "let people appropriate as many plots of land as they please for planting arecas and building houses." Anyone who had cleared twenty hectares of ricefields and recruited ten registered persons was allowed to found a new village (Lê Thành Khôi 1955: 358).

Until 1836, southern villages had neither cadastral registers (*địa bạ*) nor any land census. In that year, emperor Minh Mạng (reigning 1820-1841) mandated the establishment of cadastres in the southern region for the first time, and the application of a compulsory communal-land regime to villages in this region. For that reason, communal lands (*công điền*) in southern villages did not have the same magnitude as those in the northern countryside, which originated in primitive communes (Nguyễn Đình Đầu 1994: 105, 138).

In 1836, according to data from the first cadastral census conducted by the mandarin Trương Đăng Quế, out of the total utilized area of six southern provinces, public property made up 8.1% of the land, of which 5.3% was communal land. The remaining 91.9% of land was private (Nguyễn Đình Đầu 1994: 172-173). But by the early 1930s, the proportion of communal lands in Cochinchina attained only 3% (or 30,000 hectares), while the same figure in Tonkin (Vietnam’s northern region) was 21% (235,000 hectares) and in Annam (central region) 25% (195,000 hectares) (Henry 1932: 213).⁸

James Scott (1976: 60-61) commented that “[t]he disappearance of village lands was a particularly vital blow to the community’s protective fabric,” for it took away the land redistribution and welfare function of the traditional village. As a result, southern villages had “no economic foundations for becoming ‘isolated islands’ like northern Viet villages” (Ngô Văn Lê 2011: 257).

According to Lê Thành Khôi (2014: 313), the development of private land tenure in the southern region in the 17th and 18th centuries marked an important transition in the Vietnamese economy, for it turned out to be a “great phenomenon that made this period different from all former periods.” Private land property in Vietnam appeared, of course, very early and developed in the northern region especially from the 12th century (Trương Hữu Quýnh 1982: 133), but in the South this process was far more accentuated and moreover was accompanied by the appearance of a new stratum of large landowners, the development of commerce and small industries, as well as a monetary economy and the embryo of a capitalist class (Lê Thành Khôi 2014: 313).

Upheavals of Land Tenure Arrangement in History

During the period of French colonial rule, which enlarged the irrigation canal system (started under the Nguyễn Dynasty) while reinforcing the private property system in favor of French landlords (Biggs 2012: 65, 70), the overall agricultural area of Cochinchina increased from 215,000 hectares in 1868 to 2,214,000 hectares in 1930 (Sansom 1970: 21-22; see also Biggs 2012: 71, 90).

But land policies of the French colonial regime have been blamed for generating a strong polarization of agrarian classes, with large landlords possessing hundreds or even thousands of hectares on the one hand and landless farmers on the other—a situation that had not existed in this region during precolonial times (Truong Quang 1987: 136). The formation of two social groups, the *điền chủ* (landowners) and the *tá điền* (tenant farmers), in the Mekong delta between the

late 19th century and the 1920s generated “a pattern of landownership and tenure quite uncharacteristic of traditional Vietnam” (Nguyễn Thế Anh 2003: 117).⁹

In the 1930s, 80% of the agricultural surface of this region was cultivated by tenant farmers (Pierre Gourou 1940: 283, as quoted in Rambo 1973: 42), and about three quarters of peasant adult males had no land, giving Cochinchina the highest proportion of landless peasants in the country (Ngô Vĩnh Long 1991: 28). By 1953, landless households in this region accounted for 79% (against 21% with land) (*ibid.*: 29), and by the late 1950s, this proportion was 77% and receded only to 61% in 1965 after the agrarian reform of President Ngô Đình Diệm’s Republic of Vietnam government (Sansom 1970: 54, 57). With the land redistribution programme of this reform (according to Ordinance 57 of October 22, 1956), by 1961, 422,431 hectares had been resold to 115,912 tenants; this means that only about 10% of the tenants were affected by this land reform (Truong Quang 1987: 142; Sansom 1970: 58).

Another factor causing important changes in the land tenure arrangement of this region was the land reform campaigns conducted by Việt Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam) from 1946 and by the National Liberation Front (NLF) from the early 1960s, consisting mainly in lowering rental rates and allocating land to landless farmers in their controlled areas. This land policy was “very effective” because it did bring actual benefits to peasants (Sansom 1970: 55-65).

In areas controlled by the Republic of Vietnam’s government, the Land-to-the-Tiller programme launched by President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu on March 26, 1970 produced further results, compared with the previous agrarian reform of President Ngô Đình Diệm. By the end of 1973, over 1.3 million hectares had been distributed to 837,000 out of about one million peasant households in this region (Truong Quang 1987: 144-146). As a result, the proportion of tenant farmers was reduced from 60% in 1967 to 5% in the early 1975 (Trần Hữu Quang 1982: 33-34), although in many areas this programme was in fact “to freeze land holdings already distributed by the NLF” as an attempt of the Saigon government “to counteract the *fait accompli* of its political rivals” (Truong Quang 1987: 153).

After the national reunification in April 1975, despite the governmental urge to adopt the socialist collectivization policy which had been largely applied in North Vietnam, most rural households in the southern provinces persisted in individual production and private ownership. By 1979, there were only 18.5% of households and 15.8% of agricultural land engaged in cooperatives (*hợp tác xã*) and production groups (*tập đoàn sản xuất*), but most of these new organizations were dissolved a few years later due to inefficiency and peasant resistance (Trương Thị Tiến 1989: 20; see also Bergeret 1999: 433; Luong Hy V. 2003a: 7; Ravallion & Van de Walle 2008: 194).¹⁰ One important reason for this situation, according to Timothy Gorman, is that the “egalitarian principles” of the state policy of equalizing landholdings and collectivizing production were “alien to the moral economy of the [Mekong] delta’s upper peasantry,”¹¹ which embraced the notions of “distributive justice” and inviolable private property rather than the notion of “distributive equity” found in the northern rural region (Gorman 2014: 508-509).

As a result, by 1985 in the Mekong Delta, only 3.7% of rural households remained in agricultural cooperatives, of which “many [were] merely nominal” (Luong Hy V. 2003b: 84-85). With the *đổi mới* (renovation) policy launched in 1986, which induced a process of economic liberalization, the complete decollectivization in Nam bộ agriculture occurred in 1988 (Luong Hy V. 2003b: 99).

PRIVATE LAND OWNERSHIP OF PEASANT HOUSEHOLDS IN THE CONTEMPORARY MEKONG DELTA

Cultivated lands in the Mekong Delta were not the property of, or controlled by the village. To the peasant way of thinking, land is “a family possession” (Sansom 1970: 74), and it is the “peasant’s sacred hereditary property associated with individual family” (Võ Hùng Dũng 2011: 59). If land ownership came originally from lands directly cleared from forests and swamps and developed by first-generation peasants in the early migration stages, then later on, most lands of successor generations were inherited from their parents, or acquired by purchase. Choi Byung Wook (2011: 267) noted that from the very early time of Viet people settlement, land reclamation and land purchase were the two main sources of land accumulation of rural families. In the 19th century, land transactions became especially effervescent and widespread throughout this region. It is the reason why southern peasants always view land as a kind of commodity, expressed through their common habit of selling or buying land.¹²

In our 2014 survey in two Mekong Delta provinces, among the total sample of 480 households, there are 385 agricultural households and 95 non-agricultural households.¹³ Most of farming households are rice growers (95.8%). The average household size is 4.32 persons per household, and the average cultivated area per farming household is 1.68 hectares (1.08 hectares in Tiền Giang Province and 2.56 hectares in An Giang Province).

The survey results showed that among 295 landowner farming households, 73.9% have lands inherited from parents (42.5% of the total agricultural lands of landowner households), 47.1% have lands by purchase (53.5% of agricultural lands), 1.4% have reclaimed lands, and 3.7% have lands allocated by the state.¹⁴

Meanwhile, in the Red River Delta where historical socio-economic conditions are very dissimilar, especially with long decades of socialist collectivization, according to the survey by Bùi Quang Dũng in 2009-2010, only 3% of households have lands inherited from parents, 1% have lands by purchase, and 94% have lands allocated by the state (Bùi Minh et al. 2012: 31-32).

In the North, land allocation to village members during the decollectivization process in the late 1980s and the early 1990s was carried out mainly by administrative decisions, based on an “egalitarian” re-distribution of land plots (Bùi Quang Dũng & Đặng Thị Việt Phương 2011: 14, 18). While in northern villages, one could find an enduring trend of “local pressures against land sales” (Luong Hy V. 2003b: 100), in the rural southern region a revival of the land market appeared as early

as 1990 despite the state legislation declaring that land remains under state and collective ownership (Luong Hy V. 2003a: 11).

This fact shows that northern peasants have “a very different moral economy of property” compared to those in the Mekong Delta (Gorman 2014: 517). As noted by Timothy Gorman (*ibid.*: 506), “while villagers in the north gained access to land (as common patrimony) through membership in a village community, their counterparts in the Mekong Delta were not granted land, but settled and cleared it themselves, and thus their right to access and use was rooted in the application of labour.”

Another original trait in Mekong Delta villages is the phenomenon of *đất phụ canh* (subsidiary farming land) which refers to the fact that the farming plot is located outside of the residence village of the household concerned. According to our 2014 survey, among 307 landholder households (i.e. those having lands owned or/and rented for farming) in the sample, there are 73 households (or 23.8%) having lands outside of their villages (of which 14.3% is in another village, 2.9% in another district, and 6.5% in another province), with a total of 106 plots (17.3% of the total 614 plots) and 156.9 hectares (or 30.4% of the total 516.6 hectares of farm land of households in the sample).

This is a common practice found everywhere in the southern region from the time of the early settlement. During the first centuries of reclamation, due to free migration and agricultural exploitation, peasants might reside in one place and have farming ricefields in another place, as they pleased. Historian Trịnh Hoài Đức (1972: 17) reported that in the early 19th century, peasants could “possess lands in Phiên trấn [i.e. Gia Định Province] but exploit lands in Trấn biên [i.e. Biên Hòa Province] depending on their free will, without any regulations”; this fact was due to “tolerant and simple legislation” and “compared to northern provinces, the laws in Gia Định province are more clement and the tax burden is much lighter.”

According to data from cadastral registers established in 1836, “subsidiary farm lands” accounted for 20-30% on average in every southern village—which “indicated that villages in the six southern provinces were very open, with almost no bamboo hedge surrounding them” (Nguyễn Đình Đầu 1994: 156). Samuel Popkin (1979: 65) explained that “[w]hen there is private land with secure title, the opposition to outside landownership becomes far less pronounced.” Pierre Gourou (1940: 266 as quoted in Rambo 1973: 42-43) noted that in Cochinchina, lands could be freely sold or bought and therefore peasants lacked the strong ties to the land of their natal village “which impeded treating land as a commodity in the North.”

The situation in the old-time Red River Delta was quite different. Of course nowadays northern peasants can own or purchase lands outside of their own village, but in the past, they preferred to purchase ricefields in their own village rather than outside, because farming in another village could cause risks or troubles, and especially because “it is honourable to be a landowner [in his own village], for one could become a notable in the village” (Gourou 1936: 373). In the traditional village, “the emphasis on village citizenship [...] encouraged local

ownership and impeded the development of powerful multivillage landed fortunes” (Popkin 1979: 89). Moreover, historically, it was the village that controlled land transactions: the laws of 1839 “ordered that all absolute sales be recorded as such in the deeds of purchase and forbade village land mortgages to extend beyond a maximum of thirty years” (Woodside 1971: 158).

The significance of the “subsidiary farm land” phenomenon as well as the land’s commodity status in the Mekong Delta point to this reality: since the time of the early settlements, farming activities have never been restricted by administrative control or locally contained within the village territory; peasants can possess and exploit lands wherever they wish, depending on their capabilities. It is why “villages in southern region don’t have a closed economic structure” (Nguyễn Công Bình 1998: 27). The “subsidiary farm land” phenomenon also means a separation between economic space and residence space which, in addition to the land market, turns out to be an important factor speeding up the economic specialization processes on the regional scale.

Due to the fact that household lands are not dependent on village control or regulation, and that household economic activities are always separated from the village institution, the fate of the Mekong Delta peasant and his family is never bound tightly to the communalist tendency of the traditional village model. The independent status of the southern peasant is interpreted by Samuel Popkin (1979: 176) in the following terms: “Given the sanctity of private property, a landowner with a legal right to pay his taxes, who did not need resources from the village, did not have to be tied to the village in the same way as did the elite in other areas.”

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION ACTIVITIES

This section will examine characteristics of the Mekong Delta rural households concerning labor use, their decisions in agricultural production and in the use of loans, derived from data of the two aforementioned surveys.

Division of Labor, Labor Hiring and Farmworkers

Our 2014 survey in the Mekong Delta found that male household members undertake most tasks in farming activities, while female members account for a smaller proportion. Among 307 farming households in the sample, here are the percentage figures of households having male and female members taking part in different tasks respectively: 56%/17% in preparing the ricefields, 77%/41% in paddy seed sowing, 91%/41% in weeding and irrigating, 83%/12% in fertilizer spreading and pesticide spraying, 40%/21% in harvesting, 51%/17% in seeking for credit, 79%/51% in selling farm produce, 87%/17% in buying seeds and farming inputs, and 16%/34% in raising livestock.¹⁵

Compared to those figures, the gender division of labor in the rural northern region reveals a quite contrary situation. The 2009-2010 survey shows that in the Red River Delta, rural household wives account for 74.8% of agricultural tasks,

while the percentage among husbands attains only 17.0% (Bùi Quang Dũng 2011: 35).

The above contrasting gender divisions of agricultural labor in the two deltas reflect a great difference in the agro-economic structure of these rural regions. In the Red River Delta, the wealth differentiation of rural households doesn't depend on their landholding size because the great majority of households have only small plots of about 1,000-3,000 square meters per household,¹⁶ and as a matter of fact, most of people "don't make a fortune from farming activities" (Bùi Quang Dũng & Đặng Thị Việt Phương 2011: 14). As T. Rambo and T.C. Le commented, "[Red River Delta] farmers will not get rich from these lands, but at least they are guaranteed a source of livelihood that more or less adequately provides for their family's sustenance."¹⁷

Meanwhile in the South, with a higher average cultivated area per household and a much more pronounced differentiation of landholdings between households, "the poorest households rely more on off-farm income sources, whereas the wealthiest households are mostly concentrated on the farm."¹⁸ This remark of the World Bank in 1995 is also confirmed once again by our 2014 survey results: within the total 480 households in the sample, the proportion of income from crop cultivation in the household's overall income increases from 19.1% in the first quintile of households (with lowest income and having only 0.16 hectare per household), to 26.5% in the second quintile (0.32 hectare per household), 33.5% in the third quintile (0.67 hectare), 38.3% in the fourth quintile (1.01 hectares), to 56.0% in the fifth quintile (with the highest income, having 3.22 hectares per household).

Like in northern traditional villages as well as in many other Southeast Asian countries, non-commercial labor exchange (*vần công* or *đổi công*) in the Mekong Delta was a common form of mutual aid from old times. This normally occurred on a small scale among 5-7 relatives or neighbor families, to meet the needs of seasonal agricultural tasks that had to be completed in a few days, such as preparation of ricefields, seedling transplantation, irrigation and harvesting. But landowners of a higher socio-economic level were likely to hire additional laborers for those tasks (Donoghue & Vo Hong Phuc 1961: 54, Hickey 1964: 244).

However nowadays this labor exchange custom has considerably declined due to the trend towards professionalization of farmworkers, as well as the increasing mechanization and specialization of farm work. Our 2014 survey found that only 7.8% of farming households still practice this custom, while the remaining mostly rely on hired labor. Among those households practicing labor exchange, 60.0% are poor and smallholding ones (having under 0.7 hectare per household). The 2009-2010 survey of Bùi Quang Dũng (2011: 18) also reported the figure of 10.4% of farming households in the Mekong Delta who rely on labor exchange between neighbors, while it is still higher in the Red River Delta with 20.9%.¹⁹

Concerning the hire of farmworkers, the 2014 Mekong Delta survey indicated that this is a widespread practice, although 67% of farming households have turned to hiring machines for soil preparation, and 91% to hiring combine harvesters.

Thus for paddy seed sowing, 64.9% of the fifth quintile (having highest income) of farming households hire wage laborers; this percentage is respectively 42.7% and 39.2% among the fourth and the third quintile, 16.0% and 9.6% among the second and the first quintile (lowest income). For spreading fertilizer and spraying pesticide, the percentages of farming households hiring laborers are 50.0%, 26.7% 20.3%, 5.3% and 8.2% respectively in those five quintiles.

One of the dominant traits in Mekong Delta agriculture is the role of labor contracting services and the formation of a specialized agricultural labor workforce, which appeared most probably from the first half of the twentieth century, when a large proportion of peasants were landless.²⁰ Our 2014 survey found that out of 385 agricultural households in the sample, there are 17.7% (68 households) who are landless and earn their living mainly from wage labor in agriculture. If we include smallholding households having members working as farm hands as well, the total number of agricultural households with members engaging in hired farm work attains 46.1%.

According to the 2009-2010 peasant survey, in northern rural areas there exist very few peasants who work full time as farmworkers, even among landless households: a little more than 10% of interviewed households in the Red River Delta have members working as farm wage laborers (Bùi Quang Dũng 2011: 17). A report of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in 1996 found that while hired labor represented 33-39% of the total labor use in the Mekong Delta, the figure was just 5% in the Red River Delta (as cited in Minot & Goletti 2000: 14). Noting a study in Phú Thọ Province in the northern region, Luong Hy V. explained that no “villager had to rely exclusively or primarily on selling his/her labour to agricultural employers,” because they were instead “guaranteed some land for their livelihood.”²¹ Gorman (2014: 518) commented that the Red River Delta does not have a “bifurcation of agrarian classes into large-scale producers and agrarian wage labourers” as in the Mekong Delta.

It is not rare that in the Mekong Delta household earnings from farm wage labor are somewhat better than smallholding households’ income—a fact that R. Sansom (1970: 127) noticed in the Mekong Delta in 1966 as well. Newspapers have reported many cases of peasants selling or renting their small plots in order to work as agricultural laborers as a more reasonable choice for their family’s income. For example, a peasant in Lương An Trà Commune (Tri Tôn District, An Giang Province) decided to rent his 1.3 hectares of ricefields and move to earn a living as a farm laborer (Hùng Anh 2010).

The study of James Hendry in Khánh Hậu village in 1958 related that there were laboring groups of about 40-60 people each, both men and women, who worked under the supervision of a labor contractor (called *trùm cấy* for the task of transplanting seedlings) who contracted with landowners for this service (Hendry 1964, as quoted in Sansom 1970: 126). A survey in Vĩnh Nhuận Commune (An Giang Province) in 2009 also found that at peak times of the farming seasons, local landowners could hire laborers who came from other communes or districts, some-

times as many as 600-650 people throughout the commune (Bùi Minh et al. 2012: 30). Thus agrarian wage labor in the Mekong Delta really “could be considered as a profession” (Bùi Quang Dũng 2011: 18).

Hồ Cao Việt (2008: 11-12) observed that specialized farmworker groups in the Mekong Delta will gradually “annihilate” the traditional form of labor exchange and replace it with economic forms of hiring labor, so that labor relations are no longer between kin or neighbors, but rather between landowners and organized farmworker groups coming from other localities.

This phenomenon illustrates how far monetary relations have penetrated into southern rural areas and influenced labor relations, even among the lowest socio-economic category of destitute peasants, in a region where “the growth of capitalist labor relations” had actually appeared in the French colonial period (Scott 1976: 67).

The very existence of this professional farmworker stratum in the Mekong Delta may prove convincingly that there is a regional-scale labor market and a form of farming specialization in the context of a well-established market economy in this region.

Decisions in Production

The Mekong Delta entered into the market economy three centuries ago. Since the late 18th century, it supplied not only local demands but also exports to other Southeast Asian countries (Đỗ Thái Đồng 1995: 17-18).²²

Labor division and agricultural production specialization are two characteristics that make the southern rural region very different from its northern counterpart even today. The close links with market factors and monetary relations are salient features in daily production and consumption activities of households.

Our 2014 survey showed that in order to acquire paddy seeds for a new crop, up to 85.4% of farming households relied on purchase, 3.6% on barter, and only 11.0% used their own seeds stocked for this purpose. Most of farming households in the sample sold almost all of their produce: the sale proportion of rice was 96.2%, vegetables and root crops 99.9%, fruits 97.2%, fish and shrimp 99.5%, livestock (mainly pigs) 75.5%, and poultry 40.4%.

Mekong Delta peasants do not have the old traditional mentality of *tích cốc phòng cơ* (storing up grains to protect against unforeseen circumstances), however this is in no way a case of a frivolous or prodigal mindset, but rather a form of behavior linked closely with market economy conditions (Ngô Văn Lê 2011: 258). They usually sell the entire output and afterwards buy what they need at local markets when necessary, even rice for daily meals.

This practice of dealing with farm produce completely differs from that of northern peasants. The 2009-2010 survey of Bùi Quang Dũng (2011: 11) indicated that nearly half of farming households in the Red River Delta retained their rice output for family consumption, 28.2% retained rice mainly for consumption and sold it only in a situation of necessity, and almost no one sold entirely their rice output.

Nearly fifty years ago, a study of the 1966-67 rice crop by R. Sansom (1970: 100) in Long Bình Điền and Thân Cửu Nghĩa communes of Định Tường Province (now Tiền Giang Province) showed that only 12 out of 97 farming households sold more than half their crops (but none sold more than 65%) and 32 had no surplus for sale. Thus today’s figures of our 2014 survey may prove that in the Mekong Delta there is very little trace of the self-sufficiency economy, and the monetization trend is now much more striking. Farming families depend much more on market circumstances for their production and their living, which now are influenced by international price fluctuations in many cases.

In order to learn about investment trends in economic behavior of Mekong Delta peasants, we asked in the 2014 survey the following open question: “In case of having a relatively great sum of money, for which purpose do you prefer to make use of it?”²³ (respondents may answer up to three purposes). Responses of household heads could be subdivided into three main groups of choice (percentages are calculated on the total 480 households in the sample):

- *Investment-oriented* purposes (among 81.5% households), in which: 51.6% said that they want to purchase more lands, 39.2% to extend their production, 9.2% to raise pigs, cows or fish, 3.5% to rent lands for farming, 2.3% to buy a ploughing machine or combine harvester, 4.6% to set up a trade or service shop, 3.8% to invest capital in some business, 1.0% to extend their business.
- *Consumption-oriented* purposes (among 31.9% households), in which: 21.3% want to use the sum for building or repairing their house, 3.5% to buy a television or other devices, 1.7% to buy land in an urban area (for housing), 6.5% to pay off debts, 2.7% to pay for their children’s education expenses, 1.3% to pay hospital fees.
- *Saving-oriented* purposes (among 23.5% households), in which: 9.4% want to deposit the sum in banks, 15.0% to keep the sum at home for unforeseeable circumstances, and 1.5% to buy gold.

It is noteworthy that the proportion of investment-oriented choices attains more or less 80% throughout five quintile categories, even among poor families having small plots of lands. If combined, investment-oriented purposes make up the majority of answers, or 62.6% (of the total number of choices), consumption-oriented 20.1%, and saving-oriented 14.1%.²⁴

The Use of Loans

The 2014 survey revealed that indebtedness is also an interesting indicator of Mekong Delta peasants’ economic behavior in the market context. Out of the total 480 interviewed households in six communes, 50.4% had debts during the last twelve months (up to the interview in September 2014). Agricultural households were indebted much more than non-agricultural ones (54.1% compared with 38.9% respectively).

Among agricultural households, there were 48.5% who borrowed with an interest charge (*vay*) (on average, each household borrowed 1.3 times and 97.3 million đồng²⁵ in the last twelve months), and 15.1% having interest-free loans (*mượn*) (borrowing on average 3.9 times and 15.6 million đồng per household).²⁶

Concerning reasons for being indebted, out of 200 debtors among agricultural households, 66.5% had loans for investment purposes, and 46.0% for consumption purposes. Loans for investment consisted mostly of expenses for crop cultivation, livestock raising, and there were 7.5% cases who borrowed for land purchase (15 households, of which 11 households belonged to the fourth and the fifth quintiles, i.e. quintiles of highest income in the sample). Meanwhile loans for consumption were composed mainly of family living expenditure, children's education expenses, hospital fees, repairing or constructing a house, and paying off debts.

The proportion of debtors is equally high in every socio-economic category, among well-off as well as poor households (50.0% among the fifth quintile, and 55.6% among the first quintile). Families of higher income borrowed mainly to invest in production and business (83.8% among the fifth quintile), while those with lower income borrowed mainly to cover daily family expenses and consumption expenditure (72.5% among the first quintile).²⁷

In the Red River Delta, according to the 2009-2010 survey, the proportion of debtor households was about 50%, roughly equal to the above-mentioned figure in the Mekong Delta in 2014; however, in contrast to the southern region, northern low income families were much more indebted than higher income ones, and the overall proportion of loans for production investment is much lower than in the Mekong Delta, respectively 34.8% compared with 59.7% (Bùi Quang Dũng 2011: 21).

Concerning sources of loans, our 2014 survey showed that nowadays borrowing sources in the Mekong Delta are more concentrated in formal credit institutions than in informal ones as before. In terms of formal credit institutions, during 2014, 45.5% of 200 debtors among agricultural households in the sample have borrowed from Agribank,²⁸ 7.5% from the Bank for Social Policies, 17.5% from other banks, and 5.0% from local socio-political organizations. Meanwhile in terms of informal credit sources: 17.0% from relatives, 11.5% from close family members, 9.5% from private moneylenders, 8.5% from neighbors, and 3.0% from other sources. Results of a survey that we conducted in 2012 in six communes of three Nam bộ provinces (An Giang, Vĩnh Long, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu) found that besides those formal and informal credit sources, 8.5% out of debtor households have also relied on *hụi* (a kind of traditional rotating credit association) (Trần Hữu Quang 2013: 127).

The 2014 survey's data indicated that middle and high income level households have a higher proportion of borrowing from formal credit institutions (especially from banks), while lower level ones rely more on informal sources, with the one exception that poor families have more loans from the Bank for Social Policies.

If comparing those figures with the loan sources found by the 1966 survey of Robert Sansom (1970: 111) in two Mekong Delta communes (namely 32% from

relatives, 41% from *hụi*, 20% from government, 1% from moneylenders, 2% from merchants, 1% from landlords, and 3% from friends), we may witness a sharp decrease of informal loan sources (relatives: 17% in 2014 vs 32% in 1966; *hụi*: 8% in 2012 vs 41% in 1966) as well as the increase of formal credit sources, especially banking institutions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While even until today “the village in the North still persists in being the essential frame of social identification for peasants” (Bùi Quang Dũng 2010: 21), although it is no longer “traditional”, we can note the contrasting reality in the Mekong Delta. Here the “traditional” village model has disintegrated since initial periods of settlement—this is a region defined in the mid-1950s by the famous local writer Sơn Nam as having a type of “*văn minh sông nước*” [riverine civilization] in contrast to “the more stable, terrestrial landscapes of the northern [...] and central [...] plains” (Biggs 2012: 9; see also Bourdeaux 2014). Villages of Viet people in this region are characterized by structural features such as the dissociation of private land ownership from the village’s control, the separation between economic and residential space, between kinship system and village structure (in contrast to the embeddedness of these two institutions in old traditional villages), and thus the autonomous status of the nuclear family and even of the individual person.

In terms of the political economic dimension, the specificity of Mekong Delta peasants’ economic behavior was connected mainly to free market conditions, which dominated this region when the “Vietnamese agricultural economy was incorporated into the French capitalist economic system under the world economy’s rule” (Lương Đức Thiệp 1971: 245), and became “a capitalist agriculture”, a kind of “frontier capitalism” since the French colonial period (Scott 1976: 40).

Historical works and recent survey data have shown great divergences of the Mekong Delta in terms of village institution and peasant economic behavior, compared with the old “traditional” rural society as well as the contemporary northern rural area. By this, we do not mean that contemporary villages in the Red River Delta still persist in “traditional” model, as the issue of the “type” of contemporary northern villages should be the scope of another research study, which could promise to be very interesting. In this paper we attempt only to demonstrate that villages in the Mekong Delta can be depicted as open communities of a “farmer society” in contrast to “corporate” communities of a “peasant society” in the sense devised by Eric Wolf.

In a monograph written in 1973, Terry Rambo has described and enumerated different characteristics of the Mekong Delta village as follows: (a) land privately owned and freely alienable, (b) poorly demarcated boundaries of the village community, (c) conspicuous consumption, (d) continuous contact and communication with the outside world, (e) production for the market with dependence on outside capital inputs, and (f) adoption of agricultural innovation techniques (Rambo 1973:

42-49). Thus the Mekong Delta society turns out to be effectively “a classic open peasantry” in the sense of Eric Wolf (Rambo 1977: 186). Similarly, Samuel Popkin (1979: 174) believed that villages in this region have become “open villages” and therefore “village economic and political reactions were different from those in other areas.”

In our opinion, most of the surveyed indicators presented in this paper have confirmed and consolidated the thesis of Rambo and the statement of Popkin. Mekong Delta peasants, specifically peasants of the fourth and the fifth quintiles (with the highest income) or “upper peasants” (Gorman 2014, see also Trần Hữu Quang 1982: 35, 2014: 23), correspond to the “farmer” ideal type of Eric Wolf and Robert Redfield. We believe that typical features of Mekong Delta peasants’ economic behaviors are predominantly determined by the original socio-economic structure of this region, shaped throughout the last three centuries. This structure has been socially and historically crystallized from at least the following factors: (a) an “open” village institution in the environment of a liberal political system; (b) a private land property system (although not legally recognized in recent decades); and (c) a market economy environment.

Villages in the Mekong Delta are indubitably typical of ethnic Viet villages, as stated by Paul Mus (1952: 20): “Vietnam is primarily a way of being and inhabiting of which the expression and the instrument of expansion are the village and the proliferation of villages,” and “the advance of a front line of villages populated by military colonies, criminal or free people” in Cochinchina has made this region a “Vietnamese land like any other one.” But with an exception: southern Viet peasants have constructed a new form or a new version of Vietnamese village structure, in which their socio-economic behaviors, in the words of Pierre Gourou (1945: 331-332, as quoted in Popkin 1979: 172), have “much less of the peasant mentality” compared to those of Tonkin or Annam peasants. Or as stated by Anthony Reid (1993: 211), “Vietnamese in language and administration, Cochinchina was much like the rest of Southeast Asia in its economic basis and cultural pluralism.” The distinctive riverine civilization (*văn minh sông nước*) of Vietnamese settlers in the Mekong Delta, according to David Biggs (2012: 61), was produced not only through the adoption of different practices and agricultural techniques of local Khmer and Chinese peoples, but also “in the formation of hybrid economic and social identities that emerged as a result of mixing northern Vietnamese ideas with those in place on the frontier.”

Li Tana (1998: 156) has stressed that “this is not to say that Vietnamese in Đàng Trong²⁹ became ‘non-Vietnamese’ or lost their identity,” but rather “they created here another way of being Vietnamese.” This region has opened “another horizon” to Vietnam in its development and “it reshaped Vietnam in every possible way” (Li 1998: 158).

Further explanations for the divergence between the Mekong Delta’s and Red River Delta’s villages, as well as between southern and northern peasants’ economic behaviors, in our opinion could be found not only in their corresponding

“agrarian arrangements,”³⁰ but in their “moral economy” as well. Prospects for future socio-economic development of these two main rice baskets of Vietnam should therefore be envisaged by carrying out further comprehensive research on social institutions with their socio-economic features, on the moral dimension as well as on the human behavioral dimension, instead of focusing narrowly on economic or technological issues.

Note des auteurs

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Notes

1. By “*moral economy*”, James Scott means the “notion of economic justice” of peasants concerned (Scott 1976: 3).
2. The Vietnam’s southern region (Nam bộ, or Cochinchina as termed by the French administration in colonial period) comprises two subregions: southeastern and southwestern (Đông Nam bộ and Tây Nam bộ), covering the Đồng Nai River Delta and the Mekong River Delta respectively.
3. This survey is part of our research project funded by the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) (grant number: I3.1-2012.13), carried out from 22 September until 4 October 2014 at six communes of two Mekong Delta provinces (Tiền Giang and An Giang respectively) with a total sample of 480 households (hereafter called *the 2014 survey*). The sample was selected by a multi-stage sampling method and interviewed with a mainly closed-ended questionnaire. The quota sampling method was applied to the choice of surveyed areas, at province, district and commune levels. The two chosen provinces of Tiền Giang and An Giang are representative of the upper- and the lower-delta subregions. Two representative districts of these two provinces are Cai Lậy and Châu Thành respectively. In each district, three communes have been selected according to three levels of living standards, namely high, medium and poor levels. Six surveyed communes are mainly rice-growing ones, composed of ethnic Viet people: Phú Cường, Phú Nhuận, Mỹ Thành Bắc (Cai Lậy District, Tiền Giang Province), Bình Hòa, Tân Phú and Vĩnh Nhuận (Châu Thành District, An Giang Province). One representative hamlet has been chosen in each commune, and the sample of interviewed households has been randomly selected by the method of systematic sampling (k^{th} interval) with an alphabet-ordered sampling frame based on the household register of the concerned hamlet (80 households for each commune).
4. This is a survey of the research project of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) entitled “2009-2010 Vietnam Peasant Survey” (principal investigator: Bùi Quang Dũng), carried out in 2009 at eight communes of two Red River Delta provinces (Hải Dương and Thái Bình) and two Mekong Delta provinces (An Giang and Hậu Giang) with a total sample of 2,000 households (hereafter called *the 2009-2010 survey*). The sample was selected by a multi-stage sampling method and interviewed

- with a closed-ended questionnaire. At the commune level, the sample of households has been randomly selected by the method of systematic sampling based on the household register of the chosen hamlet which is representative of the commune (250 households for each commune) (see Bùi Quang Dũng 2011).
5. The Chinese word 社 (*shè* in Mandarin and *xã* in Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation) is combined from two radicals: 礻 or 示 (*shì, kỳ* = spirit), and 土 (*tǔ, thổ* = soil, earth) (Ory 1894: 3).
 6. According to Nguyễn Tùng (1999: 22-25), it is worth noting that in China, the word 社 (*shè*) used solely hasn't the meaning of village or commune as in Vietnamese language. Concerning the Vietnamese terms *làng* (village) and *xã* (commune) in Vietnamese, see also Phan Huy Lê (2006: 27-28).
 7. The bamboo hedge is a symbol of the ancient Vietnamese village, depicted by Pierre Gourou as “a kind of sacred boundary of the village community, the sign of its individuality and its independence.” The “first punishment” inflicted by an emperor upon a village which had participated in an agitation or had given asylum to rebels was “to cut its bamboo hedge”—this is actually “a serious blow to its pride, a stamp of dishonor,” so serious that “the village feels as uncomfortable as a human being would were he undressed and marooned in the middle of a fully dressed crowd” (Gourou 1936, cited by Popkin 1979: 90, and Gourou 2003: 237-238).
 8. The decrease of villages' communal land in Cochinchina was largely due to land concession's policy of French colonial administration, and “usurpation of such land by rich landlords” (Nguyen Van Vinh 1961: 34, as quoted in Ngô Vĩnh Long 1991: 16), and also to the practice of permitting village officials to sell it (Morel 1912, cited by Ngô Vĩnh Long 1991: 15). See also Nguyễn Thế Anh (2003: 115).
 9. Pierre Brocheux described that by the 1890s, thousands of poor migrants following the path of steam dredges in sampans loaded with tools, supplies, and building materials in order to clearing forest and forming new fields, but “[o]nce land was cleared and agriculturally productive [...], they often found that landlords had already claimed rights to the land, and they either left for new lands elsewhere or worked out some arrangement”; and this situation continued even into the 1930s (Brocheux 1995: 123, cited by Biggs, 2012: 71).
 10. This situation has also been described by P. Pingali and Võ Tòng Xuân (1992), and Ngô Vĩnh Long (1993) as quoted in Ravallion & Van de Walle (2008: 194).
 11. By “*moral economy*” of the upper peasantry, Timothy Gorman means their “deep-seated and widely-shared notions of economic and distributive justice” (Gorman 2014: 501). He used the term *upper peasantry* to refer to “a broad class of relatively well-to-do farmers” which “owned larger-than-average plots of land, hired in labour (at least seasonally), and were engaged, at least partially, in the production of crops for sale rather than direct consumption” (ibid.: 502).
 12. Even now when lands throughout the country are under the “whole-people ownership” (*sở hữu toàn dân*) statute, and agricultural households possess only land-use right instead of land-ownership right, southern peasants in their everyday language continue to talk of “selling lands” or “purchasing lands” instead of “transferring land-use right” as legally and officially stipulated.
 13. The concepts of *agricultural household* and *farming household* are based upon the following definition of the *Handbook of Household Surveys*: “A household is considered to be an agricultural household when at least one member of the household

is operating a holding (farming household) or when the household head, reference person or main income earner is economically active in agriculture” (DIESA 1984: section 13.15). In our 2014 survey sample, 385 agricultural households are comprised of 307 farming households (in which 283 landowner ones, and 24 ones having lands rent for farming), 68 farmworker households (landless), 4 landless animal husbandry households and 6 retired farmer households who have rented out all of their lands.

14. The total percentage of landowners exceeds 100% because many of them have more than one plot with different origins.
15. As most of the tasks of soil preparation and harvesting are mechanized now in the Mekong Delta (by using ploughing machines and combine harvesters), the rates of male and female household members taking part in these works are not high. Moreover, the technique of transplanting paddy seedlings is now quite rare in this delta for it is largely replaced by the technique of sowing paddy seeds by hand or by seed spreaders (called *gieo sạ*).
16. Pierre Gourou noted in 1936 that the maximum area of an available and exploitable land of a farming household in the Tonkin Delta was only one hectare (Gourou 2003: 339), as the excessive population density of this region at that time has largely reached “the limit of the agrarian system’s production capacity” (Devienne 2006).
17. Rambo & Le (1991: 88-91) as quoted by Gorman (2014: 518).
18. World Bank (1995: 66) as quoted by Luong Hy V. (2003b: 99).
19. The system of nowadays agricultural mutual aid between relatives and neighbor households in the Red River Delta has been recently described and analyzed by Olivier Tessier (2009).
20. The Hamlet Resident Survey in 1967 found that landless peasant households in the Mekong Delta accounted for 50.7%, of which 33.9% are tenant farmer households and 16.8% are farm worker households; the rate of farm worker households was highest in Hòa Hào area (An Giang, Châu Đốc and Sa Đéc provinces), attaining 28% (SRI 1968: 13).
21. Luong Hy V. (2010: 223-224) as quoted by Gorman (2014: 518).
22. During French colonial time, rice exports of Cochinchina rose from more than 200 thousand metric tons in 1870 to the peak of more than 1.5 million metric tons annually in the 1935-1940 period (Sansom 1970: 21-22). In the same decade (1930s), according to estimations by Pierre Gourou in his 1936 book, the total annual output of rice production in the Tonkin Delta reached about 2.2 million metric tons of paddy, in which 1.87 million (or 85%) were kept for household consumption, and only 0.2 million (or 9%) for exports through Hải Phòng Port (Gourou 2003: 369). The commerce of the Tonkin Delta with its surrounding regions at that time was very restricted and its trade with other countries in the world was almost null (*ibid.*: 508). Nowadays, even when the agriculture in the Red River Delta has brought out some overall surplus of its rice production (Bergeret 1999: 429) due to “the return to family farming and the easing of trade restrictions” since 1988 (Devienne 2006), the Mekong Delta still accounts for the majority of the country’s rice exports (OECD 2015: 80), which reached 7.72 million metric tons in 2012 (according to data from the Vietnam Food Association, see “Vietnam’s rice export for the first 6 months of 2013”, in <http://www.viettrade.gov.vn>, accessed on 27 February 2016).
23. The idea of this question is taken from a questionnaire of Robert Sansom’s survey (1970: 209).

24. These results are very similar to findings of Robert Sansom (1970: 209) in the 1966 survey of in two communes of Định Tường Province (now Tiền Giang Province).
25. The exchange rate at 30 September 2014 was 21,246 đồng/US\$.
26. The total number of debtors with interest and without interest exceeds the overall percentage of debtors among agricultural households because many households had loans with interest as well as loans without interest.
27. These tendencies of indebtedness' purposes are approximately similar to those observed in different Mekong Delta communes during the late 1950s and the 1960s (see Hickey 1964: 173, Sansom 1970: 108).
28. Agribank is the abbreviation for the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development.
29. *Đàng Trong* was a name designating the southern part of Vietnam and *Đàng Ngoài* the northern part in 17th and 18th centuries during Trịnh-Nguyễn lords' secession war.
30. "Agrarian arrangements" is a terminology proposed by Benedict Kerkvliet and Doug Porter to indicate main kinds of answers to three basic questions formulated by Barrington Moore concerning the development process in any nation, called "social co-ordination questions", namely: "how should resources be distributed; how should production be done, and who shall make decisions and rule on these matters?" (B. Moore 1978: 9, as quoted in Kerkvliet & Porter 1995: 1-2).

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Abstract: What are the characteristics of peasants in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam? This question is largely indebted to the seminal work of Pierre Gourou in the Red River Delta or Tonkin Delta. However, land management practices in the southern part of the country remain a kind of *terra incognita* for researchers. This paper examines some main features of southern peasants' behaviors concerning land ownership, labor use, and market-driven behaviors in the socio-historical context of "open community" villages by comparing them with those of northern peasants. The paper's main argument is that Mekong Delta villages constitute an evident example of the "farmer society" type, different from the "peasant society" type—a distinction devised by Eric Wolf.

Repenser le village vietnamien « traditionnel » : d'une société paysanne à une société d'agriculteurs dans le delta du Mékong

Résumé: *Quelles sont les caractéristiques des paysans vietnamiens du delta du Mékong ? Si la question a fait largement débat tout au long du xx^e siècle pour le delta du fleuve Rouge ou du Tonkin grâce à l'étude de Pierre Gourou, les pratiques de gestion de la terre au sud du pays comportent de vastes zones d'ombre pour les chercheurs. Cet article examine certains traits dominants des comportements des paysans du delta du Mékong concernant la propriété privée, l'utilisation de la main-d'œuvre et d'autres pratiques liées au mode de production agricole. Réunissant et comparant un ensemble de données socio-historiques, les auteurs abordent les communautés villageoises en termes de « communautés ouvertes » et ouvrent des lignes de comparaison avec les paysans du nord du pays. L'article arrive à la conclusion que les villages du delta du Mékong constituent un exemple manifeste d'un type de « société d'agriculteurs » qui génèrent des nuances par rapport au type de « société paysanne » jusqu'alors proposée par Eric Wolf.*

Keywords: Vietnam, Mekong Delta, village, rural transformation, social change.

Mots-clés: *Việt Nam, delta du Mékong, village, transformation rurale, changement social.*