

HAMLETS IN NORTHERN RURAL VILLAGES THROUGH HISTORICAL PERIODS

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Abstract: Hamlet is an “administratively divided unit” within village. It is closely embedded in the existence of village and it is unique to rural areas of Vietnam. For each specific period of history, the hamlet functions also vary in order to be suitable for requirements of the period. In the process of new rural building and international integration, new functions of the hamlet should be re-defined so that it will be forever an indispensable part of the rural in Vietnam.

Key words: Hamlet, Northern, renovation, cooperative.

Introduction

By now, many different opinions have been raised about the rural generally and the village specifically. There is, however, a common consensus among all the opinions that village is a unique product of rural areas in Vietnam and it is a basic social unit that has existed since the pre-August Revolution (1945).

According to Le Thi Chieng, a cultural researcher, the concept of “*thon*” imported from Chinese (*tun* - 屯) is sometimes used instead of the concept of “*lang*” (village) in Vietnam, as there is no corresponding word that sounds similarly and has the same meaning as “*lang*” in Chinese. Both of the two concepts have been used till now. Furthermore, a village consists of some smaller “administratively divided units” such as hamlets and alleys, as presented by Tu Chi, an anthropological researcher. Hamlets are closely attached with human life. It is the first social unit, where people contact each other outside their family. Names of hamlets are often simple, relating to a specific feature of the hamlets.

A lot of research works on villages have been done, but the number of research works on hamlets still remains limited. This paper focuses on two factors, including: residence characteristics and some functions of hamlets across historical periods.

1. Before the August Revolution (1945)

1.1. Residence characteristics

In the history of mankind, there are two fundamental ways to form residence communities, including: (1) People inhabit together on the basis of residence location; and (2) People inhabit together on the basis of blood relations. Looking at the history of community establishment, we can realize that the residence-based communities were formed before the blood-relations based ones, because the consciousness of blood lines (i.e. one is conscious of “who he/she is”) came later than the consciousness of “living in mutual dependence” firstly with surrounding people.

In history, villages in the North were

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mainly formed by the former way. Due to various reasons, people gathered and inhabited together in a high terrace surrounded by some cultivated land. The high terrace was used for houses and gardens; it was therefore named “building land”; whereas, the surrounding and lower land was mainly used for rice cultivation so it was named “farmland”. It was not necessary that those people had blood relations with each other, but surely they had “neighborly relations”. In rural language of the North, *lang* (from the compound *lang gieng* that means neighboring) is used to show a strip of flooded land located right next to the river banks. Farmers created this strip of land in the hope of making the maximum use of farmland for rice cultivation. In the meanwhile, *gièng* is the major part of a fishing tool. In the literal sense, therefore, *lang gieng* (neighboring) is used to indicate those people, who live in adjacent areas and play a significantly influential role in daily life.

In addition, another factor that played both the role of community formation and the role of community cohesion in Northern rural areas is the fact that they had the same production field. As the main activity of production was wet rice cultivation, it is inevitable that those who lived together in the same location did cultivation work in the same surrounding land. The cohesion of residence community was also strengthened by two factors, including: (1) building the river dam to protect their living area from flood; and, (2) building small-scaled irrigation systems to supply water for some lots of farmland. Although each farmer could do a lot of private activities in life, he/she could

not build his/her own private irrigation system for production. It was very hard to build a private system of water supply and even harder to build a private system of drainage, since it completely depended on the general system of drainage. This living principle is reflected in the following Vietnamese well-known folk verse: *Oh gourd, love the pumpkin. Though it is of a different species, you both share the same trellis.*

This folk verse shows that the residence location (trellis) is higher appreciated than the blood relations (species). As the level of productivity still remained low and people had to struggle against natural calamities, it was necessary for them to unite together. The first factor for community cohesion is that they shared the same residence area. In carrying out research on rural communities, therefore, the factor that should be immediately and always taken into account is the way to form and divide communities, based on residence locations.

In history, a village was a basic social unit that consisted of all elements, such as: administrative, economic, cultural, and spiritual. A village was also divided into different hamlets by itself. Herein, the question is: “what are the reasons for the division?” Was the division made due to geographical separation, transport constraints, population pressure, or other changes in social and community relations? Which one was formed at first, hamlet or village? Were hamlets divided from a village or vice versa; i.e. there was a hamlet at first; and then, its population, residence area and farmland were big enough to become a village; after that, the village was in turn divided into

hamlets? Or, did both processes take place at the same time?

Because of various reasons, a household or some households was/were then separated from the community by moving to new residence places. Normally, those places geographically still lied in the village area but they were less favorable for habitation than the inside area of the village. As the places also belonged to the village, those who moved to live there would remain considered as permanent residents of the village, but not migrants. This is a very important factor for Vietnamese villagers in the past. After moving to the new places, they became less dependent on the previous residence area. This change in living places is called “to move to the village outskirts” by farmers. After a period of time, habitation in the new places became more stable; production was more developed; and population increased; as a result, “outskirts hamlets” or “new hamlets” were formed. Those hamlets expanded more and more, creating a separate area with particular living characteristics. At that time, the term “village outskirts” was used to indicate those residence places. When those places became big enough, in terms of residence area, farmland, and population size, ones started to build their own temples and pagodas; specific names were given to them; and then, they were officially recognized by the government. Eventually, a village was formed. In conclusion, it can be assumed that hamlets were formed before villages.

Although *lang* and *thon* are synonyms (village), *thon* is sometimes used the same as *xom* (hamlet). This is shown in some

compounds, such “*xom lang*”, “*lang xom*”, or “*thon xom*” (village hamlet), which are normally spoken in daily life. It is also difficult to differentiate between the two concepts, because a village sometimes consists of only one hamlet; and, a commune sometimes consists of only one village. Looking at functions, size, scope of activities, and residence locations, however, we can realize that “*thon*” and “*xom*” have a lot of similarities, although they are different names used as a practice in local areas. *Lang* and *thon* are often used as synonyms, but *xom* is always considered as a “divided unit” of *lang* (village) or *thon* (if *thon* and *lang* are used as synonyms of village); and, the existence of hamlets has been closely embedded in rural areas and farmers’ life for a long time.

1.2. Several hamlet functions

Hamlet is a part of a village, in terms of residence agglomeration, but it has its own particularities. Households as well as members of a hamlet are not necessary to be relatives. The principle of behavior among people in the same hamlet is: “A near neighbor is better than a far-dwelling kinsman”; or “neighbors give mutual help, whenever necessary”. They provide support for each other in carrying out specific activities of production as well as when a household has “a big event” or a difficulty in life.

Hamlet members are mentioned in the concept of “*hang xom*” (neighbor), which is used to show informally those who live in the same hamlet without any differentiation. In terms of social status, therefore, farmers at least can find their peers in the hamlet. In the meanwhile, the concept of “commune

or district fellows” is used to indicate the group of mandarins. Thus, a hamlet is the very place, where farmers can find themselves and can get direct protection as well as mutual help from others.

The concept of “neighbor” is not only used, but also further developed in urban life. It changed into the concept of “street people”, which is used to indicate those who live together in a certain geographical area (called street).

Each hamlet has its own life without connection with other social units, except for the fact that it somewhat depends on the village, where it is located. A village consists of many hamlets, but the hamlets are very little related to each other. The only thing that connects all the hamlets together is the general irrigation system, which all of the hamlets have to use. This loose linkage among the hamlets shows the feature of small-farming society that has existed for a long time in Vietnam.

Hamlet can be recognized as a social form. It is an appropriate “micro-society” to concerns of farmers. In a hamlet, all people know clearly characters as well as household situations of each other; whereas people in a village sometimes may not know about all others. This makes people in the same hamlet sympathize with each other, but it results in some envy as well.

The hamlet religious form is not very obvious and probably has changed a lot time by time. It might be just a shrine or a temple, where worship has been made without any formal standards.

Hamlets have common activities with the village and commune in only some

aspects, such as: social security and field management. Hamlets sometimes have private and sometimes share with the village/commune practices of religion or festivals. Offerings are brought to the communal house in the village to make worship, but they are then divided separately into hamlets.

If land is viewed as the most basic factor for agricultural economy, there is no separate area of land for a hamlet. Hamlet was not viewed as an administrative unit, based on which the feudal governments allocated residence and farmland. Farmland of a village was divided into different sections on the basis of some local criteria. None of the sections was contiguous to the residence land of only one hamlet and none of them was provided privately for one hamlet. In a section of farmland, there were different fields belonging to different hamlets of the village. Consequently, a hamlet had no private irrigation system, but all hamlets shared a general irrigation system of the village.

Thus, a hamlet was just a residence agglomeration without involvement with allocation of farmland. There were some particular hamlets, where the residence area was large and production of vegetables was developed with well-known specialities. Those productive activities, however, were done separately by households, but they were not typical for common activities of the hamlets.

Every grow-up man, who was a permanent resident of the village, must be a member of one hamlet and he might be a member of an association or a group.

For such a great quantity of small-farmers’ households, in which every household

head had a private real estate and economy as well as individual social status, it was necessary to have organizations that assist the government in keeping control over those people. Although a hamlet was not an official organization that helped the government to take control over individuals, it actually provided support for governmental organizations. In addition, it is the very location, where those organizations were established.

2. The period of agricultural cooperatives

To meet requirements of seasonal cultivation, farmers had to exchange their workdays. The exchange of workdays was sometimes made on the basis of blood relations, but it was mainly based on the neighborly relations. Within a hamlet, if person A spent one day working for person B, person B would spend another day working for person A. When living in the same hamlet, all members knew clearly what work each household had to do; all the exchanges of workdays were made orally without any written agreements. The very name of the exchange (exchange of workdays) shows the activity of giving mutual help for each other on the basis of workday, regardless of specific work. Person A might help person B to harvest rice; whereas person B might help person A to grow rice, in which a workday was used as the unit of exchange.

During the time of the Resistance War against the French colonists, the exchange of workdays was named “the work rotation” and promoted in the liberated areas, due to a greater need of giving help to the households, of which members were taking part in the army. Workday exchanging groups were step-by-step set up within hamlets.

Members of a group provided mutual help for each other on the basis of workdays. All of them spent a day doing work for the household of every member in turn.

In the early time of agricultural cooperative building, the workday exchanging groups were maintained, creating an initial stage for the transition from individual economy to collective economy in agricultural production.

Afterwards, agricultural cooperatives were established on the basis of village; i.e. each village was considered a cooperative. If a commune consisted of only one village, several cooperatives were set up in the village. And then, this pattern was viewed appropriate for a smaller-scope cooperative. In a cooperative, there were productive teams set up at the scope of a hamlet. In this period, hamlets just existed in people’s subconscious, but they were replaced by productive teams in practice. In rural areas, names of previous hamlets were used to call corresponding productive teams.

Farmland of agricultural cooperatives was formed from two major sources, including: public farmland of the village and private farmland contributed by villagers after keeping 5% of their previous farmland to do household economy. Farmland of productive teams was also formed by the same way; i.e. it consisted of public farmland of the hamlet and private farmland contributed by the hamlet members after keeping 5% of their previous farmland to do household economy. Thus, after joining a cooperative, farmers became members of the cooperative, but they still keep doing cultivation in their own fields as well as the fields of other members of the hamlets, because their productive activities were limited within a

productive team; i.e. in the scope of their hamlet.

Hamlets did not have an obvious function before, but productive teams were assigned to perform a very obvious function in the period of agricultural cooperatives. It is to carry out directly agricultural production. The cooperatives undertook some general functions, such as: (1) to allocate production materials; (2) to set up production plans; (3) to design projects of public farmland allocation and projects of product distribution; (4) to fix taxation rates for productive teams; and, (5) to coordinate productive teams and supervise their implementation of productive plans. In other words, the cooperatives just perform the management function but they did not carry out directly productive activities.

Productive teams were the basic unit of production in the agricultural cooperative. They directly carried out productive activities and harvested crops. The management board of a productive team, which was called the team steering board, consisted of just few people, including: a team head, a team sub-head, and a team secretary. The team head was responsible for giving general directions. Based on the productive plans and workday allocation of the cooperative, the team head assigned different groups, households and individuals with specific work for a certain period or everyday. The team secretary was responsible for recording workdays of every households involved in the productive team on the basis of work done by the team members. Households could take note of their workdays and then compare it with the recording of the team secretary, in order to see how many workdays they had done for a certain period.

After harvesting rice, an amount of rice

would be deducted for tax. Based on the rest amount of rice left and the total of workdays in the productive team, the steering board calculated the workday value (on a scale from 1 to 10; for example, 1.2 kilogram of rice for 1 workday). The cooperative was responsible for harmonizing the workday values among all productive teams so that the workday value in all the productive teams would be the same; for the productive teams that had a higher workday value, they could get some bonus rice. Each household could estimate how much rice they would get, depending on the workday value and the quantity of workdays they did.

Thus, productive teams were closely related to life of the team members. If the steering board regulated the team well, the workday value would be high; the team members would get some bonus and consequently their living conditions would be a little better than others. The steering board, specifically the team head, could assign appropriate tasks to specific groups or individuals in order to get higher productivity. In general, productive teams undertook the responsibility for assigning work to all the team members, ensuring that no one had no work to do and all households would get the same income, if they had the same workdays.

During the period of agricultural cooperatives, farmland was also re-allocated among productive teams. At the beginning, the average area of farmland might vary from team to team, since the productive teams had different areas of private farmland contributed by households in the hamlets. And then, the cooperative re-allocated all the farmland, avoiding a big difference in

the average per-capita area of cultivated land between productive teams. As the farmland quality of rice fields was almost the same, furthermore, the cooperative started to “merge and change rice fields” within the cooperative so that a productive team could do cultivation in a specific area of farmland near the hamlet; this helped to cut out the amount of travelling time spent in production. This casually strengthened the cohesion of communities that shared “the same area of production”; it further united people of the same production team, which was the very hamlet community. This factor did not exist before.

During the period of cooperative formation and development, cultivated land was re-arranged basically, when cooperatives launched the campaign of “rice field restructuring”. Transport systems and irrigation systems were built in accordance with a general planning. Rice fields of productive teams were, therefore, re-arranged in specific areas in order to meet requirements at that time.

When cooperatives were built at the scope of the whole commune, the scope of productive teams also increased. A new productive team might consist of several previous productive teams; i.e. it consisted of several hamlets. Functions and productive directions of the new productive teams, however, still remained the same. Different hamlets in the same productive team continued to have no connection with each other. Moreover, the large-scaled cooperatives that covered the whole commune did not last long, compared with the history of the hamlets. As a result, the existence of hamlets was not destroyed.

In conclusion, in the period of agricultural

cooperatives, hamlets were strengthened by the agricultural productive monitoring function; it directly undertook the farmland management and utilization. In other words, it had “the power to use farmland”. Owing to the formation of productive teams that were set up on the basis of “the same residence area” and “the same production area”, the existence of hamlets was further strengthened and became an unbroken social unit.

3. In the period of *Doi moi* (renovation)

After the renovation policy was implemented in agricultural production, households became a fundamental economic unit. They were empowered to do trading and production on their own. Fields were allocated to every household for management and utilization. The piecework policy was performed at the level of households. Cooperatives mainly undertook the service function; productive teams no longer existed. Farmland re-allocation for households was conducted on the basis of some criteria, including: the number of household members and the average per-capita area of farmland for the whole commune. Farmland was re-allocated to all households. Some households wanted to get the very fields, which they contributed to the agricultural cooperative before. This was, however, very difficult to be done, because there had been a lot of changes in farmland since then. The re-allocation was made for only cultivated land; whereas the residence land still remained the same. Consequently, the habitation location of hamlets did not change at all.

At the beginning of this transition in agriculture, there were no longer productive teams. In rural areas, the commune people’s committee was the only body that undertook

the administrative management for every household and individual in the whole commune. By now, this has changed. As the population of a commune has been much greater and a lot of new issues have occurred, the administrative apparatus of the commune cannot undertake effectively the task without its extended units. It is, therefore, inevitable that administrative bodies of hamlets should be re-established with some new functions.

Residence location of hamlets might change a little due to their population growth, but basically it still remains the same. Thus, the population density of hamlets has been much higher, compared with that in the past. To meet the need of housing, people of the hamlets have to fill

in ponds, lakes and other sunken areas to make gardens and build houses. Social relations among the hamlet members, however, remain so close as before; they are still mutual neighbors; they still do cultivation together in the fields around their hamlet; and, there has been no change in their living and behavior norms at all.

The hamlet administrative system has been more completed, owing to officialization and legalization. At present, the name of a hamlet may not be the same in all areas; in some areas, a hamlet is named *thon*, and in other areas, it is named *xom*. No matter what name it is called, it is a direct subordinate to the commune administrative apparatus; its function and organizational structure are regulated by the law.

Administrative apparatus and socio-political organizations at the commune and hamlet level

Commune Level	Hamlet Level
Secretary of the Commune's Party Committee	Secretary of the Hamlet's Party Cell
People's Council	
Chairman and vice chairmen of the Commune's People Committee	Head and sub-head of the hamlet
Fatherland Front	Division of the Fatherland Front
Inter-union of youth	Union of youth
Farmers' Union	Farmer's Union branch
Women's Union	Women's Union branch
Veterans' Union	Veterans' Union branch
Sheriff of the Commune Police	Semiofficial Policeman
Head of the Commune Militia	Hamlet Squad Leader

The above table shows that the administrative apparatus at the hamlet level is the very miniature of that at the commune level; a leader of any organizations at the commune level is always a superior of the corresponding

leader at the hamlet level. In addition, the hamlet is not viewed as an administrative unit; leaders and organizations at the hamlet level, therefore, have neither stamp nor private legal account; the acknowledgement

made by the hamlet leader for a specific activity is not administratively obligatory. It is not necessary for people to contact the hamlet leader, before making contact with leaders of the commune. Solutions to problems in the hamlet mainly rely on negotiations, in which people are persuaded to be tolerant towards others in the same hamlet.

Like the past, hamlets have no private farmland; all cultivated land has been allocated to households. Unlike the productive teams before, hamlets have no function to do agricultural production. A hamlet may possess some area of land, which used to be warehouses, drying grounds of the productive teams. The land is now used to build the hamlet office buildings or kindergartens. Owing to a campaign launched recently to improve the rural infrastructure, hamlet leaders have undertaken very effectively their role in encouraging people to make contributions towards building their hamlet roads.

After a period, the hamlet administrative system has undertaken effectively its role and has proved that it is an appropriate social organization in the rural. It is the first social unit, where the grass-roots democracy was implemented. In the meanwhile, some hamlet - related problems have recently occurred, which should be properly solved in order to meet requirements of rural modernization. It is the thinking of localization, due to which some regulations have been made within hamlets. After rebuilding hamlet roads, some hamlets have restricted transportation from outside, as they assume that "the roads are theirs". Due to different rates of population growth and different ways to use farmland, the average area of cultivated land per capita varies

from hamlet to hamlet. Thus, there is an opinion that farmland should be distributed into hamlets, when the next farmland re-allocation is made. Formation of hamlets has resulted in the management model of "four and a half levels". In addition, administration work at the hamlet level has inevitably caused some bureaucratic and negative phenomena.

Conclusion

For a long time of history, hamlets have been always embedded in rural areas of Vietnam. In different periods, the name and functions of hamlets might vary, but eventually they have performed the inherent functions and characteristics.

In the period of modernization, it is necessary to make hamlets promote good values and minimize inappropriate factors that obstruct the process of modernization. Research on the role and functions of hamlets should be carried out, aiming at making policy recommendations that enable hamlets to satisfy new requirements at present.

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