

# Comprehensive Vietnamese Village Studies From Ten Years of Research in a Small Village



Both photos courtesy of the author

## Forum > Southeast Asia

A remarkable demographic characteristic of Vietnamese economic development has been the relatively modest migration from rural to urban areas. While the share of agriculture in Vietnam's GDP decreased from 38 per cent in 1985 to 23 per cent in 1998, 70 per cent of the population lives in villages and 67 per cent of the labour force remains employed in agriculture. The study of villages is therefore crucial to understanding contemporary Vietnam. The comprehensive study of villages requires synthesizing the research results of an interdisciplinary team of scholars spanning the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

By Yumio SAKURAI

The concept of comprehensive Southeast Asian village studies, in terms of understanding village society and culture as resultants of the interactions between the cultural, historical, and natural environments, was pioneered in Japan by Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies. In the early 1980s, Prof. Fukui Hayao of the Center mobilized experts from various fields to investigate the many factors behind village structure in a Thai hamlet, Don Daeng. Based on the enormous amount of data acquired, Fukui concluded that the most significant impetus behind village formation in Northeast Thailand was the migration of peasants in search of better ricefields, termed the *haa naa dii* migration.<sup>1</sup>

In Nguyen Xa village, Vietnam, Prof. Terry Rambo led a team engaged in similar research, which took a human ecology perspective, aiming to understand the interactions between human social systems and their ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> Though these works of sociology and ecological science resulted in greater understanding of Thai and Vietnamese village formation, they would have further benefited from longer research periods and greater historical perspective in understanding the complex relations between contemporary village structure and the historically rooted cultural values of village inhabitants.

The Bach Coc project builds on the fruits of this earlier research. Since 1993, a Japanese village research group and the National University of Vietnam have cooperated on the comprehensive research of Bach Coc, which consists of five hamlets of the Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative (HTX) in Nam Dinh Province, Vietnam. Until 2002, 176 specialists from 17 Japanese universities: historians, sociologists, archaeologists, anthropologists, economists, geographers, agronomists, ecologists, geologists, and experts in architecture, irrigation, and gender studies, participated in the Bach Coc project under the historians' leadership.

### The Bach Coc project

The Bach Coc project began on a largely experimental, trial and error basis without a clear and established theory or methodology. The project has yet to achieve a shared, comprehensive understanding of Bach Coc among team members, the explication of new theory and methodology for comprehensive village studies, and the publication of its final research results. Tentative results have been published

in 11 volumes of the discussion paper series *Thong Tin Bach Coc* (Bach Coc Information) between 1995 and 2001.

Research for the Bach Coc project took place in three stages. During the general survey stage beginning in 1993, teams surveyed the entire Red River Delta, and in subsequent years, other areas including the Mekong Delta for comparative purposes. This stage aimed to understand the geographic and historical position of Bach Coc within the Red River Delta. During the second phase of research between 1994 and 1998, teams conducted a detailed land survey, measuring the entire inhabited area of the Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative. The resulting maps familiarized researchers with villagers' use of space.<sup>3</sup> During the third phase, from 1996 until the present, teams undertook specific research: excavation of old settlements, collection and analysis of stone inscriptions, collection of oral histories from villagers, agronomic research on rice and vegetable cropping, sociological research on Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative activity, and so on. For sure, some of the preliminary conclusions reached during this third stage, resulted from the multi-disciplinary nature of this research.

Bach Coc is situated in a transitional belt between natural levees and sand ridges, shaping three types of land usage: rice farming, vegetable cropping, and human settlement. The first fishing peoples settled in Bach Coc in the third century, while a small inter-regional river port developed between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. After the port's decline, agricultural reclamation was begun by immigrants from the northern Red River Delta. Subsequently, Xa (commune) Bach Coc was established as an administrative unit in the early fifteenth century, fixing the proto-village residential area. As a result of population increase, small intra-village groups were formed in the seventeenth century, while village systems composed of meetings, officials, rites, and lineage groups were in place by the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The *cong dien* (communal land) system developed in the eighteenth century to level villagers' land holdings and to equalize their burden of taxation remains central in village culture and society. Bach Coc's post-1955 social revolution in terms of land reform, the system of labour exchange, and the early policies of the Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative, can be seen as an extension of the *cong dien* idea to all villagers. The project terms the *cong dien* tradition domestic socialism and views the agricultural cooperative as an intermediate system between domestic socialism and state collectivism. The cooperative's role is not limited to food production; it provides funds for basic infrastructure such as village roads,

small bridges, and health centres. Based on traditional local society, the Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative cannot solely be regarded as an economic organization.

Depending on topography, two kinds of agriculture are pursued: the growing of rice in the back swamps is controlled mainly by the cooperative, which provides seeds, chemical fertilizers, and water at fixed cost. In gardens and private ponds, shadow agriculture, which entails the raising of pigs and the growing of cash crops such as vegetables and fruits, is well managed by the private sector.<sup>5</sup> Household economies can be divided into two sectors: *kinh te de an* (economy for eating) and *kinh te lay tien* (economy for money). Based on the activities of the cooperative, the economy for eating (subsistence economy) relies on assistance from the cash semi-economy. The latter is composed of shadow agriculture and non-agricultural sectors including the private activities of migrant workers who support village food production and the modernization of villagers' lifestyles, through their family and lineage networks.<sup>6</sup>

Despite their independent research paths, most teams have arrived at a similar understanding of village socio-economic life and the role of the Coc Thanh Agricultural Cooperative. They emphasize two basic points, which result from the interaction between the natural environment and human activity and are likely to endure through periods of transition. First, the Cooperative, as the successor to traditional village organization, supports the *kinh te de an* sector that is based on the concept of domestic socialism. Second, private activity in the *kinh te lay tien* is possible on the base of the cooperative-supported *kinh te de an*. The two sectors can thus be said to form an interdependent dual economy. It deserves mention that the comprehensive study of Bach Coc is not completed and that our preliminary conclusions will yet be refined through successive research and discussion. Nonetheless, it is my belief that the above conclusion for one, could not have been reached without synthesizing research results from numerous disciplines. <

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Bach Coc village,  
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- 1 Fukui, Hayao, *Food and Population in a Northeast Thai Village*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (1993).
- 2 Le Trong, Cuc and A. Terry Rambo (eds), *Too Many People, Too Little Land: the Human Ecology of a Wet Rice-Growing Village in the RRD of Vietnam*, Honolulu: East West Center (1993), p. xix.
- 3 The result was published as Bach Coc Map in 1997. *Thong Tin Bach Coc*, vol.7, pp.143-173.
- 4 Nishimura, Masanari, 'Archeological Study of the settlement formation in the Red River Plain: a Case of Bach Coc and the surrounding', LP; Yao, Takao, 'The inner quarrels in the eighteenth century in Bach Coc', LP; Shimao, Minoru, 'Reconstruction of *dong ho* (Vietnamese Lineage) in Bach Coc village, Nam Dinh province from the nineteenth century to the beginning of twentieth century', LP
- 5 Abe, Kenichi, 'Shadow Agriculture, Non-Field Agricultural Activities in the Red River Delta', LP
- 6 Ogawa, Yuko, Oghino Ryo, 'Choice of Strategy - Labor force movement in a village after Doi Moi policy in the RRD', LP

### List of abbreviations

- LP: Paper presented in IIAS workshop, Vietnamese peasants' Activity, 2002
- RRD: Red River Delta