

Vietnamese Peasants

The concept of the IAS workshop 'Vietnamese Peasants' Activity: an Interaction Between Culture and Nature' was to present the results of the research on the village of Bach Coc, situated in Nam Dinh province in the Red River Delta south of the Vietnamese capital Hanoi, to an international audience of people interested in rural Vietnam. The village has been studied since 1992 by professor Sakurai and his collaborators, the most comprehensive long-term study of a single location yet conducted in Vietnam. The audience mainly consisted of researchers of rural Vietnamese life, who presented their research in other localities in rural Vietnam, from religious anthropology in the Mekong River delta to mangrove management in Thai Binh province, close to Haiphong in the north of the country.



Young woman peeling corn stalks in a village of Bac Ninh province.

By Markus Vorpahl

In the first session, Sakurai explained the scope and the extension of the research in Bach Coc: since ten years, more than 150 scholars and students had passed through this village, to study almost every aspect of village life. Historians, agronomists, economists, gender specialists, and anthropologists had done their respective research in general during sessions of two or three weeks in the summer. This makes it the most comprehensive and longest study of one settlement undertaken in Vietnam until now. The motive for researching one village so profoundly is, for the Bach Coc researchers, to understand its 'regionality', its specific characteristics as a single village, and its situation in the region. It is therefore not only the one village studied that is important, but also its implantation in the wider Vietnamese context. It is unique as the one Bach Coc, but it is also a Vietnamese village, sharing in the history of the country, taking part in its culture, economy, religion, and Vietnamese society in general. The results thus incite intense discussion, as most of them have a strong relevance for the understanding of the whole of Vietnamese – rural – society. The results range from archaeological evidence from the earliest settlements on these sites to contemporary architecture, from historical analysis of kinship organization to the role of gender in modern-day time allocation, from the role of the local cooperative to the

impact of urban enterprises on the village's economy. Unfortunately, the results of these research projects were, until this workshop, only available in the Japanese language, so the workshop allowed a wider dissemination of these results and their discussion in the presence of a broader audience.


The capacity of the village to continue its existence through all the different times and challenges – wars, colonialism, and collectivization – was attributed to its interior cohesion and its capacity to manage the interior affairs in a way to fulfil the interests of most of its inhabitants. According to Sakurai, a great part of the village's agricultural land, perhaps 40 per cent, were managed as *cong dien*, as land collectively owned by the village and rented out to roughly 300 households. This was part of a broader system of collective organization, which allowed for an equitable partaking of most of the households in economic and agricultural activities in the village. Sakurai coined the term 'domestic socialism' for this system of mutual economic assistance, which included all households except the very rich, who had no interest in sharing any of their resources, and the very poor, who had nothing to share. This resulted in a 'dual economy', according to Sakurai, in which parts of the population took part in the more protected space of the 'domestic socialism', outside of which existed another system, where the others lived in a more classic, 'capitalist' or 'feudal' system of exploitation between rich landholders and poor tenants.

The workshop started on the first day with an overview of Vietnamese village studies in general, and the position of the Bach Coc project. The history and contemporary situation of Vietnamese studies was presented by Vu Minh Giang, after Sakurai's presentation of the Bach Coc project. Sakurai and Giang, the latter of whom coordinates part of the project on the Vietnamese side, also spoke about the place of the Bach Coc project in this context as a large interdisciplinary project, enlarging the earlier more historical and anthropological research approaches. It continued with a description of the situation in Bach Coc, including its geography and history. This was followed by a more detailed view of some of the problems studied, like the role of the cooperative in the management of the agriculture, the situation of women, or the role of the different banks and their models of credit allocation in the village. To this was added a larger view on village affairs in Vietnam, for example by comparing the role of the cooperative in Bach Coc with that in other villages, or by presentation of


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studies done in other regions of the delta, mainly Bac Ninh, on similar problems of everyday management of village affairs. A broader view of villages in Vietnam was provided by several general studies on the role of migration and home, possible new ways of viewing the relation between rural and urban areas, or the situation of minorities.

Almost from the beginning of the workshop, the term 'domestic socialism', describing a key concept of Sakurai's interpretation of village life in Bach Coc, was criticized by several contributors. Terry Rambo remarked that in a standard interpretation of the term 'socialism', a collective – in most cases state ownership – of production means is necessary to qualify for this label, whereas according to Sakurai, there is a system of cooperation in the management of land owned by individual households. During the 'socialist' period of collective state management and ownership in agriculture, Sakurai explained there to have been a strong disengagement of the peasants, who were attached to the system of 'domestic socialism': the over-control and state involvement in that period was in contradiction with the village's own system of management of agricultural and economic affairs.

On the level of terminology, some discrepancy can be found between the nomination of 'socialist' for the period of state ownership and management, and the term 'domestic socialism', seen exactly in direct opposition to the former.

Questioning time was grouped together at the end of each panel, so that the more popular presentations or subjects regrettably encroached on the time of the more exclusive ones, and in general there were only ten minutes left for discussion of the whole panel.

The panel discussions were vivid, although in some cases language problems arose. As almost everyone in the audience was familiar with the Vietnamese language, in some cases it would have made sense to use it as the conference language instead of English. ◀

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Peasants bringing in paddy during the harvest in Bac Ninh province.

