Traditional Nation and Village in Vietnam

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Ethnic groups in Northern Vietnam are subdivided into three categories, according to their areas of settlement.

1. Only one group, the Kinh occupies the coastal delta and the central region, a relatively low region favourable for the cultivation of wet rice.

2. Some other groups, the majority of Tay origin and speaking the Tay language, live in mountainous regions, occupying the lower slopes at the edges of valleys. The valleys are small and used for wet-rice cultivation while the lower slopes are used for dryland farming on land cleared by burning.

3. The middle land upper slopes are inhabited by many groups, each family small and sometimes insignificant in number². These ethnic groups are either Austro-Asian, Tibeto-Burman or a mixture of both³.

This classification is simply an overview. It is appropriate not only for Vietnam but also for all countries of continental Southeast Asia, at least those which share a common border with China.

Of the three categories listed above, only the first group comprises a homogenous people long established on the coastal plains. They represent what is called toc nguoi chu the, roughly translated as the “major group” of the country. This so-called "major group" has benefited from being by the sea and prospered compared with the smaller groups living in the mountains. It has undergone rapid population growth and significant economic development because of its extensive cultivation of wet rice, proximity to the sea and frequent contact with the more developed Indian and Chinese civilizations. Thus the “major ethnic group” of all countries in continental Southeast Asia has played a primary role historically in the management of the state. It retains almost the same role today in the political, economic and cultural development of the country: this is true of the Kinh in Vietnam, the Lao in Laos, the Khmer in Cambodia, the Thay (or Tay) in Thailand, the Malays in Malaysia, and the Burmans in Burma.

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Before dealing with the traditional village of northern Vietnam, a seemingly minor but important observation should be made in order to fully grasp the subject. Ancient Vietnam never experienced foreign trade. This was, true from its foundation as an independent state around the end of the 9th century and beginning of the 10th century A.D. to its dissolution in the wave of colonialism around the middle of 19th century, it was a strictly agricultural country. Apart from a minority of scholars performing administrative functions, almost all the inhabitants of the kingdom, rich and poor, earned their living only from agricultural activities supplemented by handicrafts and small-scale trade. Every dynasty from the 11th century onwards operated only one port for traders coming from abroad by sea. This was solely for the Financial benefit of the royal administration. Until the 20 century no-one in the kingdom was even allowed to go to a neighbouring country to trade.

One might wonder why such a system was continuously decreed by all royal dynasties for nearly a millennium, while things were so different in neighbouring countries⁴. A number of suggestions have been made but it is a difficult question to answer, given the lack of historical data. The prolonged absence of it true economic market established through foreign trade has influenced the socio-political structure of the country in various way. One of the most obvious of these is the major role played by the village in the general organisation of the country. On the basis of the three categories of ethnic groups mentioned above, the following observations can be made:

1. The Kinh, or “major group”, settled in the coastal plains, are the most sophisticated ethnic grouping. Their political organization was drawn up over 1000 years of independence. However, even at the end of the 19th century their society still only consisted of thousands of villages within an administrative framework of several
The cities, whether provincial or district main towns, were just administrative or military centres. Peasants from the vicinity came now and then to sell their agricultural surpluses or handicrafts to shopkeepers who live there.

2. The ethnic groups settled in valleys in mountainous regions are for the greater part of Tay origin. In general, their traditional social organization has been preserved within the division of the country officially into provinces and districts. Their villages are called muong (roughly translate meaning "soil"); the limits of each often correspond to those of the valley or of several contiguous valleys. The unity of each small valley (or valleys) is determined by the hydraulic network which supplies water to its (or their) Fields. In my view, this is the origin of the comprehensive structure within which several neighbouring villages depends more or less on one another, under a common chieftain. Small trade is possible only along some provincial or district routes where the Kinh have settled on arriving from the delta.

3. Finally, on the middle or upper slopes, where dry farming is practised on land cleared by burning, small ethnic groups of Austro-Asian, Tibeto-Burman or other origin can be found. Their villages were not long ago autonomous and lived on good (or bad) terms with neighbouring populations. It is possible that originally they did not choose to settle on the mountain sides, but were driven there by Tay chiefs who usurped their submerged fields in the valleys. These chiefs had migrated from the Tali kingdom (present-day Yunnan) around the 8th century. In the highlands there was of course no commercial

From the above, we can note two facts which appear to be unconnected but which are actually two aspects of the same phenomenon: first, the role of the village organization founded on the basis of the general socio-political structure of the country and, second, the permanent, absence of a commercial current strong enough to gradually bring about a class of urban traders. After almost a millennium under different royal dynasties, after brilliant military victories without which the country would have fallen into servitude again, and after territorial expansion which more than doubled its area, Vietnam remained what it had always been: an essentially agricultural country.

This is not all. From the beginnings of agriculture to the end of this long period that I label as "traditional" and which lasted at least until the 19th century, northern Vietnam (within the limits of which our country first appeared) evolved from a peasant society with collective ownership of property to one made up of small property-owning peasants. According to figures gathered in this region in the years 1953-1956, when recent reforms had not yet changed the villages to any great extent, 86% of rich peasant households had between less than 2 and 7 hectares of cultivable land, while the poor ones had less than 1 hectare. In England, the greater part of cultivable land was concentrated for a century in the hands of those involved in international trade. Had this not been the case, there would only have been small-scale commerce, and the social differentiation of the peasant masses would have been insignificant, even after many centuries. This was precisely what happened in Vietnam.

Given this social infrastructure of small peasants living in it great number of villages, the State apparatus, which governed Vietnam in the form of a monarchy as of the 9th and the 10th centuries, could not at any moment of it history claim that it had a well defined social class. It had neither large landowners, nor merchants engaged in foreign trade. This apparatus, comprising the Court, scholars and administrators at different levels, placed administrative pressure from above on all villages, on all the social networks within the population and, through each village on each peasant member. It was an absolute power which did not rely upon any social class, but the objectives it pursued were few in number and modest:

a. to ensure the smooth, if not harmonious, development of the life of each village;
b. to obtain contributions from the peasants in cash (direct and indirect taxes) and in manpower (public Forks undertaken without remuneration, and also military service for fixed periods);
c. to move people gradually southward with a view to reducing overpopulation in the northern delta;
d. to lead armed resistance each time there was a foreign invasion.

In short, at the base of society were a multitude of agricultural villages which were all similar, and at the top, a state apparatus performing the main administrative functions.
We now turn to the organizational structure of the traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam as it was in the 19th century and during the colonial period. At this point we should bear in mind some general observations which throw light on this type of village where social differentiation was not so well marked.

1. From a purely administrative point of view, the formal structure of the Kinh traditional village in the north more or less resembled the ancient agricultural community. The latter can still be seen in what remains of Thuong village on the slope of the Truong Son Range and in the high plateaus of central Vietnam. The two organizations present the same model.

The traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam

a) Village mayor and his subordinates: The mayor was elected by the male population of the village; he chose his subordinates and within his village was in charge of the implementation of the orders of the scholar-administrator of the immediately superior echelon.

b) The council of notables: This was also elected by the male population of the village; it discussed matters and had then accepted by the mayor. But since they were small landowning peasants, they were frequently unable to agree among themselves and were lost in endless discussions.

c) Representatives of all the households of the village: At meetings irregularly convened by the mayor, these representatives expressed their views, whether they were listened to or not, on problems relating to the life of the collective.

Ancient agricultural community

a) Village chief: The village chief was either elected or the position was hereditary, depending on the custom of each ethnic group. He was responsible or the implementation of decisions taken by the Council or elders (see below).

b) Council of elders: Elders assumed their function at an age fixed according to the customs of their ethnic groups in the course of their discussions, they took decisions that the village chief had to implement.

c) Representatives of all the households of the village: when faced with questions they could not solve, the elders invited representatives from households to meet and contribute their views. In most cases, these views were accepted.

2. Despite such similarities, there were significant differences between the traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam and the ancient agricultural community. The latter, which was made up exclusively of peasants bound to one another by the collective right of land ownership, could give free rein to the democratic operation of the mechanism governing the community. The Kinh village of northern Vietnam in the 19th century, which was composed of small propertyed peasants, could not afford such democracy; certain details about the operation of its administrative mechanism testify to this fact.

However, the main difference between the traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam and the ancient agricultural communities was that the former, despite the vestiges of autonomy which existed until the colonial period, was just one of innumerable cells making up the fabric of the nation, whereas the latter represented in itself an independent or at least autonomous unit among many similar ones. In other words, the northern Vietnamese village in the past, with its fairly elaborate administrative mechanism, had to implement orders of the scholar administrator at the next highest echelon, while the ancient community of the Thuong people until recently lived their lives without having to refer to any superior authority. One can say that, in the first case, the village was in itself a complete structure but represented only a tiny part of the nation to which it had to show allegiance. In the second case, village and nation were one, each village being a small nation in itself.

Apart from the above-mentioned similarities and differences, the traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam was characterized, from a structural point of view, by the existence of stable organizations which had nothing to do with the administrative mechanism. None of these organizations were found in other types of villages, including the ancient agricultural community.
Let us describe them as they were just before the events of 1945.

a. An institution bringing together in separate groups representatives of households in a hamlet (territorial subdivision of a village) and serving as the body organizing the veneration of the genie of the land.

b. A parental organization bringing together all members of the same lineage (even when they lived in different villages) for the regular celebration of veneration of the ancestors.

c. A village institution comprising different groups of people of the same age, a vestige of the ancient agricultural organization.

d. "Clubs' in which friends of the same group met now and then to feast and talk, something very boldly, about the affairs of the village.

e. A mutual aid organization bringing together mainly households actively engaged in handicrafts and small trade.

f. A "club" of different groups of young people having the same hobby or organized recreation, e.g. wrestling or popular theatre.

The existence of so many active organizations at the periphery of the village administrative apparatus, in my view, also stems from the particular character of the traditional Kinh village in northern Vietnam. Each small property-owning peasant who was a member of such a village had a plot of cultivable land which he could use as he liked. What he did on this plot did not depend in any way or on any part of the village apparatus, still less on any notable, even when the latter lived there. To emphasise this point, we should say that as an individual, he had his own conditions for which he alone was responsible and which were not and could not be similar to those of anyone else. Thus, what he wanted in his daily life would be assistance from a friend or a parent, maybe encouragement and advice, but not policies handed down by the council of notables. As a result, the role of the official apparatus of the traditional village was sometimes reduced to merely administrative management, whereas the unofficial organizations were ready to help anyone who wanted help and, if need be, to give him status, i.e. the status of a man of the village.

In the framework of traditional Vietnam where the village was independent unit, the national culture would be above all a village culture in which the contributions of scholars of peasant stock prevailed over the achievements made by the courts of various successive dynasties.

Notes

1. The cultivation of rice in submerged fields practiced by the Kinh in northern Vietnam differs from the method of cultivation practiced by the Tay in both technique and implements. Hydraulic works built there are also of Tay origin.

2. To cultivate land cleared by burning at high altitudes, all concentration of people, however small they might be, must settle on the banks of streams. Moreover, the cultivation of dry rice gives only one harvest per year, and its yield is much smaller than that wet rice. This fact partly explains the limited, "sometimes insignificant" size of the concentrations living on file slopes of mountain.

3. According to certain linguists, the Hmong (or Meo) and the Yao (or Man) also live in southern China and in many countries of continental Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, and speak a mixture of Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asian languages.

4. To give an example, navigators of the Malaiçe peninsula (possibly present-day Malaysia) had for centuries made voyages as far as Madagascar. This explains the presence of certain racially mixed groups on the eastern coast of this large island.

5. There is no written or demographic proof that Vietnamese society had a social class more or less resembling the feudal lords of Europe. The land owners of southern Vietnam only appeared gradually around the end of the 17th century. The rural areas of central Vietnam until recently functioned essentially on the basis of the collective ownership of land. As for northern Vietnam, starting from the 18th and 19th centuries, it
apparently became a society of small land-owning peasants. In such circumstances, the State could not entrust the administration of the different regions of the country directly to a social class which represented it all over the nation, for the simple reason that such a class did not exist. Thus, the administrative apparatus remained the homogeneous organizational framework which consisted of different echelons but was of the same model everywhere.

6. Among the Tay, villages situated in the same valley at the foot of a mountain or in several contiguous valleys were connected to one another by an integrated irrigation network to form a muong (or soil) placed under the control of an official superior to a village chief. In many cases, several muong are grouped into a much larger “soil” governed by a chief of still higher rank.

7. In fact, villages situated at high altitude were theoretically controlled by the Tay chiefs who governed the valleys. However, duties carried out for the valley chiefs were purely symbolic, and the villages in question could be considered to be autonomous.

8. In the 9th and 10th centuries, when Vietnam became unified and independent for the first time, its territory was limited to present-day northern Vietnam plus three septentrional provinces of central Vietnam-situated north of the Deo Ngang (or “lateral”) Pass, which the French of the colonial period called “the deer of Annam”). South of this pass, the remaining provinces of present-day central Vietnam were the territory of the kingdom of Champa. For reasons of convenience, when we speak of the northern region of Vietnam in its early days, we mean also the three septentrional provinces of central Vietnam.

9. In northern Vietnam during the colonial period, the French carried out only some minor reforms in the 1920’s to the traditional village of the Kinh.

10. See the book by Tran Tu: Co cau to chuc cua lang Viet co truen o Bac Bo (Organizational Structure of the Viet Traditional Village in the Northern Region), Hanoi, Ed. Khoa hoc Xa hoi (Social Sciences), 1984; Tran Tu - Dan Chu Lang Xa (Village Democracy) Tap chi Nghien cuu Dong Nam A (Southeast Asia Studies) No. 2, 1991, pp. 1-19.

11. The Thuong or present-day Vietnamese, are of various ethnic groups, of Austro-Asian stock for the greater part, but some of them speak the Austronesian language and live on the slopes of the Truong Son in central Vietnam and the high plateaus of the same region.

12. In the ancient agricultural communities of Asia, black Africa, and other regions of the world, the management system is in the majority of cases the “council of elders”, described in this article. On the basis of this brief description, one can get the impression that the management for which the council was responsible did not prove to be democratic because the “elders” were only people who have reached an advanced age. However, we should not forget that in an ancient agricultural society, for production techniques, however rudimentary they might be to make any progress takes several generations; this is also true for social knowledge. Therefore, only experience accumulated and refined throughout the life of a man are taken into account. An old person gets the right which youngster people do not have only when he reaches the age of an “elder”. Before that time, he must, from childhood, pass through all lower positions, but his position improves year after year. This functioning of the organization according to age is truly democratic and is a system to which all members (male and female) of society belong from their coming of age.

13. The Thuong ethnic groups of the Truong Son and the high plateaus of central Vietnam (see note 11), were in many cases integrated into groups of several villages before the French arrived around the beginning of the 20th century and took the region over. The highest-ranking chief imposed material and military obligations on (he units under his authority. But apart from these duties to the high chief, each village governed itself and lived off its own mainly agricultural resources. In short, it had autonomy, if not independence.

14. See note 13 again

15. See note 12 again