The Vietnamese Peasantry in Recent Times

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Before the penetration of Western capitalism, Vietnamese society was a feudal Asian one. The French colonial invasion (1859) caused a major-upheaval in the nation's history. Around the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, while coping with insurrections and other patriotic movements, the colonialists embarked upon the first development of the conquered country. As a result, elements of a capitalist economy made their appearance (the Bank of Indochina, mining companies, plantations, commercial firm factories, railways, a network of roads) serving the dual role of both pacification and economic exploitation. This capitalist economy was grafted onto the traditional economic-and social infrastructure which would survive with vestiges of the Asian mode of production (e.g. the maintenance of the communal land system and village administrative system).

After the end of the First World War, with the second stage in the development of Indochina, the French capitalist economic sector had an opportunity to exert a more profound and widespread influence on the Vietnamese economy. But as before, the colonial administration did not want to abolish traditional economic relationships (the patriarchal system, small peasant mercantile production, and what remained of the agricultural commune), hoping to use them for the consolidation of the colonial yoke. Thus a mixture of capitalist and pre-capitalist production systems characterised the economic and social structure of the country until the August 1945 Revolution. The interaction of these relations was reflected in the following facts

1. The colonial capitalist sector continued to develop both in extent and in depth. After the First World War, Albert Sarraut, Minister for the Colonies and former Governor-General of Indochina, wrote a book presenting his programme of exploitation.

During the 1920s, especially from 1924 onward, French capitalism invested in Indochina, above all in Vietnam, at a far greater tempo and scale than before the war. Between 1888 and 1918, private and state investment in Indochina amounted to nearly one billion francs (private capital: 429 million francs). From 1924 to 1930, private capitalists alone invested 3-4 billion francs in Vietnam. Thanks to these funds, enterprises founded before the First World War expanded their activities considerably and many new enterprises came into being. By 1929, there were all told 50 agricultural societies, 46 industrial companies, 19 mining companies, and 31 commercial firms. All of them were controlled by French financial trusts represented by the Bank of Indochina and its associates.

The Bank of Indochina (founded in 1875 with original capital of 8 million francs, 12 million by 1920) granted loans, bought shares, founded 16 important companies and factories such as the Company of Railways of Yunnan, the Portland Cement Plant, the Company of Indochina, the Electric and Water Company, the Rubber Company of Indochina and so on. French capitalism thus controlled almost all the important economic sectors in Indochina.

In agriculture, from the first conquest until 1912, the colonialists took over 470,000 ha of land and turned them into plantations.

Ten years after the First World War, the area of land usurped had increased to 775,000 ha (of which 503,000 ha were in Cochinchina or Nam Ky), 168,000 ha in Annam or Trung Ky, and 104,000 ha in Tonkin or Bac Ky. According to incomplete figures, in 1930, the usurped land under plantations totalled 1.2 million ha, or a quarter of the total area of cultivable land in Vietnam.

The usurpation of land to the detriment of the peasants was the prevailing colonial tactic. In 1927 in Tonkin, there were 155 French plantations of 200 - 8,500 ha each. In Cochinchina and in the Central Highlands, certain plantations covered tens of thousands of hectares.

In rice plantations (285,000 ha in 1930, of which 253,000 ha were in Cochinchina) no modern techniques were applied. Land was simply rented to the poor peasants thus maintaining small-scale, backward production.

Moreover, the colonialists were engaged in cultivating cash crops, especially rubber trees on the basaltic soil of eastern Cochinchina and southern Annam (central Vietnam).
In 1924, French investment in agriculture amounted to 52 million francs, increasing to 400 million francs by 1926 (Primarily in Cochinchina). In 1927-1929, another 600 million francs were invested in rubber plantations. The area under rubber totalled 31,200 ha in 1924, and 99,700 ha in 1930. There were in addition 10,700 ha under coffee, 3,710 ha under tea, 2,000 ha under sugar cane, 1,800 ha under cotton, 1,500 ha under coconut palms and 110 ha under pepper.

In contrast to plantations used for rice cultivation, those for the cultivation of cash crops (rubber trees in particular) began to make use of machinery, but this fact did not prevent plantation owners from inhumanely exploiting tens of thousands of agricultural labourers.

Despite rapid expansion of the cultivation of cash crops agriculture in general was not seriously affected. In 1930, they covered only 2.6% of the cultivable land and the value of production was only one-tenth of that of rice production. There was no large-scale livestock breeding. Vietnamese agriculture continued to be characterised by single-crop cultivation and backward small-scale production.

2. A weak national capitalist sector came into being

French imperialism did not want to develop local industry. It restricted the formation of a national bourgeoisie, but the latter came into being all the same in the wake of the second stage of development of the colony.

Before 1918, the Vietnamese national bourgeoisie was limited to several minor sectors. After 1918, it was represented in textiles, dyeing, ceramics, rice-milling, printing, production of paints, oil, sugar, soap, nuoc mam (fish sauce), car repairs and rickshaw hire. Some were involved in business (road or river transport); others had small plantations, or set up commercial firms. In 1927, a group of large landowners and bourgeoisie founded a Vietnamese bank with a capital of 250,000 piastres. Private factories and workshops employed some dozens of workers each (in exceptional cases up to 1,000 workers).

A handful of the bourgeoisie became rich from trading with French capitalists. Some owners of workshops became capitalists. Quite a few landowners transformed themselves into capitalists, but others were engaged in commerce and industry while acquiring land to continue the feudal system of exploitation.

The nascent national bourgeoisie preferred land utilisation and commerce to industry. Its capital was only 5 percent of that of foreigners. It employed tens of thousands of paid workers. It encountered strong competition from foreign capital, being handicapped by the feudal relationships in production that prevailed.

A fraction of the Vietnamese bourgeoisie, the compradore bourgeoisie, had interests tied to those of colonial capitalism. It comprised, major compradores, entrepreneurs, exclusive agents for French goods and shareholders in French enterprises.

3. The economic sector of landowners

This continued to prosper because the landowners were in a sense partners of colonial capitalism, for which they constituted an assured support. The colonial administration supported them through a series of decisions and decrees issued by the Governor-General of Indochina or of the French government concerning land appropriation (in 1913, 1918, 1926, 1928 and 1929). Others measures were in their favour and to the detriment of the peasantry which was more and more exploited and deprived of land; the privileged system applied by the Crédit Agricole, augmentation of direct and indirect taxes rocketing prices due to the monopoly held by French commerce and expansion of the commodity-money relationship in the countryside all served to benefit the landowner. Concentration of land in the hands of the owners was achieved in different ways in different regions.

In Cochinchina, large landowners possessed more than 50 hectares each (they accounted for 2.5 percent of the total number of landowners but held 45 percent of the land under rice).

According to Yves Henry, in 14 rice-growing provinces, there were 90,285 owners who rented land or hired workers; of these 3,623 had 50 - 100 hectares, 2,449 had 100 - 500 hectares and 244 had more than 500 ha. In 18 provinces in the delta and upland regions of Tonkin, 12,000 landowners rented land or hired workers. Of these 120 large landowners held 240,000 ha, or 2.02 percent of the cultivable land. The remaining owners had 5 - 50 ha, or 20 percent of the cultivable land. The same document reveals that in Annam (excluding the Central Highlands), 50 large landowners had more than 50 ha each (or 0.008 percent of the cultivable land). Moreover, 8,900 medium and small owners (or 1.35 percent of the total number of owners) held 120,000 ha (or 15 percent of the cultivable land).
By the August 1945 Revolution, the landowning class accounted for 9 percent only of the total population but possessed more than 50 percent of the cultivable land in the country.

The expansion of large landholdings during this period eroded the traditional customs governing communal land and ricefields, the foundations of the village community. Its consequences, in addition to land concentration, further aggravated the already exploited peasants having too little or no land amounting to a half to two thirds of the total number of households. Land rent took 50 percent of their income. In mountainous regions where semi-slavery was still in existence, the landowners (the mandarins: tho ty, land dao, ca ro... and so on) exploited the peasants through the corvées system.

According to Governor-General Pierre Pasquier in 1931, three quarters of the cultivable land was mortgaged or used as collateral for usury\(^1\)

The fact that the French Crédit Agricole lent money to peasants through intermediaries (indigenous landowners) provided a new way for the latter to get rich, and be inextricably tied to the imperialist yoke. This collusion between landowners and the colonial administration was strengthened by other measures: the expansion of the electoral body for the Colonial Council (Hoi dong quan hat) and the Departmental Council (Hoi dong dia hat) after the First World War; reforms in village administration (consolidation of the council of notables and the council of family heads (Hoi dong toc bieu); increased power of canton and village chiefs on the basis of certain criteria (loyalty to the colonial authorities, being proprietors, provided with feudal-colonial honorific titles).

In this socioeconomic structure, the small-scale production sector among the peasantry played an important but backward role, marked by the division of land into small plots. It was based on the system of private ownership of the means of production, on the tenant farming system applied by Vietnamese and French landowners and, to a lesser extent, on the ancient custom of periodically sharing out communal land. This economic sector underwent serious upheaval with the expansion of plantations, exploitation of mines and construction of new railways and roads which continuously took land from the peasants. Small-scale production by the peasantry (90 percent of the population) was adversely affected by the colonial fiscal regime, high land rents, and the usurping of communal lands.

Before 1945, the peasantry accounted for 97 percent of agricultural households, but held only 36 percent of the cultivable land; 40 percent of these households had little land while half, in Tonkin and in Annam, and two thirds of them in Cochinchina, were landless.

According to statistics from 18 provinces in the delta and the upland region of Tonkin, the number of households having less than 1 mau (0.36 hectares) was 594,091, or 61.8 percent of proprietors, while the number of households having 1 - 5 mau was 287,792 or 29.8 percent of landowners\(^2\).

In Annam (excluding the Central Highlands), the number of households having less than 1 mau (0.05 ha) was 449,391 or 68.5 percent of the total proprietors while that of households having 1 - 5 mau (0.05 - 2.5 ha) was 126,351 or 35.3 percent of all landowners.

In Cochinchina, although population density was lower, there were 85,931 households (33.6 percent of total proprietors) having less than 1 ha, and 97,060 households (or 38 percent of total proprietors) having 1 - 3 ha\(^3\).

It should be noted that in many European and American countries small peasant households have 5 - 10 ha of land on average.

Vietnamese peasants having little or no land of their own had to work for landowners at least twice a year particularly at harvest time in the fifth and tenth lunar months.

Poor peasants and the lower stratum of middle-level peasants also had to rent land from landowners so as to have some source of supplementary income. The tenant had to pay no cash rent to the landlord who took 50 percent or even 70 percent of their harvests as payment in kind. The tenants had moreover to pay other fees for draught animals, irrigation agricultural implements and so on. In some places, after renting land but before the harvest, the tenants had also to pay an amount of money to the landlord’s.

The tenant farmer lived in wretched conditions. During the interval between harvests or at tax time, he had to borrow money or paddy from landowners at usurious rates of interest. In the borrowing contract, the peasant was obliged to mortgage his garden and sometimes even his house. Finally, the poor peasant often lost property. During harvest time, he had to work two or three times more than the value of the sum of money
borrowed or pay in cash. Debts were sometimes handed down from generation to generation.

The tax yoke weighed heavily on the peasants. After the First World War, besides poll and land taxes, there were others to be paid. Before the war, poll tax was 0.5 piastre on average (the majority of poor people in the countryside had to pay). From 1919 onward, all men of 18 - 60 years of age had to pay 2.5 piastres in poll tax. This was a considerable sum for poor peasants who had to mortgage their property, even their ancestral cult objects, or worse, their children, to find the money to pay the poll tax.

Land tax varied according to the quality of the fields and was set on an unjust scale. When the State budget lacked money, the administration had only to reclassify fields of inferior category into a superior category. Fiscal agents could at will falsify measurements to augment taxes by a third or two thirds. In 1921, despite serious floods poll and land taxes were increased by 30 percent. The provincial, prefectural and cantonal authorities could freely levy supplementary taxes for their own benefit.

Unable to support his family, how could the deprived peasant think about improving farming techniques, especially when the fields were in very tiny pieces. For instance, in Bac Ninh province, one hectare was divided on average into 14 plots of 0.068 ha each; the 100,000 ha of the province were divided into 1,500,000 plots.

Agricultural implements were effectively obsolete being made of wood or bamboo. Sometimes a man without other means had to pull the plough in place of a buffalo. Agriculture in mountainous regions was still more backward.

Natural disasters, an inherent risk of a tropical climate, frequently occurred (floods, droughts, insects, pests and so on). Between 1911 and 1929 there were 147 typhoons. The typhoon of July 1929 in Nam Dinh destroyed 78,839 houses and 100,000 mau of ricefields. In Thai Binh 118,839 houses and 119,159 mau of ricefields were destroyed. In the years 1911, 1913, 1915, 1918, 1953, 1924 and 1926, collapsed dykes completely destroyed the crops.

As a result of these unfavourable conditions, farming was very inefficient. Paddy output was only 1.2 tonnes per hectare.

Moreover, the trade monopoly, the policy of raising the price of industrial goods and lowering price of agricultural products pursued by the French colonists stifled many handicraft trades in the Vietnamese countryside. According to Qua Ninh and Van Dinh, "from 1924 to 1929, the indigenous handicrafts industry was in jeopardy, ricefields were concentrated in the hands of landowners and the number of impoverished peasants was enormous"4

In consequence, unemployment, underemployment and overpopulation increased in the countryside.

Although they were deeply attached to their villages, peasants had to abandon them and sought work in urban arm, the mines and plantations. According to official statistics, from 1923 to 1929, 78,226 workers, especially peasants, from Tonkin were employed as plantation workers in Cochinchina and southern Annam. In 1926, 27,505 persons were recruited from 15 provinces of Tonkin (especially peasants. from Ninh Binh, Thai Binh, Nam Dinh, Hai Duong, Hung Yen. The colonial administration purposely caused the impoverishment of the peasants to create a source of labour accepting miserable wages.

The following passage from a report by the Inspector-General of Mines for the Governor-General of Indochina has great significance: "There is an undeniable truth and unchangeable psychology - that the "nha que" (peasants) are not willing to work far from their villages unless they are about to starve. This is why, to resolve the present difficulty in the recruitment of "coolies", we must impoverish the countryside and lower the prices of agricultural products5

However, colonial industries and plantations were unable to absorb all the unemployed from rural areas. On the, other hand, a number of plantation and factory workers could not tolerate the harsh life of these terrible places. They returned to live in poverty, in their village- and restart the cycle of misery.

Notes


