

THE IMPACT ON A SENDING COMMUNITY OF SEASONAL MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of Vietnamese peasants, seasonal migration has existed for a long time. However, after *Doi Moi* (Renovation), there has been an increase in the number of peasants on the move to the cities to seek jobs. By 1999, there were approximately 337,000 seasonal migrants in Vietnam's two biggest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. This phenomenon invites the scrutiny of urban planners and scholars.

Seasonal migration is a broad, complicated subject. In this paper, I shall analyze the impact of migration on some aspects of village and community relationships in a northern Vietnamese village. The issue here is whether long-term migration by a large segment of the village population influences their relationships to their lineages. I am also concerned with whether the incomes female migrants earn from trade and bring back home from the cities improve their roles and statuses in their families, village, and community. As a related issue, this paper examines the impact of migration on children and their relationships with their parents. I did my fieldwork in Huong Quat village, Thanh Cong commune, Khoai Chau district, Hung Yen province, the home village of many long term migrants to Hanoi.

1. Huong Quat Village and Its Street Vendor: a Brief Profile

Located in the center of the Red River Delta, Huong Quat is an agricultural village with a long history. Like many other villages, Huong Quat has a chronic scarcity of cultivatable land. Each individual laborer is given on average 384 square meters of cultivable land. The lack of productive land forces the peasants to confront two problems: the redundancy of labor and insufficient production to live on. The recent production in Huong Quat is 170 kg paddy rice/one *sao* (360 square meters). Even without natural disasters or insect plagues, each inhabitant of a household harvests only 370 kg paddy rice on his/her land. After subtracting all expenses relating to production and tax, the revenue left is about 190 kg. This amount of food production barely sustains a household. Peasants have no choice but to diversify their economic activities.

For a long time, peasants living in villages in the northern delta have had to earn extra money through traditional handicrafts. Others sell goods in the market. In Huong Quat, street vending is considered an age-old occupation for the villagers. Long ago, in the slack agricultural season, local people went to Hanoi to buy goods and sell them on the streets or in local markets, and then went back home during harvests. Villagers speak of this as "going to the market."

This activity was interrupted for a long period. The subsidy policy and collective economy from the late 1950s to the early 1980s reduced peasant mobility dramatically. Free market activities were seen as damaging to the economic collective and were prohibited. Since *Doi Moi*, the movement of peasants has been revived and is even more intense than in the past. In 2000, of about 4428 villagers, 1355 peasants or 31% of the village population, were on the move. Most of the migrants are women (60%). Furthermore, old people and children are also involved in seasonal migration. Many families in Huong Quat have more than two members on the move.

Eighty percent of Huong Quat's migrants move to Hanoi. The rest travel to other cities, and even to remote mountain towns such as Son La, Lai Chau, and Lao Cai. Huong Quat villagers sell miscellaneous goods of low quality as well as clothes, fruit, books and newspapers. Huong Quat migrants use many different means to transport their goods, depending on age, gender, and the nature of the goods themselves. They may simply carry things in their hands or load them on their bodies and their shoulders, or push a cart or a bike.

A Huong Quat migrant's working day starts at 6:00 am and ends at 9:00 or 10:00 pm. Usually, a street venter walks 5 to 10 kilometers a day through streets or residential quarters. During their vending adventures, they often confront gangsters and drug-addicts who may demand money, menace them, or threaten to rob their goods. Moreover, their street vending activity violates the city's traffic

safety rules; they may be caught by the police and forced to pay a fine.

The income of the migrants is unstable, depending on the seasons of the year, daily weather, and luck. On average, the income of a migrant per day is about 15,000 to 20,000 Vietnamese dong (from 1 to 1.3 USD). Half of this amount is spent for their meals and lodging. Each month, a migrant can save from 200,000 to 300,000 Vietnamese dong to send to their families. In their home village, this remittance is used to pay for all family expenses, to invest in agricultural production, and to sustain rituals such as weddings, death anniversaries, and funerals. The rest can be saved in a bank for big familial affairs such as for purchasing land, building a house, or buying expensive appliances. Owing to the pressure of family expenses, the migrants usually use up all their money, and sometimes rely on loans from their co-villagers to sustain their families. Few migrants can save to build their own capital. The exceptions are some unmarried women migrants; parental support allows them to save some money for their dowries.

Because they are living far from home, the peasants bond together for survival and mutual support. In Hanoi, 80% of Huong Quat migrants lodge in Phuc Tan district, a place that was created from a sand bar of the Red River as a dwelling place for addicts and criminals. Not only Huong Quat migrants, but also migrants from Thanh Hoa, Nam Ha and Vinh Phuc also stay in there. Usually, there are between 10 and 20 people sharing a guesthouse. Each pays 2,000 Vietnamese

dong (about 15 cents) per day for lodging and sleeps on straw mats or on wooden boards on the floor.

2. Kinship and Community Relationships of Huong Quat Migrants

It is noteworthy that Huong Quat migrants, especially relatives, often share the same guesthouse. In the thoughts of Huong Quat co-villagers, kinship is the most important relationship, and has even a greater significance for those who are far from home. In the village, kinship relationships are affirmed during weddings, funerals, and agricultural works. Today, these relationships are reinforced and expanded among urban migrants as lineage members bond together and provide mutual support. While they sell goods on the streets, the vendors of the same lineage inform each other about prices, best-selling goods, and so on. They loan money to their co-villagers for their capital investment or send remittances home to sustain their families. When a person is sick or has an accident, relatives take him or her to a hospital or to the home village. Moreover, the lineage plays a role in monitoring the conduct of its members, preventing them from falling into bad ways in the cities as well as in their home village.

The lineage also plays a role in drawing migrants back to their home village. On the occasion of weddings, funerals, and death anniversaries in the lineage, all migrants have to come back to express their sentiments and obligations. If, owing to the better income they can earn in the city, a number of people no longer go back home during the harvest, they are still

obligated to return on ritual occasions to offer their support to their lineage.

As in many other villages in the north of Vietnam, family and lineage rituals in Huong Quat have been revived in recent years. Many lineages have rebuilt ancestral temples that had been destroyed many years before during wars and the land reform campaign. All the costs are borne by the families within the lineage. During the year, the anniversaries of the dead are the most important rituals for a lineage member. On the day of the ritual, men of the lineage gather at the headman's house or at the ancestral temple. They collect money for the offerings to their lineage ancestor and hold a banquet.

Funerals and weddings are held on a larger scale than in the past. For a death anniversary, there are between 5 and 10 food trays. A wedding might last for three days with hundreds of food trays. The ceremonies related to a funeral may last for 4 or 5 days, also with a lot of food. The village festival is held once every three years and all villagers are expected to participate. The New Lunar Year, Thanh Minh Festival in May and Mid-Autumn festivals are also occasions for migrants to reunite with their families.

However, the form of support that lineage members extend to each other has been transformed due to migration. In the past, lineage members usually helped each other during the harvest, in house construction, or in any works requiring heavy labor, but today, these forms of support have disappeared. Instead, they help each other materially with their

earnings from the city. These changes do not loosen kinship bonds, but on the contrary, reinforce them. It is clear that “going to the market” has had a huge impact on family and community.

3. The Impact of the Migration on Huong Quat Women

The fact that 60% of Huong Quat’s migrants are women has also brought a radical change in the socio-economic life of Vietnamese peasants, especially in the Red River Delta, contradicting the peasant women’s roles as housewives who do not have the ability to “go out in society” as men do.

Many studies have analyzed the relationship between economic reforms and gender in Vietnam (William, S & Selden, 1993; Werner, J, 1998). These studies indicate that the reduction of jobs in state industries meant massive unemployment for women in the industrial sector. Today women work primarily in agriculture, trading, and service. Men are more likely to have salaried government jobs while women’s work is typically unstable and generates little income. One profound reason for this division of labor is that in Vietnam in particular and in some Southeast Asian countries in general, small trade, services, and restaurant work are seen as ‘trivial’ and suitable only for women (Rigg 1998).

Inequality thrives even in the family sphere. *Doi Moi* (Renovation) has been accompanied by the return of religious rituals in the family and community (Luong Van Hy 1998, Kleinen 1999). During the collective period, especially during the Anti-American War, women

played an important role in all fields such as the army, the economy, and politics. Social intervention would be made on women’s behalf, even in opposition to their families. Now, the equality that collectivization brought to women no longer exists (Fahey 1998: 237). Thus, many scholars consider women to be the most vulnerable group during the process of economic reform in Vietnam (Rigg 1998, Diep Dinh Hoa 2000).

In the past, Huong Quat women focused on their agricultural work, and traded goods during the slack agricultural season. Housework such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children was also their responsibility. With migration, these tasks are passed on to other family members. Men in Huong Quat unwillingly take over housework when women become sources of extra income for their families. The question still remains whether these changes in the division of labor transform spousal relationships.

My paper suggests that men still play an important role in their families and are responsible for buying expensive appliances such as a television, VCR or a motorbike, and are involved in concerns outside their households such as lineage rituals, village festivals, and so on. Meanwhile, women have a decisive role only in simple family affairs such as purchasing daily utensils, food, books and notebooks for their children. Most significantly, men retain a dominant patriarchal role in their families. In some families, women are abused by their husbands when they come back home from the city for a visit.

Even when migrant women work far from home, they still carry responsibility for agricultural work. Since migration, the cultivation of winter crops has been reduced and 22% of Huong Quat households have temporarily suspended agricultural cultivation. These are cases where young spouses are together on the move. They leave their allotted land for their relatives to cultivate or rent it out for a short time. When business is slack in the city or when familial concerns, such as having small children, draw them back to the village, they take back their land and resume cultivation. Moreover, the labor market which has emerged in Huong Quat in recent years also contributes partly to lightening labor pressure during the harvest time. My observation shows that female migrants in Huong Quat have two options at harvest time: either they must go back to cultivate or they can send their remittances home to hire someone from the labor market to take their place in the fields when their business in the city is flourishing and they are earning a good income.

It is clear that migration does not improve the status of women in their families. There are many reasons for this. When a number of men from Huong Quat were asked about their opinions on women after their move to the market, they expressed pride that the old established order was still maintained in its fullest sense, that the villagers still preserve 'traditional values' in their social behavior and family relationships. Meanwhile, women in Huong Quat noted that they are used to such a life. However, it cannot be denied that they always want

to have their husbands treat them fairly and share their feelings as well as their burdens in their lives. Very few women resist the inequality in their families or community because public opinion immediately condemns them as immoral and vainglorious about their city-earned money. The structure of families and the notion that men are superior to women have their roots in an ideology of 'son preference' for the sake of maintaining descent lines and providing care to parents in old age. This outweighs economics. Therefore, a wife is particularly vulnerable if she does not have a child--particularly a son--, regardless of how virtuous she is and how much money she can earn. Thus, economic "renovation" and the subsequent migration of women combines with the old patriarchal system and is reinforced by the ritual revival to protect men from any form of women's resistance.

Not only does migration bring inequality to women, but it is also an element in the unraveling of relationships. In recent years, men who stay in the village have acquired lots of leisure time, so they gather to drink alcohol and to gamble. Moreover, some of them take prostitutes to the village or become sexually involved with co-villagers. Others seek affairs with women in other villages when they go there to work. There seems to be a strong social consensus that after marriage, women are primarily concerned with their children and husbands consequently feel lonely. Because of their "natural" sex drive, the husbands may want to have an affair. Others opine that women after marriage

pay too much attention to their livelihood, and they get old and ugly very quickly. Men are often selfish and want to have “exotic” feelings; it is easier for them to have an affair. Because of these attitudes, if men in Huong Quat are caught having an affair, they are ridiculed and sneered at, rather than criticized or stigmatized, as would women.

Meanwhile, only a few Huong Quat migrants have committed adultery, resulting in their being alienated from their spouses. Adultery or affairs rarely happen among Huong Quat villagers who live and work in the city. This is true in part because Huong Quat villagers share their lodgings with kin and members of the same lineage; mechanisms of social support are also a means of social control. More important, women are more likely to accept their fates and are afraid of public opinion. If they violate the social standards, they are condemned more severely than men. Numerous studies on sexuality in Vietnam indicate that public opinion is more sympathetic to men than to women when they have an affair.

4. The Impact of the Migration on Children in Huong Quat

The temptation caused by the available revenue earned from the city in the early *Doi Moi* period caused many children to drop out of school. At the peak of migration activity, 22% of children of secondary school age had dropped out to go to the city for work such as selling newspapers, postcards, or goods. This is because their parents felt that completing the seventh grade was sufficient for literacy and had no interest in higher

education for them. The parents are spared the cost of the child’s education and they think that jobs are available for peasants’ children. Anyway, they don’t think that peasants’ children have better prospects for employment. Therefore, instead of going to school, their children may go to the market to help them improve their household’s livelihood. Children themselves want to drop out of school, as they are uninterested in school. They are attracted to new shoes and clothing that other drop-out children have acquired with their own earnings.

However, Huong Quat people soon realized the negative effect of the trend on their children. The children who sell goods on streets are controlled by their parents, but they succumb to urban vices and their behavior toward their parents changes. Some urban jobs --selling newspapers and postcards-- require knowledge of foreign languages so many children find it necessary to return to their home schools to continue their studies. As a consequence, the educational situation in Huong Quat has recently improved and the number of drop-out children has been dramatically reduced.

The other impact of migration is the parents’ lack of attention to their children. There are families in which both mother and father are on the move, leaving their children with grandparents or hired caretakers. A number of children have begun to take up bad habits, wanting to spend their money frivolously and hang out with their friends. They become lazy and do not do their homework, become selfish, and so on. Even though this problem has not reached serious

proportions, it is a cause of concern for the people in the village.

Disregarding the negative implications, migration has positive impacts on the life of the people. First of all, their work in the city brings them a considerable income and sustains many families' lives. "Before the move, our life was very difficult." Huong Quat people usually present their street vending in such a way. Before migration, agricultural revenue made up 80% of the income of a household in Huong Quat, whereas now, 80% of the income comes from their work far from home. Most village houses and roads are built with bricks, tiles, and cement available after 1990. Televisions, cassettes, and electronic fans are basic appliances for most households. Their daily life has radically improved. Meat and fish are more frequent components of village meals.

Migration enables people to broaden their social relationships. The work in the city helps them to have more friends from different places, especially villages in Khoai Chau district, Hung Yen province. When they pay a visit to their villages for rest, festivals, and weddings, the migrants usually go to visit each other in other villages. As a result of these new relationships, more Huong Quat people marry outsiders. Most important, migrants are able to be in contact with many others and learn more about the urban life and culture where they stay and work. Along with their earnings, they bring back to the village the social knowledge that they have gained and a broader sense of life.

CONCLUSION

Not so long ago, researchers tend to regard the "traditional" Vietnamese village as a closed entity, the people living there being rather conservative in outlook (see Kleinen 1999). However, past experiences have shown that the inhabitants of the Red River Delta are dynamic, flexible people who always try to improve their conditions in the face of scarce agricultural resources and population growth pressures. Peasants use the vernacular "*di cho*" (going to the market) to refer to long trips lasting from a few weeks to few months for trading purposes. Previously, "*di cho*" was a popular activity of peasant women in the area. Besides the village's market, there are bigger market places at the canton (*Tong*), district and province-level. The market is the place to exchange local goods; it is also the venue for cultural and social intercourse. The market serves as a convenient channel for expanding personal relations among the peasants coming from various villages, near and far.. The fact that nowadays peasants go and look for work in the city is also considered an act of "*di cho*", not unlike their forefathers who went to the local market at regular intervals in the old days.

This tradition of "*di cho*" was interrupted by the decades during which the country was under a system of economic planning. Doi Moi in reality helped bring down the barriers imposed by state/collectivism, allowing the peasants to fully exploit their potentialities and dynamism. The nature of "*di cho*" nowadays is different from the

former times, since its scope also becomes much bigger. One factor is that the idle periods between harvests are longer. The pressures from agricultural unemployment or under-employment and the need for survival push peasants into moving out and earn their living elsewhere, and in the case of Huong Quat, on the city streets. When they return to their native village, it is more often for family and kinship business rather than for agricultural production. But in spite of the diversification of economic activities and increased mobility, the peasants never abandon agriculture since they regard activities like street vending as a temporary occupation full of uncertainties. Basically, peasants (such as the case of Huong Quat) cling to their land, which reflects the "Safety first" attitude in the psyche of the farming people (Scott 1979). The fact that they have to move as seasonal migrants only reinforces family ties, kinship spirit and community feelings. As I have pointed out earlier, these community feelings are strengthened not only with regard to the home village but also enhance solidarity among migrant street vendors coming from the same village.

Compared with the collective period, the division of labor in a household has changed and women today play an important role in contributing to family income. This does not change their status in their households, or alleviate their "three burdens" (work, child care and household chores) (Khuat Thu Hong 1991), which tend to weigh even heavier on their shoulders as they are continually on the move. The renovation of lineage

and community rituals draws in money contributions by migrants which, in turn, foster strong sentiments toward their home village.

Maybe it is too early to anticipate the impact of seasonal migration on kinship relationships and gender roles in Huong Quat, but in a contemporary timeframe, the move has had a strong impact on the roles and statuses of women in their families and communities. It also reinforces the patriarchic dominance of men in their families and lineages. It is clear that the threat of negative consequences of migration on village relationships and the existence of past burdens are always challenges in the developmental process, not only in Huong Quat, but in other villages in the Red River Delta.

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