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THE TRADITIONAL VILLAGE IN VIETNAM

Neil Jamieson

First and foremost, traditional Vietnam was a way of life based upon wet rice agriculture. It was the acquisition, maintenance, exploitation and expansion of a body of lowland rice fields. The landscape in which this way of life was set consisted of a vast sea of paddy fields, eternally changing from brown to green to gold to brown again in an endless seasonal cycle of renewal.

For generations after countless generations over hundreds of years, crop after crop was planted, nurtured, harvested and consumed to sustain the people and perpetuate the culture which produced it. There were years of peace and plenty; but drought, war, flood, and epidemic came frequently enough to prevent any trace of complacency from developing.

Vietnamese culture emerged in the midlands of the Red River delta some four or five thousand years ago, centering around the territory which now contains the towns of Phú Thọ and Việt Trì. Over the millennia the combined effects of a receding sea and alluvial build-up extended and raised the Red River delta, and with a growing population and improving technology the Vietnamese followed the receding shoreline, transforming the face of the delta as they moved. In the first millennium B.C. the balance of population had shifted from the foothills and midlands into the center of the delta proper.

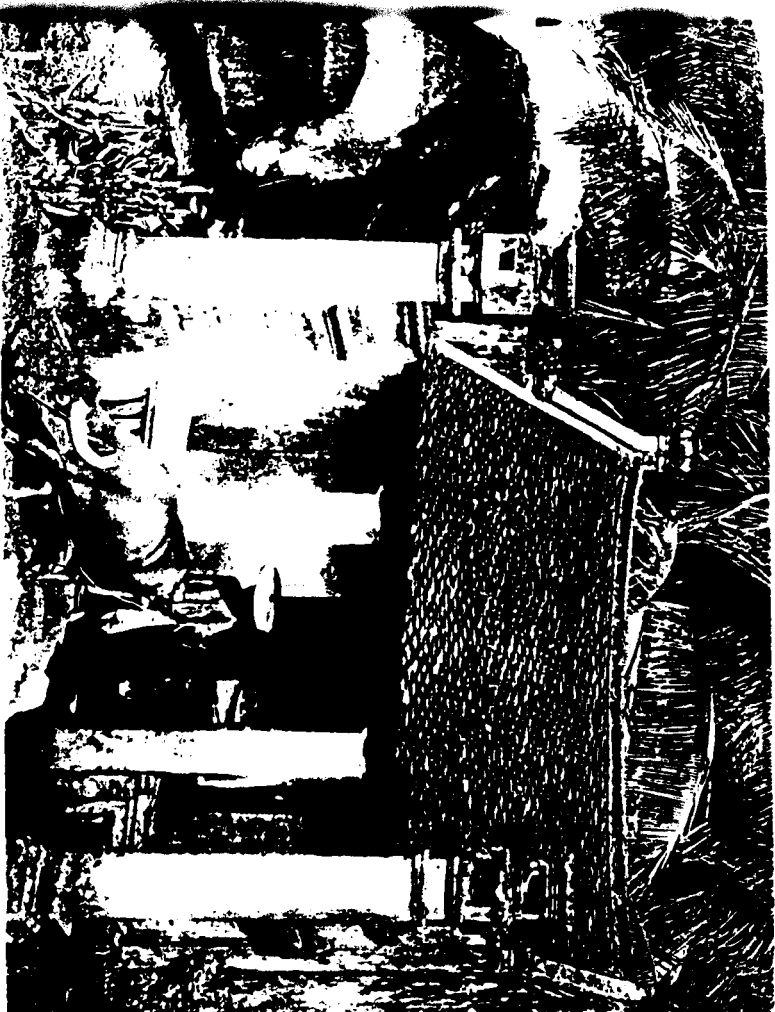
As the Vietnamese moved eastward across the ever-growing and increasingly fertile delta, they became more and more dependent upon agriculture to sustain existence. As woodland and marsh became village and field and the population continued to grow, the rice crop became literally a matter of life and death.

Each year the Red River deposits a thick layer of rich alluvium upon the surface of the delta, providing fertile soil for the growing of rice. But a high price is exacted for this bounty. The Red River is one of the most dangerous rivers in the world. It is characterized by extreme and rapid variations in depth and rate of flow.

With a small catchment basin, heavy but erratic rainfall, a steep gradient, plains of low elevation and flat relief [Rambo 1973: 71-73], the bountiful paddyland of the delta could be swiftly transformed into a deadly trap. A series of heavy rains following a drought could raise the water level by as much as ten meters in just a few days. At such times a devastating flood of terrible proportions would wash across the heartland of traditional Vietnam, exacting a cruel toll of lives, property, and sometimes even the precious crop of rice.

When the Vietnamese regained their independence in A.D. 939 after a thousand years of Chinese domination, their territory consisted of the Red River delta and the uppermost portion of the central coastal plain. They proceeded ever so gradually to push southward down the narrow strip of arable land between the mountains and the South China Sea, extending their southern boundary some four hundred miles over the next seven hundred years.

Not until the eighteenth century did significant numbers of Vietnamese venture into the Mekong delta, which was still largely under Cambodian rule. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that the lower Mekong delta was settled in earnest. For complex historical, political, and ecological reasons the villages in south Vietnam deviated from many of the norms found in the northern region. Such variation will be disregarded for the traditional period. The following discussion refers primarily to the Red River delta and the upper coastal plain. As one moves south to Hà Tĩnh this particular configuration of traits becomes less marked [Doãn Quốc Sỹ 1965: 18], and when one moves out of the central coastal plain into the Mekong delta, one finds a very different kind of village



A VILLAGE GATE

altogether [Rambo 1973]. The reader should bear in mind that the traditional village in this essay refers primarily to lowland, ethnic Vietnamese settlements north of Hà Tĩnh. Most comments are generally applicable to many villages in the central coastal plain, but all villages south of the vicinity of Phan Thiết are explicitly excluded from the category.

Traditional Vietnam was composed of thousands of essentially similar villages distributed throughout a vast expanse of contiguous paddylands. There were no real cities and few towns of any size in traditional Vietnam. Even well into the twentieth century over 95 percent of the population lived in rural villages, pursuing a way of life little changed in essentials for hundreds of years. Village life was the essence of traditional Vietnam.

The traditional village in Vietnam was a relatively compact and isolated community. Viewed from above, these villages would have appeared as dark green specks scattered across the shifting hues of the rice fields. On the ground, however, the physical isolation of the village was even more dramatically expressed.

Not only was each village separated from others by a considerable expanse of paddy lands, village houses tended to be rather tightly clustered together within a dense bamboo hedge which totally surrounded them, physically setting the community apart from the adjacent countryside as well as from other communities. The village could be entered only through an ornate, well-guarded and highly symbolic "village gate", which was closed and locked at night.

In this rustic context, the village gate often seemed an imposing sight. This effect was carefully calculated, and naturally so. The gate was the face which the tightly enclosed village presented to the outside world. As such, the construction and condition of the gate was an outward sign of the prosperity and self-image of the village, an emblem of corporate self-respect.

Often a roof was built above the gate, perhaps slightly curving, preferably of tile. Beneath the roof and above the gate itself a wooden sign stretched between two sturdy gateposts. Adorned with Chinese characters proclaiming the name of the village, such signs were often painted in glistening colors which quickly faded under continuous assault from sun and rain to be but a pale outline encrusted with moss [Toan Anh 1968: 8-9].

In fact, each village usually had two gates. But one was the main gate at what was recognized to be the "head" of the village. Just inside this main gate it was common to find an ancient banyan tree. The banyan tree by the gate at the head of the village was customarily surrounded by an aura of supernatural power. It inspired respect, devotion, and a certain amount of awe. An important part of the rich oral tradition in the village probably associated this tree with countless tales of ghosts and spirits, with stunning accounts of good or ill fortune, portraying it as an abode of powerful but mysterious forces, generally friendly, but not to be taken lightly.

Anyone entering the village would be struck by the sight of this tree. It commonly stood well apart from everything else, and usually at some considerable distance from the nearest house or building. As one approached more closely, dozens and dozens of old limepots could be seen stacked at the foot of the tree, hanging from its aerial roots, and tied to its lower branches.

The Vietnamese have been avid chewers of betel for millennia. A bit of areca nut is mixed with a dash of lime and wrapped in the leaf of a betel vine to make a tasty and mildly narcotic quid. Lime was purchased in moderate quantities and stored in a pot kept in one's home. Most people used a small jar of baked clay with a high neck and a funnel-shaped mouth, while well-to-do families used a round, flat-bottomed pot shaped like a vase with a handle and a mouth on one side.

Each time a quantity of lime was brought home from the market some people would spread a pinch of lime meticulously over the mouth of the container "to feed Mr. Pot" [Phan Khoi 1956]. With or without such administrations, however, after years of use the mouth and/or neck of the container would become clogged with an encrustation of hard sediment and the limepot would have to be replaced. But it would not simply be thrown away. It would carefully be placed upon a household altar, set upon a wall or shelf at the local pagoda or village shrine, or carried out to the banyan tree inside the gate at the head of the village [Toan Anh 1968: 10-14].

It is interesting and significant, but not surprising, that these durable and well-used lime containers were called "Mr. Pot". Anything which was big, or old, or powerful, or dangerous was apt to be called "Mister" in the traditional Vietnamese village. The people often referred to a tiger, which could

eat them, as "Mr. Tiger". A cooking tripod which might serve as part of the family hearth for five or ten years might be called "Mr. Tripod".

So a limepot which had been or would be used for a long time was venerated and called Mr. Pot as a sign of respect. When it could no longer be used it was not taken out of the village nor hidden away as a piece of useless junk. It was installed in some visible place of honor and valued for its age and the service it had rendered, symbolizing in its own humble way the continuity and cumulative efficacy of communal life [Phan Khôi 1956: 74-75].

As one moved on past the banyan tree, away from the gate and into the village, the main street would often branch off in several directions. The village, which from the distance seemed to form one compact mass, was typically upon closer inspection found to be composed of several distinct neighborhoods. They were close together, to be sure, but physically and sociologically the separation was unmistakable.

One main trunk of the road would certainly lead to a large and distinctive building standing off by itself. This would be the *đình*, the heart of the village. The *đình* was at once ritual center and town hall. In the *đình* the fusion of church and state, of politics and religion, was manifest. The very architecture of the *đình* reflected the duality of its role in village affairs.

In Vietnam a village was much more than a cluster of homes. It was even more than is implied by the word community. It was a status. This status was awarded to a community by the king. The attainment of "villageship", so to speak, was formally symbolized by the royal appointment of a guardian spirit for the village. The royal edict assigning a spirit to this task was kept in a special sanctuary in the innermost recess of the *đình*. The sanctuary was opened only on important ceremonial occasions, although a caretaker would enter daily to burn joss sticks upon the spirit's altar.

The generic name for these village spirits was *thành-hoàng*, a derivation of the Chinese term for "city god" (*ch'eng huang*, 城隍, literally "wall and moat"). The etymology of the term emphasized the protective aspect of the concept and served to elevate and legitimize the practice, as do many Latin terms retained in legal, medical, and religious usage in the United States. But the spirits themselves were commonly chosen from



Vietnamese history or mythology (i.e., the Heavenly King of Phù Đổng, Chú Đồng Tử, General Lý Thường Kiệt, General Trần Hưng Đạo, etc.).

Within the sanctuary, the guardian spirit was sometimes represented by a statue, but more commonly there was merely a small dragon throne or a red or gold colored piece of cloth bearing a dragon motif. If there were a statue, it would probably be wearing a mandarin's hat in the old style (*quan-mào*; *kwan mau*, 官帽) and a pair of boots like those worn by mandarins. If there were a dragon throne but no statue, often a hat would be placed upon the seat and a pair of boots set at the foot of the throne. Also, an ancestral or spirit tablet for the spirit would always be present.

In front of the representation of the guardian spirit would be found a large altar (*bàn thờ*) laden with elaborate ritual weaponry made of bronze. One might also find there a decanter of wine, a box of betel, and similar amenities. It was upon this altar that the revered royal edict was carefully kept in a special box.

Normally a smaller and simpler altar (*huống-án*) stood before the main altar. This held an incense burner certainly and perhaps a flower vase, candlesticks, and other common ritual artifacts.

To either side of these two altars were recesses called the left and right inner chambers (*tả hửn nội gian*; *tso yu nui chien*, 左內間). Between the altars and each of these chambers was displayed a row of ceremonial objects such as an important personage might find necessary or useful, things like a parasol, a fan, the eight treasures (*bát bửu*; *pa pao*, 八寶) commonly depicted in the hands of the eight immortals of Taoism, etc.

The sanctuary and the left and right inner chambers were referred to as the "inner" or "upper" đình (*đình trong*, *đình thượng*), or the "back palace" (*hậu-cung*; *hou kung*, 後宮), or "inner temple" (*nội-điện*; *nui tien*, 內殿). The rest of the building was known as the "outer" or "lower" đình (*đình ngoài*, *hạ-đình*). The outer đình was an open public area. Here meetings were held, issues were discussed, important announcements were made, elections were conducted. Sometimes tax collection took place there. And also this was a place for feasting, for private worship, and both religious and secular public ceremony.

The walls of the outer đình were lined with various minor altars dedicated to followers or subordinates of the guardian spirit, local heroes, Taoist or Buddhist cult figures, prominent benefactors of the village, or whoever or whatever was deemed important or appropriate by the villagers themselves. These shrines, too, received a steady offering of incense and candles throughout the year. The caretaker of the đình usually performed this role daily, as he did for the altars of the guardian spirit. But villagers themselves could and did come of their own accord to make offerings at one or another altar in the outer đình for personal or family reasons [Toan Ảnh 1968: 279-283; Đào Duy Anh 1951: 207-208].

Somewhat more elaborate and more formal rituals were held on the first and fifteenth days of every lunar month, on days marking a change from one season to another, on New Year's Eve, on occasion of the Kitchen God's (*Táo-Quân*; *Tsao Chün*, 灶君) ascent to heaven on the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, and on certain other special holidays, varying from village to village according to local custom.

During the year each village would have several major rituals at which special sacrifices (*tế*; *chi*, 祭) were offered to the guardian spirit with great solemnity. These might be days which marked the beginning of fall, the beginning of spring, the birthday of the guardian spirit, the death anniversary of the guardian spirit, corresponding to the first planting or first harvest of rice, or whenever dictated by village custom. Often there would be one especially important ritual sacrifice at which new members would be formally admitted into the village and an annual village festival would be opened [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 208-209].

After all important sacrifices a high feast would be organized at the đình. The entire outer đình would be packed with village members. These village feasts were extremely important to villagers, and the seating arrangements and distribution of portions at such feasts were prescribed to the smallest detail in accordance with relative positions in the village status hierarchy [Toan Ảnh 1968: 275-279].

These affairs were characterized by numerous, highly visible symbols of status level, such as who sat at which table, how many men would share a tray of food, and who received which cut of meat. Villagers were sometimes distinguished as "men of the second table" or "men of the third table" in reference



IRRIGATION

to the table at which they sat during these feasts [Gourou 1975: 73-74]. There were numerous fine points of symbolizing status distinctions which varied from locality to locality, following the same general pattern.

A pig's head, for example, was generally the most highly prized portion at the feast and tradition dictated the basis upon which it would be awarded. A notable who felt he had been deprived of his rightful portion of the pig's head would devote all his time and energy, sometimes ruining himself through costly litigation, to obtain satisfaction for this intolerable assault upon his honor [ibid.: 308]. An ox head was rarer, but highly vied for where tradition called for beef to be part of the feast (see, for example, "Half an Ox Head", "Nhà cái thú bò", a short play in three acts by Khái Hưng in *Trống xuôi reo*, "The Murmur of the Brook", pp. 60-66). Elsewhere, it might have been the head of a rooster which was the highest prize.

Nguyễn Khắc Viện [1974: 39] tells us that in his village:

After the ceremonies honoring the village guardian spirit, the head, beak, and crown of the sacrificial rooster had to be set aside for the highest ranking notables. Heaven help anyone else who took a piece for himself! Notables were known to commit crimes just to get the crown of a rooster.

Obviously, it was not gastronomic considerations which impelled these men to such competitive extremes.

Each notable competed with the others to bring home the head of the sacrificial chicken from the ceremony because in the eyes of his wife, children, and neighbors this would be irrefutable proof that he was the most honored man in the village. [ibid.: 167]

Should anyone inadvertently or willfully deviate from their strictly defined role behavior at these affairs, they would instantly and publicly be rebuked by everyone around them. The slightest deviation from the protocol of hierarchical rights and privileges dictated by village custom was a challenge to the entire system, a system in which everyone who attended the feast had a considerable psychological as well as social and economic investment.

Participation in this status hierarchy (*ngôi-thứ*) with its attendant distribution of privileges and obligations was limited to village members, and not everyone who lived within the village boundaries was a member of the village as a legal corporate

entity. While village members were ranked among themselves in a strict hierarchy corresponding to named social positions, the most basic distinction in the village was between members (*mội-tịch*) and non-members (*ngoại-tịch*). Most adult males in the village were members, but membership was not to be had by anyone for the asking.

First of all, the village status hierarchy was formally restricted to males only. Strictly speaking, women were not even members of the village. A woman's status level, in the sense of the way people treated her, depended upon her age, her reputation, and her family background. The daughter of a high-ranking man would be treated with deference as a sign of respect to her father. Younger people were generally respectful to older people of whatever sex or status. But basically, a woman took her husband's status.

Women were, in fact, commonly addressed and referred to by their husband's status, title, or role. A woman whose husband was an elder, for example, might be called "Mrs. Elder" (*Bà Lão*), even if she were not yet middle-aged. A woman whose husband had passed the baccalaureate (*tú-tài*) examination might be called "Mrs. Baccalaureate" (*Bà Tú*), or more informally as "Auntie Baccalaureate" (*Mợ Tú*, *Bác Tú*), or "sister Baccalaureate" (*Chị Tú*), even if she herself were illiterate.

Even close friends, relatives, and people of higher status would tend to communicate degrees of or shifts in intimacy, social distance, or superiority by shifting the rhetorical kinship element in the term of address or reference rather than by dropping the title or status element which was derived from the woman's husband's status. Regardless of the personal attributes of the women themselves, a woman showed deference and respect to women who were wives of men who had a status higher than her husband, and she expected and was often prepared to demand deference from the wives of men of lower status.

Although there appears to have been considerable variation in the types and severity of criteria for village membership, there was a strong tendency to restrict eligibility to those born and raised within the village. Residence requirements of up to three generations have been reported for some villages. In other places it was necessary to own property within the village to qualify for membership [Toan Ánh 1968: 56].

The village was a legal corporate entity and a highly significant one. Each village was corporately responsible for the



TRANSPLANTING RICE SEEDLINGS

payment of taxes to a higher authority. Levies for military conscripts and corvée labor were also placed upon the village as a whole. Outsiders, even officials of the central government, dealt with the village, not with individual villagers. The village's internal affairs were governed by village leaders in accord with village custom. So long as the village as a corporate unit met its obligations, even "the law of the king must yield to village custom" (*phép vua thua lệ làng*).

The village itself was also an important landowner in traditional Vietnam. As a proportion of the total amount of land under cultivation, communally owned land has been estimated at 21 percent in north Vietnam and 25 percent in central Vietnam even under French rule [Hendry 1964: 254]. While the actual percentage of land which was communally owned varied greatly from time to time, region to region, and even from village to village, such communal ownership of land was always an important characteristic of the traditional Vietnamese village.

As an ideological first principle, all land in the nation belonged to the king. There was private ownership of land, but property rights of individuals were not absolute. The king's right of eminent domain was absolute, legally and ideologically. And this royal power was used to establish and sometimes to bolster communal land ownership. For example, in the late fourteenth century private landholdings in excess of ten hectares were converted to communal land [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 55]. Similarly, in 1839 measures were taken in Bình Định province to increase the proportion of communally owned land [Smith 1973: 23]. Reasonable compensation was usually paid to those whose land was confiscated, although one had no right to demand it.

Periodically, usually at three-year intervals, the use of village-owned land was reallocated among village members. Individual members of the village were permitted to work certain plots of village land. This provided a means of ensuring subsistence for the poor or those who fell into difficult circumstances. Some villages used this as a means of reimbursement for services rendered to the village, such as participation in patrol duty. But communally owned land was also an important source of village income. Rent was paid for the use of village land, and for those who were neither charity cases nor providers of services to the village the rent was far from insignificant.

The village in turn paid taxes on this land. In fact the tax upon village-owned land was normally higher than that for

privately owned land [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 55]. Until 1774 it was the only kind of land subject to a land tax [Smith 1973: 23]. Village land could not be sold, except for certain parcels (*bản thôn điền*; *pen ts'un t'ien*, 本村田), those that had been purchased by the village with village funds, which could either be sold outright or mortgaged as security for loans.

This land tenure system supported village solidarity by virtue of the fact that no one outside the village either owned or worked village land. Thus the village remained essentially a closed system in terms of its most important resource. Both law and custom constrained ties between villagers and outsiders in this key domain [Rambo 1973: 306]. But the villagers themselves by their own initiative were usually quite capable of maintaining this boundary by their own concerted action.

As Gourou observed during his meticulous study of the human geography of the Red River delta:

A person exposes himself to crude disappointment if he buys land in a commune in which he was not born. The villagers band together to prevent the dispossession of one of their fellow villagers. The buyer will be expected to take the seller as his farmer, and will be obliged to put up with his shortcomings; he will find no other farmer if he wishes to make a change. He has to pay two or three times as much as the inhabitants of the village for protection. If his harvest is pillaged, the communal authorities will exhibit extreme ineptitude in discovering the culprit. [Quoted in Popkin 1979: 164]

Such spontaneous and effective boundary-maintenance behavior is a dramatic demonstration of village closure. Within such a closed system, it is easy to understand why village membership was so coveted a commodity and why the vitality of the village itself as a corporate unit was of paramount importance to all who lived within the protective shelter of its hedge and gate and under the guardianship of its tutelary spirit. It was only through membership in a particular village that one could be a participating member of society and partake fully of its economic, social, religious or political life.

With such isolated and semi-autonomous villages as the basic units of social organization, the dynamics of structured interaction at the village level had to maintain some equilibrium within the village system for traditional Vietnam to remain viable. It was within the context of the village that people



A ĐÌNH IN THE LOWER RED RIVER DELTA

were motivated to maximum productive effort, to work, to co-operate, to share. It was primarily through village level mechanisms of social control that energies were channeled, resources were allocated, and disputes were settled.

The core cluster of mechanisms by which this control was accomplished was embedded in the social competition which was most clearly expressed within the framework of the village status hierarchy (*ngôi-thứ*). Multiple sets of redistributive mechanisms served to channel status competition in ways which enhanced the viability of the traditional village.

The upper strata of village society were known collectively as the "Council of Notables" (*Ban Kỳ-Mục*). They were also known as the "Assembly of Literati" (*Hội Thũ-Văn*) or simply as "the officials" (*quan-viên*). These men constituted the elite class in the village politico-religious hierarchy, and they dominated village affairs. Within the ranks of the notables themselves, there were three basic sub-divisions which were equivalent to three general status levels.

The highest level of rank and prestige in most villages belonged to those who had achieved some rank or title awarded by the royal court. Essentially this meant those men who had passed important examinations at competition organized at the national level or those who held permanent rank in the national civil or military bureaucracy. These men were known as *chức-sắc* with *chức* meaning "position" or "title" and *sắc* meaning "royal edict or decree" [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 125].

The second level consisted of those men who had achieved some rank in the village or canton (*tổng*, composed of several villages), current or former officials. The men in this level were known collectively as *hàng-chức*, with *hàng* meaning "village" or "local". This level also included some honorary positions (i.e., *xã, nhiều*) which could be purchased outright or awarded for outstanding generosity toward or service to the village. This commonly meant buying things for the *đình* or making substantial contributions for public, village-sponsored events.

The third level consisted of those who were academic scholars. They were known as "scholars" or "candidates" (*thĩ-sinh, khoa-sinh*). In most villages this probably meant those men who had passed competitive examinations at the provincial level. In some villages which had produced few outstanding scholars those who had passed preliminary examinations at the district

level were included.

The exact details of qualification for membership in the body of notables and for discriminating status levels within it varied from village to village. But all traditional Vietnamese villages had a status hierarchy and a body of notables at the top. Although the particular statuses and the criteria for recruitment to them were subject to variation in accordance with village custom and local circumstances, most villages had a system very much like the one described here [Toan Ảnh 1968: 41-44].

Directly beneath the notables in status were the village elders, those male village members above 50 (or sometimes 55) years of age. With the achievement of this status came a marked increase in honor, privilege, and influence. Upon reaching the age of 60, village members moved into a still higher status (*lão-nhiên*, or *bô-lão*). Above them was a still higher status which was itself divided into four more levels determined by relative age. Often age itself was a basis for membership in the body of notables, and in some villages age was a primary determinant of status level [Toan Ảnh 1968: 44; Nguyễn Khắc Khâm 1970: 17].

Beneath the elders came full village members between the ages of 18 (or 16 or 20) and 50 (or 55). The lowest level was that of the male youths of the village, boys ranging from six or seven to 18 or so years of age who had fulfilled all membership requirements and were registered on the village rolls but were not yet old enough to be fully participating members [Toan Ảnh 1968: 44-45; Đào Duy Anh 1951: 126].

These many statuses were conceived of quite literally as rank-ordered positions and all affairs of the *đình* and many other social situations involved a protocol in which this rank-order was scrupulously observed. On formal occasions no two men could be completely equal, and where no other discriminations could be made men followed the rank-order in which their names appeared upon the village rolls.

Relative position within this status hierarchy was extremely important to village members, and they ardently competed to "eat above and sit before" (*ăn trên ngồi trước*) each other. All believed that "a mouthful of food in the village is equal to a trayful at home" (*một miếng giữa làng bằng sừng xó bếp*) and "a morsel of village meat is like a trayful one has to buy" (*miếng thịt làng, sừng thịt mua*) [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 129].

It was precisely within the explicit context of status-determined, physically expressed symbolic relationships at the *đình* that village solidarity was most profoundly and forcefully expressed. In the annual round of ritual life at the *đình* ceremonies were periodically performed by the community as a community for the community. In these rituals the shared values, needs, and concerns of the group as a whole were made manifest in meaningful symbols. Focused upon the cult of the guardian spirit, village ceremonial activity at the *đình* served to symbolize the dependence of all members of the community not just upon each other, but upon powerful external forces—natural, supernatural, and social—which could adequately be manipulated and controlled only by the corporate group and not by its individual members.

The village status hierarchy was not a bureaucratic or administrative organization. The notables were an elite group who dominated village affairs, but they were not an executive or administrative body *per se*. The village functionaries (*chức-địch*), however, were basically mere executors of the will of the council of notables, out of custom and self-interest.

At the apex of village offices was a "highest venerable" (*tiên-chủ*), followed by a "deputy high venerable" (*thứ-chủ*). These positions were normally filled by men from the highest status level of the village (*chức-sắc*), retired mandarins from the national bureaucracy. Lacking someone with these qualifications who was willing and able to serve, the oldest man in the village was often recruited into office.

These men were the ultimate decision-makers and the highest authority in the village. But although they had to be consulted about anything of importance, often they did not wish to concern themselves with the mundane affairs of routine village life and were content to lay down only very general guidelines and exercised little supervision of the actual execution of their policies [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 127].

It was primarily within the council of notables that issues were seriously debated and most decisions were actually made, although public meetings were sometimes held and dissent was not only permitted but almost institutionalized through the informal role of the "ox-head" (*đầu bò*) or "devil's advocate" [Gourou 1955: 313]. It was within the context of the council of notables that power brokerage took place, that factions formed and fought out their disputes. If one had a grievance,



VILLAGE NOTABLES

a cause, or an idea, one needed a patron who could achieve a respectful hearing among the notables.

The village chief (*lý-trưởng* or *xã-trưởng*) functioned primarily as an intermediary between the village and district or provincial authorities and between the council of notables and the rest of the village administration. He was the chief executor of the will of the council and responsive to their wishes on all matters, great and small. Assisting the village chief in his administrative responsibilities were two primary assistants: a deputy village chief (*phó-lý*) and a sort of "mayor" or "township manager" (*mãnh-trưởng*). In recent centuries all three have been locally elected. These men were responsible for seeing that records were properly maintained, taxes were collected, and for supervising the performance of lesser village functionaries [Toan Ánh 1968: 23-24; Đào Duy Anh 1951: 127-128].

Several adjacent villages would form a canton (*tổng*). The canton chief and his deputy were elected by the chiefs of the villages in the canton. The canton was an extension of local government rather than part of the central administration [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 129].

The positions of village chief, deputy or "manager" were often rather thankless jobs which involved hard work and heavy responsibility with little or no salary and little real power. But being chosen for these jobs was an honor, and it permitted one to "move up the table". It meant entree into the council of notables which was where the real power and prestige lay.

Those who served well in these offices, or as chief or deputy chief of a canton, were often rewarded with either a certificate of recognition (*tuông-lực*) or assigned a grade or rank in the national bureaucracy by the king in a royal edict. Such a document, like a diploma received from the national examinations, was a basis for entering the highest status level (*chức-sắc*), and was thus highly coveted. It was a ticket to the head of the table and the inner circles of power in the village. The desire to earn such recognition drove men into public service and often served as a powerful check upon any tendency to abuse the privileges or neglect the duties of one's office.

Emotional involvement in the ranked status hierarchy of the village seems to have been a powerful motor force which kept the village system operating effectively. Not only was it an integral part of a steering mechanism which channeled

energies, it was also to some extent a governor which served as a brake or accelerator for certain classes of activities. It was a major basis for maintaining internal equilibrium in the village.

Although the rank-ordered social positions in the village hierarchy were all achieved statuses, nevertheless village custom insisted upon public validation before recognition of a change of status would be granted by fellow villagers. For those who sought to achieve or maintain an elite status, village custom exacted participation in a sub-set of redistributive mechanisms involving a constant round of ritual feasting. For want of a better term, these rituals (*lễ khao-vong*) shall be referred to as "celebration offerings".

Whenever an individual met the criteria for a change in status—whether it be by passing an examination, being elected or appointed to some office or rank, or attaining a certain age such as sixty or seventy—he had to organize an offering at the *đình* and a subsequent feast which often amounted to having a party for the entire village at his own expense. While there was great variation in detail from village to village and from time to time, these were often extremely costly affairs and they were absolutely necessary to validate the new status [Toan Anh 1968: 240-241].

Attainment of the age of sixty was felt to be an achievement and a particular cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving (*lễ mừng lục-tho*). I attended one such special birthday party in Mỹ Tho in 1967. Such celebrations were not common there at that time, but this was a party to remember. I was an unexpected guest, dragged in at the last moment by the man's son who was an acquaintance of mine. But when I arrived forty or fifty men were crowded around tables filled to capacity with an incredible variety of food and drink. While the sixty-year-old man donned a traditional tunic and reported the event to his ancestors, the guests began merrily to eat their fill of the many delicacies and wash them down with local and imported beer, rice wine, Coca Cola, and imported scotch, bourbon and cognac.

When all were stuffed to capacity and more than a little intoxicated, we had barely made a noticeable dent in either the food or drink which was available. Of course the women and children would have eaten separately later from the untouched dishes, but nevertheless there was much more of every-

thing than could possibly have been consumed and all of it was of the highest quality obtainable. In this survival of a traditional village custom, the spirit of public generosity was overwhelming. The cost of that celebration might well have exceeded the household's normal annual expenditure for food and drink.

Of course, as noted earlier, for a villager some such party would have to be given to validate one's status as an elder. And often village custom distinguished several distinct ranks within the status of elder, each calling for another celebration to validate the increment in status. Such "celebration offerings" (*lễ khao-vong*) were essential to validate any advance in the status hierarchy. Those who held the highest status had of necessity borne a heavy expense in providing many such celebrations as they advanced up the many steps in the status system of their village.

Ritual life at the *đình*, revolving around the cult of the guardian spirit, provided a focal point for the entire village. In the words of Đào Duy Anh [1951: 128]:

For villagers the guardian spirit was the symbol of the history, customs, ethics, legal code, and common aspirations of the entire village.

But radiating out from the *đình* were many other social and religious groups and activities which provided the daily content of the principles and relationships symbolized in the *đình*.

Other turns of the village road typically led into discrete neighborhoods (*xóm*) in which the village population lived. At the entrance to each neighborhood another gateway marked a sociological boundary. The neighborhood itself consisted of several lanes or alleys (*ngõ*) which were lined with houses set fairly close together, each with its own small yard and garden, separated by a fence or hedge. Although the neighborhood and lane had no legal status, they were nevertheless distinct units of considerable significance.

Each neighborhood, too, had its own membership rolls and its own chief (*trưởng xóm*), elected by its members, to serve as an intermediary between the neighborhood and the village. Although the neighborhood did not have its own council, the neighborhood chief would usually have three or four assistants to help with various aspects of his duties. A neighborhood never had its own *đình*, but it might have a shrine (*miếu*) of its own, built with its own resources to worship a cult figure

of its own choosing. It might also have a small Buddhist pagoda primarily for the use of those living within the neighborhood.

Even the lanes within a neighborhood had their own membership rolls, their own chief elected by and from their own members, held their own meetings and discussions, and sometimes had their own ritual activity. The lanes and to a large extent the neighborhood were face-to-face groups where everyone knew each other well and mutual aid was commonplace and informal. One might qualify for membership in the neighborhood even though one could not become a member of the village. And one could become a member of the lane without being a member of the neighborhood.

Most villages also had a place set aside for an outdoor market. Commerce being an activity of low status, primarily conducted by females and foreigners, the marketplace was usually located outside the bamboo hedge, along the road leading into the village. A rotating market system (*phiên chợ*) was the normal practice. At any one village a market day would usually be held every four days or so. A schedule was worked out so that there was always a market within a reasonable distance, but adjoining villages would not hold markets on the same day.

These markets were typically bustling and colorful affairs, but they involved transactions on a very small scale, primarily redistributing local goods. Early in the morning women would begin streaming toward the scheduled market of the day. Some might be regular vendors who supplemented their household income by purchasing oil or sugar in moderate amounts and reselling it in very small quantities. Others might be bearing a temporary surplus from their home garden: some fruit or vegetables, a few chickens or ducks. Still others might have made some candy or cakes, perhaps some noodles or rice paper, to sell at a minuscule profit. Burdened with carrying poles, sacks, or baskets, the women would converge upon the market at a brisk pace, laughing, chattering, calling out to friends and acquaintances [Toan Anh 1968: 19-20, 171-176].

The village boundary, of course, extended well beyond the bamboo hedge to include a scrupulously delineated expanse of rice fields. Almost every family was somehow engaged in the exploitation of these fields. Carpenters, blacksmiths, paper makers, and potters usually tried to farm as well. Indeed, most occupations and even the growing of most other crops usually were secondary activities, things to be done when not occu-

ried with growing rice. Every village wrested from its fields virtually every grain of rice they were capable of producing. When it came to labor-intensive techniques in growing rice, there seemed to be no concept of passing a point of diminishing returns. No one questioned the wisdom of putting in much more effort to achieve a slight increase in production.

Even in the 1930s there were still over 950,000 landowners out of a population of less than eight million in the Red River delta. With about 1,200,000 hectares under cultivation in a region of 15,000 square kilometers, this meant that most families owned their own land, but the holdings were very small. The average size of a landholding was 1.2 hectares, or roughly three acres. But even this was misleading. The mean size of a holding was much smaller, probably not much over one-third of a hectare, or well under an acre of land. Half the land was worked by owner-operators who owned less than one hectare. Nearly two-thirds of the farmers, or the typical village family, cultivated holdings which averaged little more than one acre, or about .36 hectare. A farmer who owned one hectare was relatively prosperous by village standards. Any holding above four or five hectares was very unusual and implied real wealth [Gou rou 1975: 65].

Not even these figures, however, convey a clear picture of the actual size of the individual plots which were worked. Within the village, plots of land were continually being fragmented by inheritance, the buying and selling of small parcels, and the practice of renting part and retaining part for one's own use. Thus a typical peasant family farming one hectare of land would probably be working six different and perhaps fairly widely separated plots of land. A maze of bunds divided the fields around the village into hundreds and even thousands of separate plots.

This extreme division of village land into numerous tiny plots meant more work for the peasants. The plow and harrow missed the corners of each plot, and since not an inch of soil was wasted this meant long hours of hoeing. The construction and maintenance of miles and miles of bunds required even more labor. And, indeed, it seems certain that the total yield was considerably reduced by the simple fact that the bunds themselves took up a significant proportion of the total area of arable land. But, nevertheless, the peasants liked the division of their land into separate parcels [ibid.: 62]. Depending

upon elevation, slope, and distance from irrigation channels, some plots could be planted earlier or later than others. This allowed the farmer to work his land more intensively by extending the period from the first planting until the last harvest. It also greatly reduced the possibility of suffering extremely heavy losses. If there were too much or too little water, if it came much earlier or much later than was anticipated, at least some of his plots would still probably produce a decent crop. What was being maximized was the potential of the family for sheer survival.

Throughout traditional times, many Vietnamese villagers have grown two rice crops per year, at least on part of the land. The main rice crop was planted in May-June and harvested in October-November. The secondary rice crop was planted in October-November, as quickly as possible after the first crop had been harvested, and it was then ready for harvest in March-April, just in time to avoid the monsoon rains which returned in May. Many of the higher fields did not have a sufficient water supply to enable them to grow a second crop, and some of the lowest fields could not be adequately drained and so could grow only the "fifth month" crop. But many fields produced two crops a year, keeping the family busy most of the time.

For many fields which were a little high or a little low, however, two crops were possible but required a bit of luck and a great deal of effective water control. Cooperation and discipline were absolutely essential. Nothing required village unity more than water control, but nothing else tested it so severely. Issues involving the control of water could quickly lead to frayed tempers and threats of reprimand for alleged deceit, malingering, incompetence, or outright theft of water. Too much or too little water at a crucial time could have a critical impact upon a crop, creating serious repercussions for a family's economic situation. Even the "well-to-do" but a slender margin of safety. For many the specter of hunger lurked perennially close at hand.

Those whose land produced only one crop, or who neither owned nor could rent more than a very small amount of land, were faced with a shortage of income and an abundance of free time. They were, in other words, under-employed. The responses to this situation were various and of great ingenuity. At first glance, it seems incredible that so much effort would be expended to obtain such meager rewards, but a closer look at the

family situation makes the responses much more comprehensible.

Let us attempt to construct a crude picture of the economic situation confronting village families as the traditional era was drawing to a close in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The figures used, which must be understood to be only very rough approximations, are derived primarily from the observations of Gourou.

A relatively well-to-do family consisting of only five persons who owned and intensively farmed one hectare of land in the 1930s would have lived on a total income of about 80 to 110 piasters per year (depending upon the price of rice), or somewhere between US\$25 to \$35 per year. Their per capita income would have been in the vicinity of US\$6 per year.

Upon their one hectare of land they would have raised about 45 to 90 piasters worth of rice, of which they would have eaten themselves about 30 to 60 piasters worth (approximately 1500 kg or 3300 lbs.). They would have sold for cash about 15 to 30 piasters worth. They would also have raised vegetables and perhaps some fruit, adding perhaps another 8 piasters to their income. They would probably also have raised a few chickens and perhaps a pig, yielding another 14 piasters. By hiring out as laborers, they may have earned another 11 piasters (at the going rate of about 4 cents per worker per day plus meals). Through petty trade and small home industry another 6 piasters or so might have been acquired. Thus, by village standards, such a family would have acquired an enviable and relatively prosperous standard of living.

Most families had less land and more mouths to feed, however, and they could not possibly grow enough food to feed themselves. With perhaps one-third of a hectare of land and seven members in the family, the only surplus the typical family had was that of labor. Their land would have yielded only about 750 kg of rice, while to fill their stomachs and nourish their bodies about 2100 would have been desirable. And at a bare minimum a few dozen piasters worth of necessary goods and services would have to be obtained through cash or barter. What would such a family do?

To begin with, they would sell much of their rice for cash and buy less expensive but filling replacements such as sweet potatoes, corn, taro, and manioc. Much of the money received from the sale of rice would often have to go to repay pressing debts, however, enforcing a hand-to-mouth existence for the

rest of the year, and probably another loan at usurious rates to tide them over, which would eat into the following year's crop.

They would work as quickly as possible in their own fields, trying to finish their own plowing, harrowing, planting and harvesting in time to permit at least some family members to work for a few days in the employ of larger landowners. But wages were low and most of the work was seasonal. Working their own fields to the limit, helping others as hired laborers, and even taking full advantage of feast days, fairs, and other holidays and celebrations still left the family with several hundred potential days of labor in which there was little farm work to be done, and even more days with free hours in them.

In a typical village there were dozens or sometimes over a hundred families in more or less this situation. Most of them owned land and were members of the village. They grew substantial amounts of rice and vegetables as their primary production activity, but not enough to feed themselves and pay their taxes, let alone purchase clothing or tools, meet the expenses of sickness, death, or weddings. Some family members earned money working as agricultural day laborers, and probably the family raised a pig and a few chickens or ducks. But they remained continually short of food and money, and were under-employed much of the year. Village industries provided the means of using their extra time to earn the extra money required to lead what they considered to be a decent life.

The major characteristic of village industrial and commercial activities is that they were, like agriculture, primarily—almost exclusively—family enterprises. Each "workshop", "factory", or "plant" consisted of the members of one family working side by side in a remarkably labor-intensive manner with the barest minimum of capital investment. The work was often delicate, complex, and exacting. To produce products of good quality with minimum capital investment and the greatest economy of raw materials, prodigious amounts of skill and labor were employed. Labor was not considered to be a cost. An entire family would work hard all day for a profit of only one half of one piaster and think nothing of it [Gourou 1975: 127].

The second major characteristic of such enterprises in traditional rural Vietnam was that of village specialization. It was rare for each village to have its own blacksmith, carpenter, potter, basketmaker, brickmaker, mason, barber, herbalist,

A VILLAGE MARKET

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seamstress, or specialist in making beancurd, noodles, or other frequently used goods and services. It was the common practice for an entire village, always in addition to carrying on intensive cultivation of such land as it possessed, to specialize in a particular craft or industry.

In addition to the occupations mentioned above, there were villages which were devoted to making paper, votive objects, parasols, coats made of leaves, fishnets, lacquerware, palanquins, shoes, lace, tunics, conical hats, mats, fans, hammocks, joss sticks, anything one can think of. There were villages which specialized in raising silkworms, spinning silk, weaving, dyeing cloth, in gathering nightsoil, in embroidery, tanning leather, printing, preparing herbal medicine, wood inlay, working with mother-of-pearl, in castrating pigs, in any skill imaginable. There were also many villages in which most or all of the men were skilled carpenters, silversmiths, herbalists, masons, barbers, or tinkers.

Yet, even greater village specialization and monopoly existed within the above categories. The manufacture of a single, relatively simple product would often involve the labor of several villages, each of which retained a virtual monopoly over some necessary ingredient or process in its manufacture. For example, a beautiful mother-of-pearl coated paper was produced in which the paper was made in one village, the gloss of mother-of-pearl was added in a second, varnish was put on in a third, and all this only to go to yet a fourth place where the finished product was put to use in the manufacture of other objects [Gourou 1955: 583].

One village bought latania leaves from another village, used the central part of the leaves to make a certain kind of hat, and then resold the tips of the leaves to a third village which made them into raincoats [*ibid.*: 540]. Yet another village specialized in making linings for a certain kind of hat which was made in a neighboring village. One village which made a certain kind of votive ingot bought starch needed for the glue from one village and bamboo strips for the framework from another. Each village directed its efforts to acquiring and maintaining a monopoly over some aspect of production, be it however trivial, be it a formula, a technique, or a raw material. This principle of industrial organization was a powerful element, both cause and effect, of village solidarity, along with communal land, the communal cult, and the physical

closure of the bamboo hedge and village gate.

The skilled workers, craftsmen, or artisans within a village who were engaged in the same kind of work would organize themselves into a guild or occupational association of some kind (*hội bác-nghề*). Similar organizations existed in Hanoi (which has sometimes been referred to as the city of "thirty-six guild streets" (*băm sáu phố phường*)), and there were also some for skilled traveling workers, and some for certain restricted occupations such as mining and salt productions.

Non-agricultural vocational skills were almost exclusively transmitted through some form of apprenticeship, and the guild structure reflected this by dividing members into a junior status usually known as "younger brothers" (*đàn em*) and a senior status known as "older brothers" (*đàn anh*). Leadership sometimes rotated among members and sometimes remained in the hands of one individual until his retirement. Each year the group assembled at least once at the home of the leader to hold a ritual feast in honor of their special "patron saint" or protecting deity (*tổ-sư*). Membership was not compulsory, but it was almost always advantageous for both social and economic reasons; indeed, it was often necessary for survival.

Such groups were often concerned with sharing information within the group and protecting information from outsiders. Like village land, specialized knowledge was a valuable resource to be retained within the confines of the village. The groups doubtless also functioned as a "pressure group" to secure favorable treatment in dealing with village authorities and with outsiders. But they were also generalized mutual aid societies in a very real sense. For a wedding, a funeral, a house-raising, or just a bit of ready cash to seize an unusual opportunity or to meet an emergency, one could usually count upon group assistance.

Such groups also often collected dues even beyond what was necessary to meet routine expenses and provide aid in emergencies and actually accumulated capital which was used in a variety of ways—to invest at a profit to be redistributed, to obtain hard-to-get knowledge or implements or materials, or to raise the material welfare or social status of the group as a whole [Đào Duy Anh 1951: 60-61; Phan Kế Bính 1970: 185-186].

Virtually every village was graced by at least one pagoda, and it would not have been unusual for a large village to have

several of them. The pagodas were often well-attended and maintained, but they had no "congregation" in any strict sense of the term. Few people felt they "belonged" to a particular pagoda. Attendance was arbitrary, irregular and very much a matter of choice, even of whim. The Buddhist pagoda had an important place in traditional village life. It was a place of devotion, a focal point for charity and good works, and an aid to personal salvation for some individuals. In some cases it was even a primary source of social activity, especially for older women and others who found themselves out of the mainstream of village life. But its utilization for these and other purposes had always been culturally optional, never prescribed and seldom emphasized.

As a systematic body of beliefs and ideas, Buddhism has long been a pervasive influence in Vietnam. But Buddhism as an institution, and especially the role and influence of the Buddhist clergy, has waxed and waned. The monk *qua* monk had no real place in the village social structure and little or no influence in village affairs. If he were intelligent, well-educated, and led an exemplary life, an individual monk could earn the esteem of important segments of the village population and exert a certain amount of influence on particular issues through them, but his status as monk did not automatically impart to him any significant measure of influence or authority.

The notables in particular seem often to have been suspicious of monks and alert to symptoms of hypocrisy. Folktales, proverbs and well-known poems expressed the doubt and ambivalence with which monks were regarded by many Vietnamese.

It appears that the pagoda had the greatest attraction for, and received much of its support from, older women. A Buddhist women's association (*hội chủ bà*) existed in most villages. Although no one was under any compulsion to join, an active organization could be found around most pagodas. Members of the group were all women, usually over fifty years of age, although widows of age forty or so were not uncommon. They normally but not exclusively came from lower or lower middle socio-economic level families. The decision to join was strictly an individual one. Especially in upper or upper middle level families, the family usually rather grudgingly concurred with the old woman's resolve to join.

These women were called *chủ bà* or *bà vải*. Both terms are usually translated as "nun", but this is somewhat misleading.

They took no special binding vows and assumed few duties or restrictions beyond any other devout lay person except perhaps in degree.

New members were expected to repair to the pagoda each evening for study of the Buddhist scriptures or instruction by the monk or senior group members. On the first and fifteenth of the lunar month all members were obliged to attend Buddhist rites at the pagoda. Several hours each evening were spent chanting sutras, and during the summer months they all kowtowed in prayer five hundred times each night.

Most members continued to live at home, but a few sometimes lived at the pagoda as, in effect, unpaid servants. All contributed some money or rice to the temple each month, and it was common practice to give gifts to the monk. The group was also frequently mobilized for a wide variety of non-Buddhist rituals and charitable works.

Once a year the group would organize a ceremony of their own and indulge themselves in a party. Leadership rotated annually and sometimes there were relationships between such groups in several villages (Phan Kế Bình 1970: 178-180).

The typical traditional village also contained many other kinds of purely social organizations. Gourou [1975: 217] relates that during his travels through the Red River delta he encountered a wide variety of such groups in the villages. There were:

Literary associations, groups of military mandarins, people's clubs, wrestling clubs, societies of singers, of musicians, of traders, clubs for cockfighting or for songbirds, or pupils of the same teacher. Other groups brought together people born in the same year. Every society had its meetings and banquets; many of them covered their expenses with income from property given to them or purchased.

People were also brought together by common interest in chess, in kite-flying, and doubtless even more esoteric activities. There were also many shamanistic cults. Most of these were composed of women who felt called to the service of a female deity. But there were some male shamanistic cults for such masculine heroes as Trần Hưng Đạo or Kuan-kung. These groups too, both male and female, might combine major religious festivals with social activity which involved a party highlighted by a banquet.

Another common group in the traditional Vietnamese village was the mutual aid funeral and burial society (*họ hiếu*). Upon a death in the family, the member family notified the head of the society who in turn notified other members. Each member of the society then took some money, or rice, or even some cakes, depending entirely upon the predetermined nature of the group, to the home of the deceased. Such groups also often had various ritual instruments and other paraphernalia needed in the funeral or burial services which they would loan for the occasion. Fellow group members then donned white robes and accompanied the body for burial. Most religious and secular details remained the responsibility of the family itself [Phan Kế Bình 1970: 183].

Groups similar to the funeral and burial societies existed for weddings, house-raising, and other occasions which called for formal and expensive celebrations or rituals. Sometimes generalized groups for mutual aid in a variety of celebrations were organized (*họ hi*), and sometimes these merged with funeral organizations into a single group for mutual aid. The size of these groups ranged from about ten to twenty or even thirty members. Each member contributed a small amount of rice or money each month and applied for assistance on appropriate occasions.

Still another group utilizing the same principle was sometimes organized to prepare for celebrating the lunar new year (*họ ăn tết*). Each member household would contribute a small amount of money each month throughout the year. Then, at the end of the year, the accumulated money would be used to buy pork, beef, chicken, special ingredients for cakes, or whatever might have been determined by prior agreement. The purchased goods would then be distributed in small portions among the members. In this way the poorer families in the village were enabled to enjoy at least a taste of a variety of what were for them otherwise unaffordable delicacies.

Many villages had another form of organization which often performed important mutual aid functions. This was the *giáp* (*chia*, 甲). It is difficult to select an English word to translate *giáp* used in this sense. The etymology is misleading and the defining characteristics seem to be broad and variable. It had something of the nature of a lodge or a club. It was not part of the formal village structure, and a *giáp* came into being because a group of people living in the same village

wanted one and got together to organize it. Phú Đông village in Bắc Ninh province had as many as ten *giáp*, for example, while others had none at all [Toan Ảnh 1968: 142].

A *giáp* might have been organized on the basis of a lineage or a common surname, residence in the same neighborhood or hamlet, worship of a particular spirit, or for any other reason which have a number of people with some common bond. Sometimes *giáp* would arise on a territorial basis within a village which had nothing to do with, or aggregated or cross-cut existing neighborhood and hamlet boundaries; e.g., there might have been a north village *giáp*, an east village *giáp*, etc. Even when a *giáp* was based upon a village or a neighborhood, for example, not all lineage or neighborhood members would necessarily belong to the *giáp*, and the *giáp* might include members of other lineages or other neighborhoods. On the other hand, one large lineage or surname group in a village might provide the basis for two or more *giáp* [ibid.: 142]. Membership was always voluntary and apparently nominal criteria for membership were usually quite flexible.

The *giáp* stood ready to help members and their families in a variety of ways. Whenever a death occurred in the family of one of its members, for example, the family would usually extend an invitation to the *giáp* to participate in the funeral. This was understood to be a request for assistance and the *giáp* was always ready to respond. Each member of the organization would be assessed a small sum of money so a cash contribution could be made to help defray expenses. Younger *giáp* members would serve as pallbearers and carry banners (*cờ*), placards (*biển*), and parallel scrolls (*câu đối*) in the funeral procession. Senior *giáp* members would help organize all necessary activities. Even if the family did not invite the *giáp*, which meant they did not need or expect any help, a delegation from the *giáp* would attend the funeral to pay their respects, and usually they would also make a cash gift from *giáp* funds to help with expenses. *Giáp* members helped one another in a like manner with weddings and emergencies.

The *giáp* was a corporate entity with its own corporately owned property. When members died they sometimes bequeathed part of their estate to the *giáp*. A *giáp* would also sometimes receive gifts of property from members, and of course members were routinely assessed small sums of money both to meet routine expenses and as contributions to help fellow members on special

occasions.

Relative rank-order in the *giáp* was based solely upon the order in which names were registered upon the membership rolls. One whose name was entered upon the list first would always enjoy priority over anyone who was enrolled after him. Regardless of relative wealth, prestige, status in the village, age, or any other attribute or achievement, his seniority would entitle him to "eat above and sit before", and claim all manner of privilege over anyone who joined the group after he did.

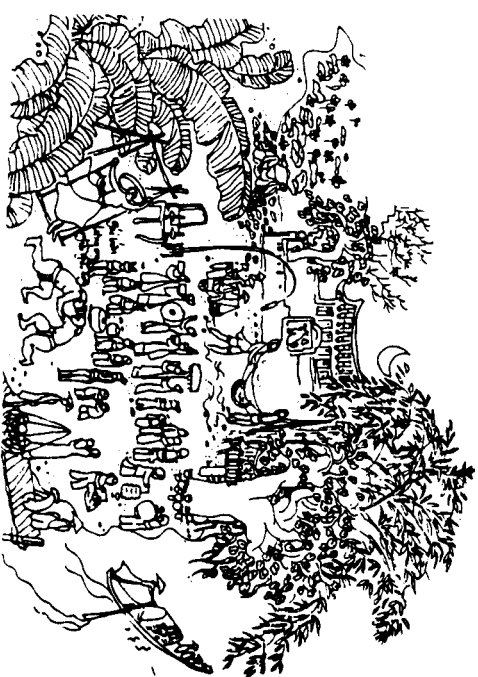
Each *giáp* was organized under a leader (*thủ-chỉ giáp*) and a council consisting of "five tables" (*năm bàn*) of four men each. The "first table" (*bàn nhất*), also called the "elder officials" (*quan lão*), was an advisory committee of the four most senior members after the leader. The leader and members of the first table were exempt from all dues and contributions required of other members. The "second table" (*bàn nhì*) was a sort of executive committee made up of *quan lệnh*, men responsible for the actual conduct of *giáp* business. The remaining three tables assisted in *giáp* affairs as part of working groups as assigned and directed by their seniors. A member who failed to pay his dues or assessments three times was penalized by reduction of position in the hierarchy of the organization. Loss of position three times resulted from being dropped from the membership.

The typical *giáp* met several times each year. At these meetings the council would report to the entire membership all that had been done since the previous meeting, to include an accounting of all money spent. Usually these meetings included a feast of sorts. Members took turns in hosting these events, but the expenses were not ruinous even then because either each person attending would be assessed a fee which would roughly cover the cost of food and drink or the *giáp* itself would purchase most of the provisions to be used and the host would merely be responsible for preparing and serving the feast, and supplementing it if he wished to invite non-members such as relatives and neighbors.

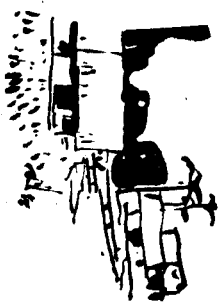
It was also common for a *giáp* to have its own patron spirit, and some had their own private temple or shrine dedicated to its worship. Cult ceremonies for the patron spirit were commonly followed by a feast. The cost was shared by the membership, not always equally but always in prescribed amounts which if not equal varied by category (e.g., youths, adults, elders)

and were never discretionary. The crucial point is that there were never any competitive elements in meeting these routine ritual expenses. Everyone was assessed a flat fee and no gain or loss of prestige was involved in *giáp* ritual life [Toan Anh 1968: 143-147; Đào Duy Anh 1951: 128].

None of these mutual aid, religious, occupational or recreational groups received official status or recognition in the formal village organization. They were all informal and strictly voluntary groups. The choice to join or participate in these organizations was an individual one, but it was usually made within the context of a family strategy. In the traditional Vietnamese village, such strategies often involved trade-offs between security and prestige. Although individuals occupied the roles and statuses upon the village stage, they did not primarily think of themselves nor were they thought of by others as isolated social actors. Each was first and foremost a member of a particular family; and when one ventured forth from one's home into the village—or into the wider world—one went as a representative of one's family. Only in the family context could the behavior of individuals be understood in traditional Vietnamese society.



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FRENCH COLONIALISM AND THE PEASANT QUESTION IN VIETNAM

Christine P. White

This article examines the relationship between agrarian and national issues at the time of French conquest, then outlines the basic socio-political structure of Vietnam during the colonial period, including descriptions of the colonial administrative system, French land policy and the rural class system. The aim is to present an overall picture of the political and economic situation in Vietnam during the final decades of colonial rule.

THE PEASANT RESPONSE TO FRENCH INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM

French conquest of Vietnam in the latter half of the nineteenth century was greatly facilitated by the existence of severe conflicts within Vietnamese society. These included ethnic and religious divisions as well as tensions between the poor peasantry and the ruling landlord gentry and imperial state.