



THE SOCIAL BEHAVIOR OF THE RED RIVER DELTA FARMERS DURING THE PERIOD OF RENOVATION

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Abstract:

Farmers' life in Vietnam has seen many changes physically and mentally after nearly thirty years of the implementation of the economic reforms. Particularly farmers in the Red River Delta in the Renovation. Moreover, the interaction between individuals, groups, and communities based on these social patterns has helped farmers improve their lives or restrained them from the development process today. This paper initially identifies and explains the social patterns, indicating barriers to the process of modernization and rural development in Vietnam, thereby contributing some evidence to clarify the unsettled debate about the nature of Vietnamese farmers that was raised almost half a century ago.

1. Introduction

Farmers' life in Vietnam has seen many changes physically and mentally after nearly thirty years of the implementation of the economic reforms. Not only in the Red River Delta, but also in all rural areas of the country, we are witnessing a strong recovery of social patterns besides institutions and formal social institutions. It is worth considering the great impacts of these patterns on behaviour, or in other words, on the social actions of the farmers not only in their daily life, but also in their economic activities.

The research question is concerned with different kinds of existing social patterns which govern the behavior of farmers throughout the country in general, and particularly farmers in the Red River Delta in the Renovation. Moreover, the interaction between individuals, groups and communities based on these social patterns has

helped farmers improve their lives or restrained them from the development process today.

Based on secondary sources, this paper initially identifies and explains the social patterns, indicating barriers to the process of modernization and rural development in Vietnam, thereby contributing some evidence to clarify the unsettled debate about the nature of Vietnamese farmers that was raised almost half a century ago.

2. Previous debates on the behavior of farmers in Vietnam

Life and social relations of Vietnamese farmers have long been the subject of research that attracts the attention of both national and international scholars. Two authors JohnJ.Mc Alister and Paul Mus's "The Vietnamese and the Revolutions" (1970), stated that "Vietnamese farmers have been taught to believe that their success and survival depend on their adherence to spiritual rituals" (Mc

Alister and Mus : 30) . Their thesis showed the role of spiritual patterns in the Vietnamese tradition. More importantly , this was one of the views that initiated further debates about the nature and behavior of farmers in Vietnam, of which there were two famous American authors James Scott and Samuel Popkin in the subsequent years of the 1970s.

In "The moral economy of the peasant" (1976) , Scott has generalized the behavior of farmers in Vietnam as adhering to a patterns or a principle of "safety first". He said that throughout their livelihood, farmers rarely tried to maximize profit, but rather tried to work and behave so as to avoid the risk of failure, to avoid starvation [1, p.5]. In a different approach, Popkin's generalization gave a different picture of the behaviors of farmers in Vietnam. In the " Reasonable Farmers " (1979) , he asserted that the actions of farmers according to the principle of " rational choice " , private gains , they tended to analyse the potential cost and benefits of different action and selected the option that is most beneficial [2,p18-22]. The debate between Scott and Popkin regarding the nature and behavior of farmers attracted enormous attention and interests of the international research community specializing in the studies of Vietnam and Southeast Asian for many decades.

In Vietnam, in the 1990s, Vietnamese Canadian anthropologist Luong Van Hy, in his studies of Phu Tho, a village in the central of the northern Vietnam's mountainous region, based on his empirical data, said that " the cost and benefit analysis has certain significance in the analysis of human action" but he also provided plenty of evidence to refute the interpretation of the cost and benefit analysis as a rationale for the revolutionary process [3, p.220-221]. Disagreed with both Scott and Popkin's explanations of the behaviors of farmers, recently , in an article entitled "Understanding Vietnam's peasants during the doimoi period", sociologist Mai Huy Bich has said that both Scott and Popkin are only partially correct : each author managed to see a certain aspect in farmers; Scott viewed from an extreme situation , whereas Popkin had overly generalized . Moreover, both of these authors had classified the farmers in very distinctive or even contrary stereotypes. From a national academic point of view, this can be seen as the first study to clarify the ongoing debate among international scholars about the nature of farmers in Vietnam.

The above evidence shows that there are different interpretations of the behavior of farmers in Vietnam. It is interesting to see the debate about Vietnam's rural society and their farmers' daily interactions has so far yet to come to an end. The aim of the following sections is to give an interpretation based on the type of social patterns to further clarify the behavior of the Red River Delta farmers during the Doi Moi or Renovation.

3. Dominating Social Patterns of Farmers' Behaviour

Farmers Vietnam has many opportunities to restore and expand the social relations since the reforms were launched, including the restoration of traditional cultural stereotypes and the introduction of new patterns. Here, we will clarify the social stereotypes that affect the daily lives of farmers.

3.1 . "Spiritual" Pattern

There is a re-emergence of the spiritual patterns in the rural social life of our country after the Renovation. In a recent study published in 2012 entitled " *Negotiating to re- establish and innovate "Tradition": The process of restructuring festivals in a northern village*" by Luong Van Hy and Truong Huyen Chi, there is a strong and lively recovery of rituals in the rural northern community after the state eliminated the planned economic mechanism [4]. In fact, in many rural areas of Vietnam, we are witnessing a phenomenal movement to restore spiritual monuments like temples, pagodas, shrines. Besides, there is also a strong recovery of the ritual pattern related to religious and spiritual activities. It is worth to note that the everyday life of individuals and social groups, including farmers are currently being driven by various types of spiritual patterns. It is easy to observe, in the beginning every new year, local people, including farmers, carrying out ceremonies in wellknown and sacred pagodas and temples to rid off bad luck, and to seek blessings for themselves and their family members; or seeking consultations with fortune-tellers – especially when the compatibility of a couple for marriage is being considered.

The empirical results of the project "Globalization and Village Identity in Northern Vietnam" shows that 98 % of the people in the sample indicates that their family comes to their local village pagoda for worshipping at the beginning of every New Year. In-depth interviews

of this study also finds an increasing number of people, especially female farmers, taking time to go to other famous pagodas outside their village during the early months of a new year. In an in-depth interview, a 60-year-old woman specializing in husbandry and food trade said "on the first day of the lunar year, my daughter and I go pagodas to pray for good health, prosperity, and undergo ceremonies to get rid of bad lucks for ourselves and our family members. Every fifteenth day of the lunar month, I would buy ritual offerings to take to the pagodas. This year, I joined a group of other women in the village to Huong pagoda to pray for blessings for the family. I have done so for many years, so if I do not go there now I will not feel secured. Results of participant observation also suggests that the better the financial ability and standard of living, the greater the participation in pagodas.

Obviously, the spiritual activity has become a very important pattern in the daily lives of farmers today. They believe that good health, favorable business conditions are attributed to the blessings of the spirit world. This contributes to prove that the actions of the Red River Delta farmers during Renovation period are not only governed by the principle of the "moral economy" or "the logical choice" as proposed by Scott and Popkin. A further question that arises is why farmers increasingly rely more on patterns in the social context of Vietnam's rural renovation and integration. This should be answered in the next research.

3.2 . "Safety first" Pattern

Evidence of the involvement of members in a cooperative during the period of planned economy shows us that "safety first" pattern had existed in the cooperative. Despite being reluctant with the collective economic model, none of these members dared to leave the cooperative, so they only participated with minimum effort [5]. At this point we see Scott's comments are partially credible "farmers always pray for peace, and avoid risks."

In the context current Innovation, the behavior based on the principle of "safety first" continues to be evident in farmers, not only in the Red River Delta but also in many other rural areas of the country. A major problem happening in today's northern rural region is that, farmers are working in their fields, growing rice and vegetables on his plot but earning no profit. In fact, many agricultural

groups have pushed family members to leave the countryside to earn a living in bigger cities, but the most notable phenomenon is that most of them do not risk transfer land to others and to switch completely to any careers other than agriculture.

The results of the project "Globalization and Village Identity in Northern Vietnam" surveyed at a village of the Red River Delta shows that there is a tendency of avoiding the transfer of agricultural land between farmers despite their current agricultural activities are being inefficient at bringing any benefits to their households. The study also discovers that most households in the village are, for many years, cultivating without profit but still keep on working on their allocated plots with an attitude of "perfunctoriness" in order to keep their land. Some of the households in this village have kept their land uncultivated for many years. According to a report of Yen Thuong village by its leader – where the survey was conducted, the fallow currently accounts for about ten percent of the total agricultural area of the whole village. In an in-depth interview, a 52-year-old male farmer in this village said " *Farming business nowadays, if taking into account of all relevant costs such as land plowing and harrowing, seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation service charges, renting harvesters, will not produce any profit, but my family still has to keep cultivating, incase we fail our other businesses we are still able to return to the field* ". This is a very serious and universal problem that we often encounter in discussions with the villagers in the survey.

Interestingly, this information shows us a response pattern based on the principle of " safety first" was the dominant thought and action in the lives of farmers the Red River Delta during Innovation. This dilemma in agricultural production contributes further proof that farmers today are not purely economically rational as Popkin had said in the document above.

3.3. "Reciprocation" Pattern

The "reciprocation" pattern based an approach and principle of "reciprocation", has been a typical pattern in the social relations between Vietnam farmers in the past as well as the present. This characteristic has been considered in many cultural researches [6],[7],[8]. One common characteristic that researchers often refer to is, in the traditional rural society of Vietnam, farmers often offer mutual

assistance when other community members are hosting important events such as funeral, wedding, housewarming, provincial promotion, etc.

Since Innovation, social relations in rural communities has changed a lot. According to our observations, the presence of this kind of emotional exchange nature "reciprocation" is governing the behavior of ordinary farmers. Currently, during the major events of an individual or household, we see the behavioral principle of reciprocation is dominating enormously the social relations of farmers of the Red River delta. The results of the in-depth interview titled "Globalization and Village Identity in Northern Vietnam" also reflect this. A 62 -year-old male farmer, who participated in the in-depth interviews said, *"As we live here, we must follow our village rules. When one household is having a funeral, we must visit to offer condolences and money, so they will come to help us when we have problems. The value of the monetary offerings between the two households should be equivalent"*.

People's behavior as mentioned above is very common. Many other studies also show us these social exchange relationships exist in rural communities, not only in the Red River delta but in many other rural areas across the country. Although being an informal pattern with underlying convention, it is strictly followed by the social groups in rural communities. Here we see a process of interaction and equal exchange between the social relationships. This situation demonstrates that farmers Vietnam are completely irrational as previously reflected by Popkin.

3.4 . "Adventure" Pattern

Adventurous pattern (or in an other word, rational pattern) is strongly expressed in social relations in rural communities of Vietnam today. Since Innovation (1986) until now, we are witnessing many farming groups utilising their capabilities to foster the development of their wealth. In recent years, the mass media promotes many examples of farmers from every region of the country successfully develop their wealth through business planning and management. For example, the electronic newspaper vnexpress.net dated 15/03/2013 promoted Mr. Nguyen Xuan Khanh That (Chau Phu commune, Ba Vi district , Hanoi) for wealth enrichment through a dairy cattle: *"Born in poor family, Mr. Khanh was*

unable to receive education, struggling to survive by farming, and performing many other tasks. He took risks in applying for a loan to raise dairy cattle, which helped foster earnings for his family of about VND 30 millions a month . "

The survey results of the community in the Red River Delta "Globalization and Village Identity in Northern Vietnam" also shows that most households, besides farming, are engaged in trade and business in very diverse fields. It is worth noting that the scope of manufacturing and business activities of many households now goes beyond the borders of the village with the principle of "profit maximization". When asked about their trading activities, information from in-depth interviews proves these farmers conform not only to "sensationalism" or "perfunctorism", but always reasonably analyse. A 38 -year-old female farmer-who daily carries poultry to city markets - says *"in the market, every buyer wants lowest price, and seller highest price. To make a profit, one has to find quality supplies and know how much to bargain with each customer"*. This reflects the fact that in the context of the current market economy, farmers can integrate and have the ability to adapt. They always want to buy at a very low price and sell at a very high price to earn profit.

However, the ability for integration and adaptation of farmers in the market economy sometimes goes too far. When land becomes very valuable, many farming households have encroached on public land, forcing local authorities to intervene and resort to coercion. Information from the interviews with Yen Thuong village officials shows that, in the first six months of 2013, village official had mobilized police to resolve 7 cases of land encroachment. This type of measure is happening with people in many other places that national mass media have widely mentioned recently. Moreover, many online newspapers also published many stories related to short term profit maximization through business shenanigans. Many of them are about farmers growing vegetables and raising cattle who do not follow standard procedures to ensure hygienic and safe vegetable and meat products. This situation proves that the farmers in the period of Renovation do not act only on the principle of the "moral economy" or with the motto "safety first" as confirmed by Scott, but they are willing to invest, and take risks to earn profit.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Through what has been presented, comments which may include issues that need further discussion are as follows:

The general analysis above of some behavior patterns has shown that social actions of farmers in the Red River Delta during Renovation is not only limited by the principle of "moral economy" as Scott has affirmed, or "rational choice" according to Popkin's conclusion, nor the adherence to spiritual rituals assumed by Alister and Mus. What we can add is, in the present rural society exists many types of patterns and different social institutions. Farmers undertake numerous actions in their everyday life, where their every social action is referenced to a certain pattern or social institutions which they are expected to role play and demonstrate conformity with expectations of relevant social groups.

Analysis of the behaviour patterns and social actions of the farmers in the Red River delta during the Renovation also shows the traditional culture values and new culture values are entwined and co-dominate the thinking and action of these farmers not only in their daily activities, their spiritual and religious life, but also in their businesses etc. ... This proves that the debate about the nature and behavior of farmers in Vietnam between international scholars Alister, Mus, Scott, Popkin, and some Vietnamese scholars has not ended. This debate still needs to continue to correctly portrait Vietnamese farmers in the real life. This is as true as the sociologist Peter Berges had once written: " Things are not always like their appearance, and the task of social scientists is to regularly verify everything, rather than consider them as a matter of course" [9] .

It should also be said research topics on agriculture, rural areas and farmers in our country has been achieving many accomplishments, and are very encouraging. However, if considered as a whole, it is very easy to realize that the majority of the research is about the change in economic activity, as well as the advancement of science and technology, whereas the portrait, position, and charisma of farmers are still quite vague in the context of the market economy, industrialization, modernization, globalization and international integration. This is an issue that should be addressed in future sociological research, especially in the rural sociology, sociology of

religion, and sociology of culture. Finally, the data and analysis in this article about the pattern and behavior of farmers in the Red River Delta in the context of Renovation also suggests implications related to difficulties and challenges that lie ahead in the process of modernizing agriculture, and rural community development in Vietnam today. How farmers can overcome challenges, integrate and sustainably develop still poses a problem and needs to be clarified in the next studies.

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ỨNG XỬ XÃ HỘI CỦA NÔNG DÂN ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG HỒNG THỜI KỲ ĐỔI MỚI

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Tóm tắt

Đời sống nông dân Việt Nam có nhiều thay đổi về vật chất và tinh thần sau gần ba mươi năm thực hiện đường lối đổi mới kinh tế. Riêng nông dân đồng bằng sông Hồng trong Công cuộc Đổi mới. Hơn nữa, sự tương tác giữa các cá nhân, nhóm và cộng đồng dựa trên những khuôn mẫu xã hội này đã giúp người nông dân cải thiện đời sống hoặc kìm hãm họ trong quá trình phát triển ngày nay. Bài báo này bước đầu xác định và lý giải các mô hình xã hội, chỉ ra những rào cản đối với quá trình hiện đại hóa và phát triển nông thôn ở Việt Nam, từ đó đóng góp một số bằng chứng làm sáng tỏ những tranh luận chưa có hồi kết về bản chất của người nông dân Việt Nam đã đẩy lên cách đây gần nửa thế kỷ.
