

Concepts of “Peasants” and “Small-scale Agricultural Society” in Vietnam: The Foundations for the Study on Rural Development⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: Many studies on social science have so far captured a deeply diverse picture of Vietnam’s agriculture and its rural society since the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period until the first decades of the 21st century. On the one hand, we have witnessed the process of land accumulation and social differentiation; on the other hand, still seen the highlights of today agriculture and agrarian relations: the small scale agriculture production and hence the small scale agricultural society (Bùi Minh et al. 2012). It can be said that Vietnamese agricultural and rural development largely depends on the level and possibility to change of these agrarian relationships. No matter how the phenomenon of land exchanges in each region take place, finally, land accumulating in this group of population will create landlessness in other groups. The accumulation of land will support Vietnam’s policy towards commodity-based agriculture; however, it will also deepen the concerns about poverty and social inequality, whilst non-farm employment opportunities as well as the qualification of the labor force stay low in the rural areas. This article analyzes the current situation of studies on agrarian relationship and rural society conducted by domestic and foreign scholars in the past few years. Besides analyzing and identifying some related concepts, the article also seeks to discuss aspects of rural development strategies in Vietnam today.

Key words: Peasants, agriculture, rural development, Vietnam.

1. The concept of “Peasants”

To begin with, it seems impossible for social sciences when referring to the situation of developing countries, to ignore the issue of agriculture and peasants. Meanwhile, it is somehow paradoxical that the word “peasant” is a typical example of the meaning confusion of a common word with its sociological meaning. Even, perhaps, the common usage of the word is more comprehensible. People always know when a person is a peasant or not, even when discussing the cases of small wealthy landowners, sharecroppers and landless agricultural laborers in a series of specific

historical and cultural contexts. Overall, the realm of social science has spent a great deal of efforts to give out a precise definition.

Anthropologists define peasants through their habits and cultural norms which are characterized by a narrow vision and inclines to traditional values. Such efforts to describe peasants as a generalized category have mixed it with description of other types of social sciences and incorporated it into various socio-economic forms. Also, in

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the realm of Marxist economists, there still exists no precise and useful definition, and this term has been regarded as a socio-economic category with descriptive features rather than useful exploring features (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology).

The famous book by Eric Wolf on *peasant wars in the 20th century*, which featured Vietnam in its part, was inspired by the economic analysis of peasants as a root of social movements and insurgency wars. Besides the book *Peasants*, in the most recent articles, authors have attempted to clarify the distinction between peasants and other forms of agricultural producers.

Wolf characterized peasants by opposing it with what he called the “primitives” and farmers. Peasants are defined as those who grow crops in rural areas and are not farmers (farm owners). Farming is basically a business, in which the inputs of production are combined and then the products of the farm will be sold in the market at a higher price. For peasants, in terms of economics, they do not operate businesses, but manage the household economy. Finally, what are things to distinguish between the peasants and the primitives, those who both live in rural areas by planting crops and raising livestock?

Wolf agrees with Sahlins that “peasant societies” have distinct characteristics compared with other traditional societies, because it depends much on higher political and economic forms. The peasant communities must obey powers from outside to which they had to pay tribute by the food from their self supply economy. Each peasant

had to bring part of their crops to the castle, where they also came to do labor work and pay taxes to the central governments. Peasant economics was not only under the responsibility of sustaining the survival of the village, but also extracted to feed the whole society (Wolf, 2000).

Position of households associated with surrounding social and political context, has been discussed in many studies as an interpretation of the peasants. According to many scholars, households are key factor to assess the “full of contradictions” position of peasants as the controller of agricultural resources (land, cattle, etc.), and the subject of the exploitation. The households themselves are decision makers on main production activities and to do that, the family must balance their own consuming needs with the demands of the ruling class (Meillassoux, 1979; W. Roseberry, 2000; H. Friedmann, 2001).

On the one hand, peasants conduct economic self-sufficiency activities to satisfy themselves and their families, on the other hand, they are considered as production units of an economic system in general and therefore they depend on a system of exploitative relations (W. Roseberry, 2000). H. Friedmann even tried to replace the concept of peasants which was criticized as too abstract by a new concept of “simple commodity producers”. The author opposed simple commodity production to peasant production; accordingly peasants are treated as household production units, partly linked to the market whereas the simple producers are completely connected to the market (cited in W. Roseberry, 2000).

There have been many attempts to define the peasant economics by exploring the relationship between different social groups such as the share-croppers in feudal domains, small peasants and intermittent hired laborers. This highlights the importance of peasant households as units of production and consumption, their role in cultivation, the relationship between capitalist agriculture and pre-capitalist one. Briefly, it can be said that the essential characteristics of peasant economics are indentified as “Households are units of labor and consumption” (Meillassoux, 1979). Household economics mainly produces food for immediate consumption, necessary tools and equipment for production and reproduction of family members. Such economic models are associated with a distinctive type of social organization.

Peasants function as economic agents and household leaders at the same time. A peasant's family is not merely a manufacturing unit, but a consuming unit as well. Peasant family not only nurtures its members but also provides them for other activities. The elderly are cared for until death. Marriage and other forms of inheritance ensure reproduction of family units both biologically and socially. Children are mostly raised and socialized by their families. Many of such functions of a social system would require contributions of labor whose nature is that it is unpaid labor.

As a result, this form of production is highly organized as it relates to all aspects of the life of every member in families or groups. Also, on this basis it creates an insurance form whose high safety will

much benefits reproduction and lives of group members. Historically, this form of production organization was closely related to manual labor and that accounts for the existence of large-scale families in agricultural societies. As long as the economic communities of this type (family, tribe, etc.) are entitled to use land without having to pay, they will continue to perform the role of social insurance. Social insurance is the aim of household economics. Family members (parents, spouses and children) are not “refunded” by direct labor but the labor that they have contributed to the community in their lifetime. This goes opposite to the modern economic system which is based on wage regime, the duration of labor or product volume.⁽²⁾

The argument on unpaid family labor is probably close to the inspiration from a classic study by Chayanov on the “peasant economics” in which Chayanov contends that the fundamental characteristic of the

⁽²⁾ In such kind society, agriculture brings about social relationships because it does not yield immediate results. From the beginning of production (land preparation and seed sowing, etc.) to the harvest period, it takes time for the crops to get ripe. During this period, the producers must have some food reserved before and this amount of food is their “debt” to those of the previous production, and these creditors, in turn, are debtors to others. Year after year, the replacement of agricultural producing groups takes place through generations. These relationships last throughout their life cycle, creating a hierarchical structure on the basis of former or later participation which helps determine the origin of society. In Meillassoux’s words, that is thing which creates a system of kinship. View from these social relations (kinship or family), we see that they themselves constitute the backbone of economic organizations (Meillassoux, 1979)

peasant economics is household economics. The entire organization of this economic form is regulated by the size and structure of the family, the demand and the amount of labor. This is the reason why the concept of economic profits of peasants differs from that of capitalist economics and why the viewpoint of the capitalist economy cannot be applied to the peasant economics (Chayanov, 2000).

What is true for families is especially true for the class. Researchers have long attempted to define peasant production methods, as well as insist that the peasant is a class. This is related to the debate about the revolutionary potentials of peasants, particularly among the Marxist theorists. Marx's argument in his book about French peasants (18th Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte) is often invoked to make the definition more flexible. Through analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the coup, Marx commented that the foundation of the situation is the small-scale peasant class. Marx stressed that, as long as millions of families existing in economic conditions split their lifestyles their interests from other classes, they form class; and as long as simple small-scale French peasants get united together at the local level and their interests do not create nationalist links, they do not form class (Recited in Roseberry, 2000).

H. Mendras stressed that, unlike the primitive and agricultural laborers, the portrait peasant society can be painted by five characteristics. *First*, it is the relative autonomy of the peasant groups in relation to the surrounding society; *second*, it is the

importance in terms of structure of family groups in the organization of economic and social life; *third*, the economic system is relative autonomy, irrespective of consumption and production and has no relation to the surrounding economies; *fourth*, the local groups have mutual understanding and relatively weak relationships with surrounding groups; and *finally*, the notables and dignitaries perform the mediating role between peasants groups with their surrounding society (Mendras, 1976).

From the discussion above, we can identify the socio-economic nature of peasants: They belong to a portrait of pre-capitalist societies.

2. Small-scale peasant society in Vietnam

The "small-scale peasant society" leads us back to the earliest markers of bibliographic research on Vietnam's rural society. Historically, we know that the regime of large feudalism in Outer (the North of Vietnam) did not develop in the direction of creating two completely opposite classes. One of the reasons for fragmentation of land ownership is the practice of dividing land for children: Vietnamese people regardless of their class equally divided the properties (land, etc.) for children without any discrimination (Truong Hữu Quỳnh, 1983). Some scholars also believe that the equal division of assets including land is the key principles of inheritance in Vietnamese society, if there is exception for the most elder son, it is cult-portion fields to be attribute (Samuel Baron and Richard Abbe, cited in Yu, 1994). Another reason to be named is the ongoing land reclamation which regularly supplemented minor land

ownership of small peasants. Meanwhile, in the Inner (South of Vietnam), for many different reasons, large property ownership under feudalism strongly grew (Truong Hữu Quýnh, 1983).

In modern times, the documents also provide clearer look on differences among land ownership regimes and distinct social class patterns and social groups. According Robequain and Yves Henry, the land in the northern delta is most segmented. Privatization the North developed strangely compared to the South. The problem is that, land is the public fund for welfare programs of the village; hence, the proportion of public land reflects approximately “social binding indicator”. Consequently, it can be interpreted that the bond and social activities among southern villagers is not as strong as those of other rural parts of Vietnam. An American scholar remarked that Southerners who mostly are peasants should be more enthusiastic in the social and political movement than Northerners who primarily are small owners (Gabriel Kolko, 2003). Other researchers, however, are trying to highlight the importance of making the land reform the center of development policies, in order to solve social conflicts in rural areas (R. Sansom, 1971).

Vietnam’s agriculture in the 1980s was marked by the reform policies in agriculture; The first one was Directive 100 on output contracts to labor groups and individuals by the Party Central Committee Secretariat, 1981); followed by Resolution 10 on ‘Renewal of economic management in agriculture’ of the Politburo, dated April/1988), which stipulated the reallocation of land to peasants’

management. Resolutions of the 6th National Party Congress (1986) and the later admitted market economy in agriculture. Changes in land policy in Vietnam contributed significantly to increasing agricultural production and rural development.

On the academic side, there are more and more international and domestic researchers conducting studies on agriculture, the direction toward “socialist” large-scale production and systematic concerns about the social classes and strata. Besides, many studies to identify the social class structure of peasants are also undertaken (Trần Hữu Quang, 1984; Lê Minh Ngọc, 1984). The reality of developing the commodity based production in Southern rural areas provided numerous evidences for the need to look at the issue from the perspective of the classes’ roles in development. When discussing “middle peasant class” the author invoked and stressed on the socio- economic characteristics of this class, and logically suggested that development policies should pay special attention to this case (Lê Minh Ngọc, 1984).

During the collectivization period, in the North there was about 80% of peasants participating in the cooperatives. They pooled their land and other means of production in the cooperatives under the common management (Nguyễn Sinh Cúc, 1995). In the South, collectivization happened later and attracted less peasants. In the Mekong Delta, there was less than 6% of households participating in agricultural cooperatives (Pingali and Xuan, 1992). Unlike the North, Southern peasant households were still basic unit of production although they did

participate in agricultural cooperatives. They maintained the private ownership toward the means of production and provided agricultural services in parallel with cooperatives. The distribution of land after collectivization was mainly based on the status of land ownership of households before 1975 (Ravallion and Van de Walle, 2001).

Researchers emphasize the policy impacts on shaping a regime of average land in rural areas, especially in the North. The regulations on land distribution in 1988 Resolution of "Renewal agricultural management" allowed households with better producing capacity to be contracted more land. However, the proposed policy faced negative responses from peasants because it would contribute to the social inequality in rural areas. Until 1994, most of the Northern provinces applied the basis of an equal share for every member when dividing land (Luong and Wealth, 1998: 65-66). This was one among factors that created the fragmentation of land.

The most recent researches have showed that landlessness is common among poor peasants in the two deltas (Red River Delta and Mekong Delta). In the poorest peasant group alone, landless people proportion is approximately 5% in Mekong Delta compared with 40% in the Red River Delta in the Delta (Van de Walle and Ravallion, 2006). The increasing landlessness among peasants is causing deep concern about the social problems that may arise (Smith and Tran, 1994; Akram-Lodhi, 2005). However, there are other studies insisting that landlessness is not necessarily associated with poverty (Ravallion and van de Walle, 2008).

The region variable even provides deeper implications concerning the relationship between structure of rural society and policy efforts. More evidence shows that small-scale peasant economics have reached its "limit" of development and in the context of more requirements for integration and further developing the commercial agriculture, such economic system is no longer appropriate. In some recent studies of rural Mekong Delta, it was found that the middle peasant households did not have enough arable land and investment capital, and consequently were not able to participate in really effective business opportunities. The concept of the central role of the middle peasant class in the current agricultural economy of the South may not be accurate anymore (Trần Hữu Quang, 2010).

The research *on some land issues* based on the results of the "Survey of peasants", had paid special attention to the process of land accumulation and the shadow of a emerging class of "new peasants" - the farm owners of a few tens of hectares of arable land (Bùi Quang Dũng, Đặng Thị Việt Phương, 2011). In many publications about this case, people call them "farmers" and discuss many of the corresponding social relations (Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1994; Trần Đình Thiên, 2009; Nguyễn Thị Tố Quyên, 2010).

However, despite the social differentiation in the countryside, with new characters, such as farmers, and agricultural hired laborers, we are still experiencing a "small-scale peasant society" (Bùi Quang Dũng et al., 2011). What was written by Nguyễn Từ Chi nearly three decades ago, still can be

used to identify its portrait: the rural society in Vietnam is still a “sea of small-scale peasants”, in which “every independent peasant household, regardless of their social class or stratum, remains an independent economic cell, with its aspiration to rise up; economic rise is inevitable but social rise as well...” (Nguyễn Từ Chi, 1996).

3. Rural development

As presented above, the panoramic view of rural Vietnam is the existence of a “small-scale peasant society”. Household economics is nonetheless a small-scale peasant household economics in the pre-capitalist mode of production, rather than an economic component of the capitalist market economy like farm economics (Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1994).

Meanwhile, the development of agriculture and rural society in Vietnam relies heavily on the transformation of labor and land, in other words, depending on the level and possibility to dissolve of the current small-scale peasant economics. All of the aforementioned have justified the importance of outlining strategies for effective rural development.

While acknowledging positive results of the *Đổi Mới* policy, researchers noted that many fundamental problems of rural development has not yet been resolved. The problem of choosing a model for agricultural and rural development becomes a top issue in academic discussion of research communities at home and abroad. Many suggested that rural areas are returning to “natural evolutionary path” (Vũ Tuấn Anh, 1990). And the development model that deems promising is that along

with the “expansion” of peasant households, the land will be concentrated in the hands of economically astute households, while other peasants whether find other jobs (non-farm), or become agricultural hired laborer. And cooperative organizations will be voluntarily formed in the fields that need cooperation (Vũ Tuấn Anh, 1990; Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1994; Võ Thị Kim Sa, 2012).

If the presented model is regarded as a key growth path for rural economy and society, there are still a lot of conditions that can make it impossible for this process to become *a natural evolution*! Researchers strongly emphasize the two most important conditions: the lack of private ownership of land - the most basic conditions for the process of land concentration, and the autonomy of households as business owners which have not yet been guaranteed in practice (Vũ Tuấn Anh, 1990; Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1994).

For several decades the South and the North Vietnam went deeply into the opposite economic orbits when the North is under the socialist system and the South was under the capitalist system. That is not to mention the impacts caused by the exposure to different cultures of peasants in the two rural areas. The Southern culture with many ancient layers is different from the North and under the influence of cultural communication with the West; therefore the continuity of history is not necessarily overwhelmed by disruption and discontinuity. All of these characteristics must be taken into account in rural development efforts (Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1989).

While sympathetic to comment on the status of cultural and regional differences, foreign pay more attention to the impact of policy. Davide Dapice, in his outstanding research on the slow development of the Northern provinces, strongly emphasized the decisive importance of development policy in lieu of unique historical and cultural characteristics of the region (Davide Dapice, 2004).

Researchers unanimously agree upon the need to avoid repeating *the dualistic economy* pattern in less developed countries, especially the colonies. The dualistic economy pattern means that there are two economies in one society: the urban industrial economy with advanced level of manufacturing, dynamic and rich; and the rural economy with most of the land and poor population. Theory on dualism was formed on such socio-economic base; it accepts the contradicting fact above and regards urban industrial development as the solution to improve slow development in the agricultural and rural sector. (B. Hainsworth, 1987). In fact, the popularization of such theoretical model does not really create effective solutions for rural development in developing countries.

The rural development programs under the auspices of the UN since the 1970s have become one of the best solutions to agricultural and rural society development, instead of applying theory on dualistic economy. The objective of rural development programs is primarily based on an assumption that farmers want to continue to live a long time in the countryside, and therefore they should be guided to integrate into a commercial economy, instead of disintegrating

household economy. Accordingly the rural development programs should lean on the community, and by all means prevent it from disintegrating. Rural industrialization and organic relationship between the state and peasants are other key contents of rural development programs (A. Chowdhury, 1993).

Under the perspectives of domestic researchers, the contents of the rural development programs should be interpreted as "to make agriculture the leading front and the industrialization of rural areas the immediate priority" (Đỗ Thái Đồng, 1989; Đặng Kim Sơn et al, 2008). Such a policy must stem from autonomous role of peasant households, the vital interests of millions of peasants, and the ability to aggregate their great strength to develop the country in steady and solid steps.

Besides the theoretical discussion above, many scholars raise more concrete solutions for rural development strategy. Restructuring of rural labor has become one of the hot issues in policy debates. A large workforce is still located in rural areas. That the rate of natural population growth in rural areas is higher than urban areas whilst rural employment increases is much slower has created pressures on employment in rural areas. Low labor productivity and the shrinking arable land as a result of urbanization and industrialization are reasons for employment difficulties in rural areas. In this context, the peasant economic model with non-agricultural activities is considered useful to solve one of development problems including the shortage of jobs among overcrowded rural population. The contents of today model, inspired by Chayanov's idea and

developed by Singh, Squire and Strauss (1986), are contributing significant efforts to solve the problem of agricultural development (Lê Xuân Bá et al, 2006).

Agreeing on the ideas of developing non-agricultural sector in rural areas, Nicholas and his colleagues suggested a series of recommendations for rural development, with special attention to increasing the productivity of land and labor income from planting. These scholars even recommended the government and international organizations in Vietnam to consider diversifying crops as important pathway to increase income, though this is not the only way (Nicholas et al, 2003).

Attached to the contents above, the proposal for social development policy to be applied to different social classes and groups was also included. These recommendations stem from a rural society that has deeply differentiated into groups and strata with different capabilities, needs and aspirations.

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