

*Negotiating Uncertainty in Late-Socialist Vietnam: Households and livelihood options in the marketizing countryside**

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Abstract

This article makes a case for Vietnam as a distinctive example of late- and post-socialist marketization, a painful experience that has brought widespread immiseration to rural societies within and beyond Asia. Building on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in a northern Vietnamese village, I explore a hitherto under-researched aspect of Vietnam's massive social and economic transformation in the 30 years since the onset of market transition or Renovation (*Đổi mới*): the surprising ways in which rural households have negotiated both the risks and opportunities of the state's push to de-cooperativize and marketize village livelihoods. The state expects that a minority of rich farmers will rapidly move into large-scale, mechanized farming, while the majority will abandon small-scale subsistence farming to specialize in trade or participate in industrial waged employment. Surprisingly, all village households insist on being *đa ̣i năng*, that is, on retaining multiple livelihood options instead of following the official modernization scripts. Their refusal to follow state plans is not market-averse 'resistance', but something rarely documented in the literature on peasant life in marketizing contexts: a local sense of agency and taking personal responsibility for the security and long-term welfare of their families, in the face of highly unpredictable state policies.

Introduction

This article builds on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2012–2013 in a village community in the Red River Delta, northern Vietnam's lowland

* I wish to express my most sincere gratitude to Susan Bayly for her invaluable guidance and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. My thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of *Modern Asian Studies* for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

riverine rice-belt. It explores the ways in which rural life has experienced the transforming effects of Vietnam's 30-year process of de-cooperativization and market reform, widely known as Renovation (*Đổi mới*). Launched in 1986, Vietnam's version of marketization is widely regarded as much more successful than its equivalents in the former USSR and other post-socialist countries within and beyond Europe.¹ Although Vietnam remains a socialist party-state, the Vietnamese government has been far less coercive in dealing with rural economic practices than their Chinese counterparts in their efforts to promote growth and marketized rationalization.² However, while most studies of Vietnam's Renovation/marketization process have focused on policymaking³ or the struggles of Vietnamese citizens to 'moralize' their insecure new wealth,⁴ there has been relatively little work done on the actual livelihood choices and decision-making processes of Vietnamese rural households. Yet it is the household that has been vested with the responsibility to act as the key decision-making unit in the operation of marketization today.

It is therefore on the life of the rural household that I focus in this article. I deal in particular with what has hitherto been missing from most work on de-cooperativization and market transition within and beyond the northern Vietnam context: first, how rural household members have actively and energetically evaluated the complex risks and opportunities of their new circumstances. And, second, how adroit they have become at evaluating what state agencies say and do to foster modernity in the Vietnamese countryside when calculating how far to

¹ A. Fforde and S. de Vylder, *From Plan to Market: The Economic Transition in Vietnam*, Westview Press, Boulder and Oxford, 1996; M. Watts, 'Agrarian Thermidor: State, Decollectivization, and the Peasant Question in Vietnam', in *Privatizing the Land: Rural Political Economy in Post-Communist Societies*, I. Szelényi (ed.), Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 149–90; World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), *Vietnam: Delivering on its Promise*, Vietnam Development Information Center, Hanoi, 2002.

² P. Taylor, 'Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants: Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 2(2), 2007, pp. 3–56; K. MacLean, *The Government of Mistrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2013; B. Kerkvliet, 'Protests over Land in Vietnam: Rightful Resistance and More', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 9(3), 2014, pp. 19–54.

³ H. V. Luong and J. Unger, 'Wealth, Power, and Poverty in the Transition to Market Economies: The Process of Socio-Economic Differentiation in Rural China and Northern Vietnam', *The China Journal*, 40, 1998, pp. 61–93.

⁴ K. Jellema, 'Making Good on Debt: The Remoralisation of Wealth in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 6(3), 2005, pp. 231–48.

risk precious household resources in novel and potentially rewarding livelihood options.⁵

My study focuses on a village I call Xuan (Springtime), a nucleated settlement of 1,600 households, 120 kilometres from the capital Hanoi. Until the end of Vietnam's cooperative economy (1958–1986), it was a very poor site of unmechanized subsistence rice farming. However, Xuan is now widely known in the district as a showcase for having made a successful transition from cooperative production to individual household farming and for taking up many of the commercial livelihood opportunities that state authorities have sought to foster in the Vietnamese countryside since the onset of Renovation. These are, notably, home-based by-employments (sideline activities), retailing, and industrial wage labour. Xuan is now a comparatively prosperous community by the standards of northern rural Vietnam. Although a small proportion of households still live in single-storey, old-brick residences with tiled roofing and outdoor plumbing characteristic of the pre-Renovation period, these are rapidly being replaced by city-style, multi-storey new builds boasting numerous signs of the recent wealth generated under Renovation such as televisions, telephones, and motorbikes.

Yet while local village authorities are satisfied with Xuan households' active embrace of almost every market initiative that has become the hallmark of Vietnam's de-cooperativization, they are increasingly frustrated because most households today are still pursuing a strategy that villagers call *đa gi năng*, a local term that means 'keeping many livelihood strategies and never relying on a single enterprise'. In the pursuit of *đa gi năng*, most Xuan households have maintained a diverse portfolio of small-scale livelihoods and evaded the strategy that the state sees as central to Vietnam's modernizing agenda: that every household should either abandon small-scale farming and commit to waged

⁵ There has been some work done on household domestic life and livelihood choices in Vietnam since the onset of economic reform. Yet the focus has either been on intra-household relations, particularly the gendered configuration of work and care (see M. Barbiéri and D. Bélanger (eds), *Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004; M. T. N. Nguyen, 'Translocal Householding: Care and Migrant Livelihoods in a Waste-trading Community of Vietnam's Red River Delta', *Development and Change*, 45(6), 2014, pp. 1385–408) or on the family as an arena from which to explore topics of kinship and village politics (see S. Shibuya, *Living with Uncertainty: Social Change and the Vietnamese Family in the Rural Mekong Delta*, ISEAS, Singapore, 2015) rather than on how the household as a whole has negotiated state pressure to pursue livelihood options that today's officials consider to be rational and 'modern'.

employment in one of the locality's new factory sites, or become specialists by committing all their resources to a single large-scale enterprise so as to transform the countryside into a place of prospering commercial farmers alongside a residual population committed to commercial entrepreneurship within a host of new local enterprises.⁶

This article is concerned with the sense Xuan households make of the mismatch between their decisions and the state's priorities, and the logic they apply to the continual decisions that must be made about which options to pursue and which to avoid, in the face of the pressure. This takes place against a backdrop of the pressure placed on them to handle marketization in ways that the state defines as rational and modern. I seek to highlight the idea of *đà gi nǎng* as a distinctive way of managing livelihood choices that has been largely absent from the literature on peasant life in Asian marketizing contexts and beyond. Being *đà gi nǎng* involves careful judgement of opportunities and risks, and a local sense of agency and personal responsibility for achieving sustainable gains and security for the family, in the face of highly unpredictable state policies.

Land use and agricultural production

The key point of conflict between official modernization scripts and villagers' *đà gi nǎng* strategy is the use of arable land for agricultural production after the de-cooperativization of the village's arable fields in 1993. At that time, shortly after the initial announcement of the new Renovation policy for Vietnam, the village's People's Committee cadres divided the community's 300 hectares of arable land, hitherto under the cooperative's centralized authority, into tiny individual plots. The number of plots allocated to each household was decided on the number of members it had. Since the officials aimed to equalize every household's economic assets, they gave each of them an equal mix of

⁶ Although land consolidation and commercialization of farming only became official policy in the early 2000s, this idea had been hinted at since the start of Renovation and was made increasingly explicit throughout the 1990s. For the party-state's modernizing agenda from the onset of Renovation, see Vietnam Communist Party, *Final Resolution of the Communist Party's National Congress*, Number VI (1986); Number VII (1991); Number VIII (1996), and Number IX (2001), National Politics, Hanoi. For the modernization scripts for agriculture and the countryside specifically, see Vietnam Communist Party, *Resolution on Speeding up the Industrialisation and Modernisation of Agriculture and the Countryside 2001–2010*, National Politics, Hanoi, 2002.

good, moderate, and poor-quality plots, of extremely small size and scattered throughout the arable areas. According to the 1993 Land Laws, the villagers were granted a 20-year title over the new holdings, which they could sell, transfer, give to others, or cultivate at will.⁷

Similar to adherents of de-collectivization in Eastern Europe⁸ and land titling in China,⁹ the Vietnamese party-state and its international advisers expected that de-cooperativization would rapidly engender a ‘natural transition’ from subsistence rice cultivation to large-scale commercial farming.¹⁰ Underlying this notion of ‘natural transition’ are two assumptions that have informed neo-liberal ‘shock-therapies’ in post-socialist Eastern Europe. One was that rural households would regard marketization as a positive force that would liberate them from the vagaries of state policies to pursue new opportunities in large-scale market-based production.¹¹

The other assumption is a version of Popkin’s ‘rational peasant’ thesis that today’s party-state officials have paradoxically embraced.¹² This assumes that the opening of market life to rural producers would automatically result in keen enthusiasts for ‘rational’ practice. It was

⁷ Although the state allocated land to rural households, officially villagers only have land use rights (*quyền sử dụng*), not ownership rights (*quyền sở hữu*). According to the 1993 Land Laws, revised in 2003, all land belongs to ‘the entire people’ and is managed by the state, which retains absolute power to decide how it should be used and allocated. On the nature of land use rights, see B. Kerkvliet, ‘Agricultural Land in Vietnam: Markets Tempered by Family, Community and Socialist Practices’, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 6(3), 2006, pp. 285–305; N. V. Sừu, ‘Contending Views and Conflicts over Land in Vietnam’s Red River Delta’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 38(2), 2007, pp. 309–34.

⁸ K. Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare: Property and Value in Postsocialist Transylvania. Culture and Society after Socialism*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2003.

⁹ B. Kerkvliet and M. Selden, ‘Agrarian Transformation in China and Vietnam’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30, 1998, pp. 139–61.

¹⁰ As economists Ravallion and van de Walle argue, the Vietnamese government has been more eager to promote large-scale capitalized farming than its Chinese counterpart. This has made it easier for Vietnamese households either to accumulate land or to sell it and relocate to other sectors. By contrast, throughout the 1980s and 1990s land in China was legally owned by collectives and hence it was much harder to transfer. See M. Ravallion and D. van de Walle, *Land in Transition: Reform and Poverty in Rural Vietnam*, Palgrave Macmillan and the World Bank, Washington, DC, 2008; K. Deininger and S. Jin, ‘Land Sales and Rental Markets in Transition: Evidence from Rural Vietnam’, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper no. 3013, 2003.

¹¹ D. Lipton and J. Sachs, ‘Privatization in Eastern Europe: The Case of Poland’, *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, 2, 1990, pp. 293–341.

¹² S. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant—The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979.

expected that households' tiny holdings would be rapidly consolidated into big fields and farmed commercially by the most successful farmers. As for the majority of less successful cultivators, it was assumed that they would willingly relinquish petty subsistence cultivation to specialize in animal husbandry, market trading, or wage labour.

The memory of de-cooperativization is very powerful among Xuan villagers. The reallocation day in 1993 is unanimously recalled as a landmark occasion that brought every household unprecedented joy, without the battles that arose in comparable contexts in post-socialist Eastern Europe.¹³ 'It took only two months to distribute the land to all households, with no disputes,' said Mrs Han and her husband Mr Nham, with whom I lived during my fieldwork. Xuan villagers regard Mrs Han's household as one of the most successful village farmers in the early years of marketization. In 1993, Mrs Han's household, including the couple and their two children, received seven tiny plots of arable land. For all Xuan villagers, this was a new resource that brought them wholly different living standards. Mrs Han and her husband recalled that within two years, Xuan had achieved a threefold increase in grain output compared to the year before de-cooperativization and exceeded by 50 per cent the highest output ever achieved in the cooperative period. Mrs Han proudly showed me their black-and-white Samsung TV set bought in 1996 with the surplus gained after several bumper crops. One of the first in the village, the TV was indeed a luxury item scarcely affordable at the time, even for middle-income urban households.

Although all village households regard the reallocation of rice fields as a transforming experience that brought them unprecedented gains, by the time of my fieldwork, the village was no longer a predominantly rice-growing locality. Instead, there was much more diversified production and trading, with rice cultivation reduced to a minimal proportion of household livelihoods. While most households still cultivate their arable holdings, three-quarters now also have a second income from home-based by-employments. This is another of the key early developments in the state's initial Renovation strategy: to encourage rural households to embark on home-based production activities.¹⁴ The most common by-employments that Xuan households still pursue today are

¹³ C. Hann, 'From Production to Property: Decollectivization and the Family-Land Relationship in Contemporary Hungary', *Man*, 28(2), 1993, pp. 299–320.

¹⁴ B. Kerkvliet and D. Porter (eds), *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, Westview, Boulder, 1995.

rearing pigs and chickens, and making dried rice-noodles (*bún*) for sale to food stalls in neighbouring villages. Two-thirds of households today have a third income from small-scale retailing of manufactured consumer goods sourced from outside the village, ranging from Vietnamese foodstuffs to Chinese plastic utensils. And in 2007, the district authorities appropriated one-fifth of the village's paddy fields and built an industrial park.¹⁵ It currently employs 400 young Xuan villagers, each of whom earns a monthly wage at least four times greater than an average household earns from cultivating their holdings.

Consider Mrs Han's household. In 1997, when they were among Xuan's most successful farmers, they decided to spend their entire savings from previous crops to embark on a new venture: commercial pig breeding. At the time of my fieldwork, Mrs Han's household was among the largest livestock breeders in Xuan. They had a flock of 150 chickens and ten pigs housed in a rambling array of bamboo cages and plastic netting enclosures in the garden plot adjoining their house. They still had their rice fields, but their animal rearing operations generated a regular income four times that of paddy farming. In 2003, Mrs Han opened a retail stall in the village market, selling manufactured foodstuffs procured from wholesalers outside the village. The stall is now one of the most popular in the marketplace, earning the Han household an income six times that of their paddy farming. With the incomes from animal

¹⁵ All households with land included in the appropriation scheme received compensation set by the district government. Initially no households whose holdings were appropriated were hostile to the scheme, and everyone recalled that they happily took the compensation and released their holdings to the officials. However, three years later, when the construction of the industrial park was nearly completed, virtually every household whose holdings were appropriated in 2007 launched a much-publicized agitation to pressure the district authorities into increasing the compensation. Villagers said that although they considered the original compensation generous for their holdings, they later learned that villagers in land appropriation projects elsewhere in Vietnam had received even larger sums and therefore they protested to claim justice. The protest came to an end when the district government decided to give villagers additional compensation. Every household who had land appropriated was granted title to a piece of unused state-owned land, equal to five per cent of the appropriated holdings, on a site next to the industrial park. The villagers were told that they could use the land to open retail stalls to sell goods to workers in the industrial park to replace the income they had lost from cultivating rice on the appropriated holdings. For more details of the protest, see L. M. Chau, "Extremely Rightful" Resistance: Land Appropriation and Rural Agitation in Contemporary Vietnam', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, doi:10.1080/00472336.2018.1517896.

rearing and retailing, they are now one of the most well-off households in Xuan.¹⁶

Despite Xuan households' successful transition from cooperative production to farming as individual households in the early marketization period, village officials have become frustrated. Thirty years after de-cooperativization, all households still use their tiny holdings mostly to meet their subsistence needs. No-one has committed exclusively to what the officials consider to be large-scale commercial farming, that is, to buy land of at least three hectares or 15 times the local median size and to farm it using machinery. This is a widespread phenomenon in today's Vietnam, as evidenced in numerous debates among policymakers, academics, and media commentators about peasant families' baffling tendency to cling to tiny, unremunerative arable plots instead of following the state's script of making a rational move into various forms of high-return agricultural specialization.¹⁷

This was the key concern of Mr Hung, chairman of the village's People's Committee and the highest-ranking local official. In our many visits to the paddy fields, Mr Hung angrily showed me that the village's entire arable area was still composed of tiny scattered plots. There had been no commercial transfer of farmlands between households. In fact, no household today has a single large-scale field. Instead, every household still grows rice on as many as five or even ten tiny plots scattered all over the village's arable acreage. The largest is the size of half a football pitch; others are smaller than a volleyball court.

These small, scattered household holdings make it impossible to deploy the large-scale mechanized equipment that the local officials regard as the desirable modern alternative to the villagers' existing modes of labour-intensive, low-productivity cultivation. 'You see, almost everyone

¹⁶ During my fieldwork, I observed the daily routines of the villagers at their homes and workplaces, and helped them with their economic practices: weeding the paddy fields, feeding the chickens, making rice-noodles, managing the sales of Mrs Han's retailing stall in the village market, and visiting the factories in the industrial park. I also accompanied villagers on their translocal business trips to neighbouring villages, the district centre, and even Hanoi to obtain inputs and sell products. I took particular pleasure in the friendly but informative discussions I had in the villagers' homes, in various village dining and drinking outlets, and during numerous ceremonial events in the village: weddings, funerals, death anniversaries, house-building celebrations, and rituals at the village pagoda and other temples of folk religion.

¹⁷ 'Government set to relax farmland ceiling', in *Vietnam News*, 18 March 2017, <http://vietnamnews.vn/society/373093/govt-set-to-relax-farmland-ceiling.html#8s1ocQAfZeKGsx3X.97>, [accessed 18 March 2019].

still use backward methods. They transplant paddy seedlings by hand, harvest with sickles, and use oxen to pull the plough, all because their plots were too small to deploy tractors or combine-harvesters,' said Hung, using the term '*lạc hậu*', meaning 'backward', a strongly pejorative term in both past and contemporary socialist usage. While the system of fragmented holdings proved to be an effective tool to ensure an exactly equitable share-out so that no household would be unfairly advantaged over others at the time of de-cooperativization, village authorities now think it has created a highly inefficient system of unproductive petty subsistence farming badly in need of rationalization. What makes officials particularly frustrated is that they cannot compel villagers to sell or buy land to meet today's standards of modernity, because marketization is supposed to be a matter of encouraging villagers to make rational land use decisions, not forcing them to comply with state plans—as in the cooperativized economy.¹⁸

Like other village officials, Mr Hung clearly thought that the villagers' reluctance to embark on large-scale mechanized farming was because they still had a risk-averse, 'backward peasant' mindset, thus lacking the capacity to think like the 'rational' beings the state expected. He used two examples to make his point about villagers' failure to follow the state's plans to achieve modernity for the countryside. First, the most successful farmers in the early Renovation period, including Mrs Han's household, have all refused to move into large-scale commercial farming. While all villagers consider Mrs Han's household's success to be the result of their active approach to diversifying income sources, what the village officials consider a rational, enterprise-minded choice for households like Mrs Han's is totally different. They would prefer the villagers to specialize in large-scale cultivation on consolidated big-field holdings or instead in another remunerative enterprises like stock rearing or retail marketing and for either of these to be the only focus for their investment and labour—an all-eggs-in-one-basket strategy for household economic life. Mrs Han recalled that from the late 1990s onwards and continuing to the present day, village officials had repeatedly urged them to purchase land from less successful village cultivators to create large consolidated holdings. Yet, Mrs Han said, they had never considered that a feasible option. Instead, whenever they had money to spend, their first priority had always been to follow the *đa gi nãng* portfolio strategy and seek out

¹⁸ T. Do and L. Iyer, 'Land Titling and Rural Transition in Vietnam', *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 56(3), 2008, pp. 531–79.

new livelihood options to diversify their sources of income. This is still their thinking today, and one that is widely shared among Xuan households.

Mr Hung's second example of villagers' 'backward peasant' thinking is the decision of the majority of the less successful farming households to retain their unremunerative holdings instead of selling them to the more successful farmers. Take Mrs Nhai's household, which is now considered to be among the 30 per cent most well-off in Xuan. The source of their prosperity has been non-farm livelihood strategies rather than paddy farming. Mrs Nhai is one of the village's many producers of home-made rice noodles, which earns her a steady income. Her husband, Mr Long, earns the same amount from working as a bricklayer and their elder son is now one of the most well-paid workers in the industrial park. Unlike Mrs Han's household, since the onset of Renovation, Mrs Nhai's household has never managed to derive from their paddy holdings more than the rice they need for their own consumption. At the time of my fieldwork, paddy farming contributed a mere ten per cent of the household's budget. Yet, like most other households, although they all have much larger regular earnings, they still retain their unremunerative land, rather than selling it to the more successful farmers like Mrs Han, while specializing in noodle-making or bricklaying. For officials like Mr Hung, households that retain their paddy plots when it is clearly unprofitable for them to do so have an irrational, sentimental attachment to their tiny holdings, which impedes the consolidation of land that is needed for a long-delayed breakthrough into real commercial farming.

In the course of my fieldwork, I became aware of another pressing concern among the local officials. As shown below, about 100 out of the locality's 1,600 households, including Mrs Nhai's, found their land too unprofitable to work. They had therefore chosen not to farm their holdings themselves, but instead to rent them out to richer Xuan households, whom they called '*ngưòi cày hộ*', loosely translated as 'renters'. Such leases are verbal agreements, made on a temporary basis, for a year or even a single crop. The households with land allowed the renter to cultivate the holdings in exchange for a small amount of paddy paid at the end of the harvest. Unlike households like Mrs Han's, the renters are a new class of richer farmers, who consider that there is money to be made from renting land from less successful farmers and investing in costly machinery to cultivate it.

An example is Mr Phuong's household. They started renting land from other villagers four years previously, first from some elderly villagers without children who thus lacked the means to tend their own fields. Soon, other villagers like Mrs Nhai, who no longer wanted the burden of

farming, also asked Mr Phuong to take on their land, knowing that he offered the highest dividend of all renters: 15 per cent of the total output. To manage the rented holdings, Mr Phuong purchased a combine-harvester two years before my fieldwork. Yet while village officials expect Mr Phuong's household to utilize its privileged access to capital and connections to buy land cheaply from households struggling to cultivate their holdings so as to become large-scale farmers, like all other renters, they had persistently stuck to rental arrangements instead of seeking to buy land.

The case of Xuan calls into question three influential strands of scholarship on rural experiences of post- and late-socialist marketization within and beyond Asia. Xuan households' keen support of the land allocation policy and enthusiastic embrace of new commercial livelihoods since the onset of Renovation are very much in contrast to what anthropologists have documented in other agrarian contexts. Generally, marketization in land use and agriculture is widely experienced as a negative change for rural households. The consequences range from a decline in agricultural input and farmers' income in some parts of post-collectivized China, to widespread farmers' suicides in India, to pervasive rural attempts to cling on to collective modes of production instead of moving into individual household farming in post-socialist Eastern Europe.¹⁹

At the same time, the villagers' pursuit of the *da gi nǎng* 'portfolio' strategy and reluctance to specialize exclusively in large-scale, capital-intensive farming also challenge the widely shared model of 'natural transition' as described by Deininger and Jin.²⁰ This model holds that every rural household would regard marketization as a mostly positive change as it provides them with a safe environment within which to treat land as an asset to be used in economically rational terms, either selling unremunerative holdings to richer farmers, relocating to other sectors, or purchasing big holdings to specialize in large-scale mechanized cultivation.

¹⁹ For China, see Luong and Unger, 'Wealth, Power, and Poverty', p. 68; J. Zhang, *Marketization and Democracy in China*, Routledge, London, 2008. For India, see K. Walker, 'Neoliberalism on the Ground in Rural India: Predatory Growth, Agrarian Crisis, Internal Colonization, and the Intensification of Class Struggle', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35(4), pp. 557–620; B. Mohanty, 'We are Like the Living Dead: Farmer Suicides in Maharashtra, Western India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 32(2), 2005, pp. 243–76. For post-socialist Eastern Europe, see M. Burawoy and K. Verdery (eds), *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Rowman and Littlefield, New York, 1999; F. Pine, 'Retreat to the Household? Gendered Domains in Postsocialist Poland', in *Postsocialism: Ideas, Ideologies and Local Practices in Eurasia*, C. Hann (ed.), Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 95–113; Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare*.

²⁰ Deininger and Jin, 'Land Sales and Rental Markets'.

The case of Xuan cannot be explained even in light of the sophisticated model of agrarian transition that Akram-Lodhi documents in southern Vietnam today.²¹ Building on Terence Byres' theory of 'capitalism from below', Akram-Lodhi shows that marketization will indeed lead to large-scale farming, not through a 'natural transition' of the kind expected by Deininger and Jin, but instead through differentiation and dispossession.²² Akram-Lodhi shows that while the majority of small cultivators have been marginalized by the effects of marketization, a minority of rich and well-connected farmers have mustered the confidence to make rational decisions about land use by buying land at a cheap price from poorer households to become large-scale farmers.²³ However, even Xuan's richest farming households still insist on pursuing *đà gi nấng*, instead of committing the whole of their household's resources to a single expanding farming enterprise.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: I first explore Xuan households' experiences of de-cooperativization in the early Renovation period. Given the pervasiveness of rural households' negative experiences of marketization in Asia and beyond, I will examine what is distinctive about Vietnam's market policies on land use and agricultural

²¹ A. Akram-Lodhi, 'Vietnam's Agriculture: Processes of Rich Peasant Accumulation and Mechanisms of Social Differentiation', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 5(1), 2005, pp. 73–116.

²² T. J. Byres, *Capitalism from Above and Capitalism from Below. An Essay in Comparative Political Economy*, Macmillan, London, 1996; T. J. Byres, 'Neo-Classical Neo-Populism 25 Years on; Déjà Vu and Déjà Passé. Towards a Critique', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 4(1 and 2), 2004, Special Issue on Redistributive Land Reform Today, pp. 17–44. Although Byres has never discussed the case of Vietnam in detail, he does mention post-collectivized Vietnam in his critique of Griffin, Khan and Ickowitz's works, notably K. Griffin, A. Khan and A. Ickowitz, 'Poverty and Distribution of Land', *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 2(3), 2002, pp. 279–330. Griffin et al. put Vietnam in the same category as Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, and China as countries that have successfully transformed their agrarian structure into a system of individual peasant farming with highly egalitarian access to land. Yet Byres challenges this view, arguing that the model of egalitarian, redistributive land reform that Griffin et al. advocate might 'lay the basis for capitalism from below; might create structures within which processes of differentiation flourished and a class of capitalist farmers emerged': Byres, 'Neo-Classical Neo-Populism', pp. 30–41.

²³ The issue of rising inequality and differentiation among rural farming households in today's Vietnam has also been highlighted by Luong and Unger, 'Wealth, Power, and Poverty'; P. Taylor (ed.), *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2004. For a typology of diverse pathways of agrarian transition to rural capitalism, see D. Hall, P. Hirsch and T. M. Li, *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia*, NUS Press and University of Hawai'i Press, Singapore and Manoa, 2011.

production promulgated in the early 1990s, particularly what it is that Xuan households regard as beneficial about the new policies and which has informed their positive responses to de-cooperativization and their successful transition to farming as individual households.

I will then examine what has changed in villagers' perceptions of state policies for paddy farming and their priorities in the use of arable land today, compared to the early Renovation period. My aim is to understand why there seems to be a contradiction between villagers' initial keen support of the land allocation policy and their subsequent reluctance to move into large-scale commercialized farming as expected by the state. Adherents of the 'natural transition' and 'capitalism from below' approaches both suggest that a transition will indeed occur. I therefore compare what Xuan households' experiences and priorities are in relation to those of the 'rational peasants' described by Deininger and Jin, and the 'rich farmers' documented by Akram-Lodhi in southern Vietnam.

As I show below, there is, surprisingly, no inconsistency between Xuan households' active support of de-cooperativization in the early Renovation period and their enduring refusal until today to become large-scale farmers thus behaving in a way that the party-state considers rational. Instead, Xuan villagers, even the richest and most well-connected farmers, have consistently followed a principle that is central to their *da gi nǎng* strategy, one that they consider to be a matter of morality and ethical obligation. Their thinking is strongly focused on an ethos of familial care, meaning that such decisions must always be considered in light of the needs and well-being of the family. Far from reflecting what was once dismissively characterized as the amoral familism of the rustic backward-looking peasant household,²⁴ in Xuan the vision of responsible householders making decisions so as to elevate the family's living standards while being ever-vigilant about its security is the epitome of moral life and thought. It is therefore inconceivable for the Vietnamese family to be thought of as an arena of bad or deficient morality.²⁵

The revival of the paddy fields

Xuan households cite two reasons for their keen support of the policies of de-cooperativization and land allocation, in contrast to Eastern European

²⁴ E. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, The Free Press, Illinois, 1958.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

villagers who strongly opposed de-collectivization policies.²⁶ First, unlike the latter, for whom de-collectivization meant a quest to regain lost family lands that had been collectivized,²⁷ Xuan villagers said they lacked any interest in using the land distribution policy as a means of regaining lost family holdings, which were collectivized in 1958.

Consider Mrs Han. Her mother came from a landless sharecropping household typical of Xuan's population under French colonial rule (1884–1945). As those households had little to no land, they had to rely on sharecropping land rental arrangements made with a few well-off local landlords (*địa chủ*). In the 1956 land reform, launched shortly after the communist revolutionaries defeated the French and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the landlords were denounced and their lands were shared out to all poor households on a 'land-to-the-tiller' basis. However, these new households' holdings were collectivized just two years later, when the DRV government established agricultural cooperatives across northern Vietnam.²⁸

Although Mrs Han could still pinpoint the location of the holdings her family received in 1956, neither she nor other family members expressed any sentimental or instrumental attachment to those fields. She said she had no wish to regain those specific plots when Renovation began, nor did other members of her natal family. This was a widely shared attitude. As the revolution's household-based, 'land-to-the-tiller' provisions lasted for only two years, such holdings were subsequently taken back and pooled under the authority of the village-based cooperative between 1959 and 1993. Thus the holdings never came to be thought of as 'ours', a lost asset to be regained by village families.

Even descendants of landlord families said they had little motivation to reclaim their pre-revolutionary family holdings. Consider Mrs Han's husband, Mr Nham. His father was one of Xuan's landlords before the revolution. In the land reform, his father was subjected to a full-scale

²⁶ Burawoy and Verdery (eds), *Uncertain Transition*.

²⁷ Hann, 'From Production to Property'.

²⁸ Vietnam did not have collective farms of the kind instituted under socialism in China and the former Soviet Union. Rural cooperatives in Vietnam were much smaller in terms of population and the size of arable holdings under the centralized authority of cooperatives: see Kerkvliet and Selden, 'Agrarian Transformation in China and Vietnam'. Another key difference was that under Vietnam's cooperativized economy, there was more space for households' private economic activities than that in collective farms in the former Soviet Union and China: see Luong and Unger, 'Wealth, Power, and Poverty'.

revolutionary denunciation session and ‘delegitimation’ in the form of many systematized humiliations, together with the confiscation of his entire arable holdings.²⁹ When farmland was distributed in 1993, all of Mr Nham’s family members who had worked the family holdings had either died, like his parents, or fled the village, like his older siblings, whom his parents had asked a relative to take to the South to avoid the desperate family conditions after the land reform.

Mr Nham was therefore the family’s only surviving member still residing in Xuan. As he was only three when the land reform occurred in 1956, he retained little memory of, let alone attachment to, the arable holdings taken. ‘What matters to me is not my father’s [arable] holdings that were confiscated in the land reform. I did not even know where they were, as I was too small when they were taken. What I must keep at all costs is this piece of residential land. This was where our father’s house stood even before the revolution, where my parents had lived until their death, and where I was born and have lived since my birth,’ Mr Nham said as he showed me around his house plot, which he inherited from his father. Typical of descendants of landlords in Xuan, Mr Nham made a clear distinction between the house plot and the arable holdings. In the 1956 land reform, communist cadres confiscated the arable holdings, but the house plots remained in individual families. It is these that villagers consider cherished ancestral land and a long-held family possession, not the cultivated acreage that came under collective ownership.³⁰

However, the villagers’ main reason for supporting the de-cooperativization policy is their unanimous realization that today’s economic circumstances are much better than those that existed before Renovation. Everyone benefits from having land, growing crops at will, and being able to control its sale. This is the result of the significant

²⁹ Mr Nham’s father was initially sentenced to death as a class enemy. However, when the Party launched the 1956 Rectification Campaign, he was classified as a ‘resistance landlord’ (*địa chủ kháng chiến*), the most acceptable category of landlords, referring to those who supported the revolution and provided shelter to guerrillas in the 1945–1954 anti-French war. The holdings and assets taken from him, however, were never returned. On the different classifications of landlords in the 1950s land reform in northern Vietnam, see S. Malarney, *Culture, Ritual, and Revolution in Vietnam*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu, 2002, p. 36.

³⁰ In the land redistribution scheme in 1993, having a ‘bad-class’ family background was ignored and no longer criminalized by the state, thus the entire village was included in the scheme, regardless of their family history.

retreat by the state and village officials from being an authority that directly managed economic life in general and controlled land use in particular to a supportive facilitator of individual households' initiatives.

One summer morning, I accompanied Mr Nham and Mrs Han to the fields where they were about to transplant new paddy plants. Like all other households working on their holdings that day, paddy has been almost the only crop Mrs Han's household grows on their holdings in two major crops harvested in June/July and October/November. What has changed from before Renovation is that today growing paddy is their own choice; the villagers do not have to follow officials' orders, as happened in the cooperative system. Today they can grow any crop they choose to. They occasionally replace paddy with sweet potatoes or seasonal vegetables for the winter crop when they foresee that the weather that year is not suitable for paddy growing. Before Renovation, however, cooperative officials did not allow this flexibility, as they considered this to be unplanned and unscientific.

Today every household decides how much labour to allocate to the cultivation of their holdings at different phases of the production process. Before Renovation, this was left to the cooperative officials, who normally assigned a fixed number of cooperative members to tend a field throughout the different phases of a crop, which required very different levels of labour. The consequence was that they wasted people's time by mobilizing ten cooperative members to weed a field on a daily basis, even though a single person could handle this task. The same group of ten also had to tend the field during the most labour-intensive phases—the transplanting and harvesting periods—when actually 20 people were required to manage those tasks.

All villagers say that since the management of production processes was transferred back to individual households, the allocation of labour has become much more flexible and efficient. During the labour-intensive transplanting and harvesting periods, all households will mobilize all their members. This means seeking help not only from adult kin members living in the village or neighbours on a labour-exchange basis, but also teenage children after school. Many village children helping their parents to cultivate the holdings were still wearing school uniform. During these short bursts, a typical working day lasts from morning to evening, sometimes even into the night. Apart from these periods of intense activity, a typical working day in Mrs Han's household involves only a one-hour visit to the holdings by either Mr Nham or Mrs Han to do the weeding or apply fertilizers and pesticides.

While allowing households to cultivate their holdings at will, the local authorities have continued to subsidize rural households in key factors of production, instead of completely withdrawing state support and leaving small cultivators vulnerable to the vagaries of private markets as has happened in post-socialist Eastern Europe³¹ and some parts of rural India in the age of neo-liberalism.³² Although a key feature of Renovation was the introduction of a commercial market for essential inputs like fertilizers and seeds, these items are heavily subsidized and widely available at comparatively low prices. This is a substantial change compared to the pre-Renovation period. Vietnam's cooperativized system was intended to be similar to an Indian-style Green Revolution-type policy.³³ However, Xuan villagers recalled that the cooperative did not introduce a 'scientific' intensive farming system and modernized production methods and Green Revolution novelties like high-yield varieties were generally not deployed.

I learned this during regular visits to the village cooperative's new office with Mrs Nhai. Since the onset of Renovation there is still officially a cooperative in every village. However, it is no longer the all-powerful regulator of local economic life. Instead, the cooperative in Xuan now functions as an agent acting on villagers' behalf, its officials liaising with supra-local, wholesale state-owned firms as and when the villagers tell them they wish to place orders for seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. Before Renovation, the cooperative was independent of the People's Committee and was run by a board of managers, led by a director (*chủ nhiệm*) whom villagers regarded as even more powerful than the village chairman. Today the cooperative is only a small organization that falls under the supervision of the People's Committee office, and Mr Hung, its chairman, appoints a single, low-level committee officer to manage the cooperative's day-to-day matters. The cooperative's new office is located in a small, single-floor stall near the village market, built to replace the large one previously located near the paddy fields.

Like most other villagers, since Renovation Mrs Nhai has been a frequent visitor to the cooperative office to obtain key inputs. On one particular day she wanted some sacks of chemical fertilizers to apply on

³¹ C. Hann et al., *The Postsocialist Agrarian Question*, Halle Studies in the Anthropology of Eurasia, Lit Verlag, Münster, 2002.

³² U. Patnaik, 'New Data on the Arrested Development of Capitalism in Indian Agriculture', *Social Scientist*, 35(7-8), 2007, pp. 4-23.

³³ A. Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1998.

the growing fields. When we arrived, the forecourt was crowded with villagers waiting to buy the products being unloaded from a delivery truck of a state-owned fertilizer-producing company. Mrs Nhai told me that buying through the cooperative meant that prices are discounted by ten to 15 per cent, compared to buying directly from suppliers on open markets. 'We are lucky to have you to help us,' Mrs Nhai told the cooperative manager, using the term '*giúp*' (help). She meant villagers considered the manager to be somebody they liked and to whom they felt grateful, unlike the all-powerful and authoritarian cooperative directors they hated and feared before Renovation. 'They always gave us orders and yelled at us,' said Mrs Nhai.³⁴

Xuan households considered the most welcome change to be the abolition of the mandatory grain procurement system at the onset of market reform. This is in contrast to China, where the state maintained its monopoly in the procurement and sale of the most important agricultural products and inputs, which substantially reduces Chinese households' incentives to increase output.³⁵ One day in the autumn harvest, I met Mrs Nhai and her husband, Mr Long. Like many other villagers hard at work that morning, they were pushing home a load-carrier bike piled with freshly harvested paddy. The destination of the paddy after harvest is a significant change, Mrs Nhai told me. Before Renovation, they had to take the paddy straight to the cooperative storehouse, where the managers calculated the amount to be taken for the grain quota to be claimed by the state, before dividing the rest among households to take home. Now the process is reversed. Mrs Nhai showed me a vacant plot where the cooperative storehouse had previously been situated, until it was demolished when the old cooperative was abolished. Now every household will carry their harvest home first, before deciding how to use it.

³⁴ The new role of the cooperative as a marketizing agent for rural farming households is widely seen across Vietnam under Renovation: see Kerkvliet and Selden, 'Agrarian Transformation in China and Vietnam', p. 54. This is a good example to show that Renovation in Vietnam is very different from the 'structural adjustment' that has taken place in post-socialist Eastern Europe or neo-liberal reforms in India. The Vietnamese government under Renovation does not consider farming and agriculture an unprofitable zone to be abandoned and state investment to be focused on high-value sectors like financial services and industries. In the early Renovation days in particular, when the state needed rural families to farm to bring the country out of the 1980s food shortage, the Vietnamese government deliberately avoided the full privatization of the market for agricultural inputs products, a policy that has hit farmers hard in India and Eastern Europe.

³⁵ Luong and Unger, 'Wealth, Power, and Poverty', p. 68.

After paying agricultural tax to the committee, which is minimal compared to the total output, Xuan households can sell their surplus freely. An option is to sell to private wholesale dealers. All were distant outsiders, based in the district town or provincial centre. They have rapidly increased in number following the liberation of the rice market; many were procuring agents for private rice-exporting enterprises to China. Most Xuan households, however, still choose the cooperative as their marketing agent, which, since Renovation, has been a procurement outlet for the largest state-owned food grain company in the North. As Ms Nhai explained, the food company often offers a five per cent higher purchase price than private buyers. Even if the prices are equal, villagers still prefer to sell to the cooperative: '[It] is more reliable. We receive payment immediately, and can visit the office anytime should any problem emerge. Unlike the dealers. They often purchase on credit, and if they take the grain and disappear, we cannot find them,' said Mrs Nhai.

She particularly emphasized that today they prefer to 'sell' (*bán*) to the cooperative rather than 'hand over' (*nộp*) their rice as they did before Renovation. (The term '*nộp*' refers to them handing over the freshly harvested grain to cooperative managers.) This is another of those occasions when my informants conveyed their joy at gaining full control over the fruits of their labour.

Before Renovation, the scene of villagers' handing over their produce to the cooperative granary was widely depicted in official accounts as a manifestation of revolutionary spirit and socialist values. It was not an occasion when produce was requisitioned, but a joyful moment of the harvest, when the grain was voluntarily brought in by enlightened members of the cooperative to the central granary in a spirit of happiness and collective amity.³⁶ But today the term '*nộp*' has very different connotations in the village and is often used when villagers describe what they disliked about the cooperative system: they had no agency over the grain they themselves had worked hard to produce. So when using the term '*bán*', Mrs Nhai meant that today selling grain to the cooperative is an autonomous decision, in which villagers have full authority to sell their produce for the benefit of their family.

³⁶ B. Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2005.

From food shortages to basic essentials

Typically of most Xuan households, Mrs Nhai's was very poor before Renovation. In the early 1980s, because of the virtual collapse of the cooperative economy, they had to subsist on the 'five-per-cent' plot adjacent to their house, which every household was allocated before Renovation to grow food crops or rear poultry to meet their basic needs.³⁷ However, the yields from the plot were insufficient and they had to scramble for supplementary work to buy food, even travelling to the district centre to clean out the latrines of well-off households.

Like all other village households, Mrs Nhai's regarded de-cooperativization as a very positive change that has transformed land into a real means of meeting the basic subsistence needs of them and their children. 'We were drowning when we caught a floating trunk,' Mrs Nhai said, recalling her happiness when arable land was reallocated to village households in 1993, using the proverb '*chết đuối vớ được cọc*'. She meant that the six tiny holdings they received, scattered all around the village's paddy acreage, were a lifesaver for them. Her husband Mr Long recalled that he was slightly hesitant, wondering if they should wait to see whether they could regain the land his natal family once held. Like Mrs Han, both Mr Long and Mrs Nhai were born to landless sharecropping families before the 1945 revolution and had obtained farmland for a short-lived period after the 1956 land reform. Mr Long's reluctance, however, was quickly overcome by his wife's determination. 'Then I told my husband he'd better care about giving his son enough food, rather than about his family's land,' recalled Mrs Nhai. What mattered to her was not a sentimental attachment to their families' past landholdings, but that the sooner they put the newly allocated land into production, the sooner the family would stop being short of food.

Since they received their designated land allocation, they have used it much more intensively than in the pre-Renovation period. Mrs Nhai told me that because they could use the harvest from the holdings at will, they knew that the more they grew, the better they could meet their own subsistence needs. They grow two crops a year rather than one, and also plant vegetables on what was hitherto uncultivated

³⁷ The 'five-per-cent' plot (*đất năm phần trăm*) was equal to five per cent of the households' collectivized holdings. It was granted by village authorities to households in Xuan and across northern Vietnam in the early 1960s to subsidize their everyday subsistence needs.

embankments, since these areas are unsuitable for paddy. They also put much more effort into the holdings than when they farmed the cooperative land, when they slacked-off and took breaks whenever the supervising officials were absent. Mr Long showed me a transplanting technique, in which he used his strength to insert paddy seedlings deep into the ground so that they would take firm root, while formerly, he and the others only planted the seedlings shallowly. Doing so saved them effort, even though they knew the seedlings would be uprooted and die.

They also took much better care of the livestock and equipment, which were allocated to them during de-cooperativization. Mrs Nhai's household received an ox in 1993. It was then, to use her phrase, 'just skin and bone', because it had not been fed properly, hence could not pull the plough. In just two years after they received it, its weight doubled because it was properly cared for, after which it could pull the plough with ease.

Mrs Nhai's household has also become a regular user of commercially produced high-yielding seed varieties and chemical fertilizers distributed via the new cooperative. Commonly they would pool their requirements with ten other households, so that the total demand met the minimum amount the cooperative required to place a wholesale order with the state-owned supplier for the discount price. Thanks to the village committee's sponsorship, the company allowed deferred payment, meaning that Mrs Nhai could obtain the products but only pay after she had harvested and sold her crop. Using those manufactured inputs was important, Mrs Nhai explained when showing me packages of seeds and fertilizers left over from the previous crop, as they would double the total output, compared to before Renovation when they manured the fields and used their own seeds for new plantings.

Thanks to the positive changes delivered by de-cooperativization, the household not only produced enough grain for household consumption, but also earmarked one-quarter of the total output for sale, which was impossible before Renovation. Mrs Nhai happily said that for this crop, the household had achieved a higher output than usual by trying a high-yielding seed recently introduced by the state-owned supplier. Like most other households, they planned to sell their surplus to the state-owned food company via the cooperative, for a higher purchase price than that offered by the private dealers. Mrs Nhai recalled they got 100 per cent net surplus when selling to the company in the 1990s. Five years previously, the price had been reduced, but nevertheless Xuan producers can still expect a 15 per cent net surplus when selling to the state-owned food company.

When explaining why they welcomed the 1993 de-cooperativization policy, the villagers' recall focused particularly on cherished memories of how their hard work became worthwhile as they could better provide for their children. Mrs Nhai showed me black-and-white photographs of her elder son in the mid-1990s, apparently well-fed, with chubby cheeks and brand-new primary school uniform. 'We could never afford family photos before we started farming individually and marketing our rice,' she said.

Like all other villagers, they never cast themselves as progressive market agents eager to join the new world of enterprise and large-scale commercialized farming opened up for them by the novel policies. What they stress instead is their capacity to make careful choices that relate immediately to their family and children's well-being. Instead of treating marketization as a fatal threat to their survival, as has been documented in post-socialist Eastern Europe³⁸ and some parts of rural India in the age of neo-liberalism,³⁹ they regarded the new autonomy they gained in terms of land use and the marketing of farming products as a welcome opportunity to realize a long-standing dream they had been unable to fulfil before Renovation: a smallholding that would provide their families with the essentials of food and clothing.

The go-ahead households

Unlike Mrs Nhai's, Mrs Han's household was part of a small group who were widely praised by villagers for being 'go-ahead'. They had actually made the shift from treating their paddy land a means of providing basic essentials to a site of more risky, growth-oriented profit-making in the early Renovation days. The key to Mrs Han's household's prosperity during early Renovation was their access to a particular source of support unavailable to the majority (like Mrs Nhai): well-off kin members living in Vietnamese cities. Everyone in Xuan knows that having prosperous urban relatives guarantees access to valuable financial help and information that enables them to make informed economic choices. This advantage, however, is only available to a few households with members who received opportunities for higher education in Hanoi and other cities thanks to the free education policy in the 1970s

³⁸ Verdery, *The Vanishing Hectare*.

³⁹ Mohanty, "We are Like the Living Dead".

and 1980s. Four of Mrs Han's sisters and brothers are among the most educationally successful villagers as they were admitted to higher education institutions in Hanoi. After their graduation in the 1980s, they had all joined the ranks of middle-income households in northern Vietnam's largest cities.

The connections to these relatives proved vital to Mrs Han's household back in early Renovation, when paddy farming was their only source of income. One day Mrs Nhai came across us as Mrs Han and Mr Nham were harvesting their holdings; she asked Mrs Han why her paddy plants were cropping much better than hers. Mrs Han showed her packets of new fertilizer she had tried out that year in her holdings. I had accompanied her to a neighbouring district to buy it from a wholesaler. It was a Thai import, ten per cent more expensive than the Vietnamese equivalent that Mrs Nhai had obtained from the Vietnamese supplier, but it could generate a 15 per cent additional yield.

'This couple are really go-ahead,' Mrs Nhai said, using the term '*dám nghĩ dám làm*' (lit. 'dare to think, dare to act'). This local idiom describes, in a positive way, brave, enterprising households responsive to learning about foreign products and new technologies under Renovation, rather than considering them greedy, self-seeking opportunists who were much disparaged by Party morality teachings before Renovation. Mrs Nhai told me that Mrs Han's household was well-known in Xuan as being pioneers in experimenting with new inputs. She recalled that only three years after land distribution, while she, like most other households, still relied exclusively on inputs from the cooperative, Mrs Han had already begun making regular journeys to the district centre to procure seeds and fertilizers.

Mrs Han explained that her elder sister had suggested this idea. By the early 1990s, the sister had secured a teaching post in a Hanoi vocational college, which made her much more informed than villagers about private markets for agricultural products which were then still in their infancy in Vietnam. In a visit to the district centre, Mrs Han immediately realized her sister was right: there she could access a much wider choice of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, many imported from China and of better quality than domestic products.

Mrs Han shared her knowledge about imported inputs with her neighbours, including Mrs Nhai. However, nobody dared to follow her after learning that using imported fertilizers, for example, would increase their input costs by ten per cent and the effects of the fertilizers were not proven. Mrs Han, however, remained determined to try the new items after gaining her husband's approval, because the

sellers promised her they could boost her output by 30 per cent. It did. Han recalled that during the harvest, she took two stalks of paddy, one from her fields and the other from the one next to it to show to other villagers. 'Our paddy plants had twice the number of kernel, of much better texture,' she said, proudly showing the difference between those who did and did not take the chance of increasing yields and cash returns. In the early Renovation period, while most village households, like Mrs Nhài's, could derive only the rice for their own consumption and a tiny surplus for sale from their holdings, Mrs Han's household commonly sold two-thirds of their harvest, earning themselves the reputation as one of the village's most successful farmers.

From life-saver to burden

While all villagers acknowledge that paddy farming on the newly acquired household plots transformed everyone's living standards from dire deprivation to subsistence security for their family, they also note that today paddy cultivation has become a burden for most Xuan households.

I return to Mrs Nhài's household. They considered the cultivation of their land allocation a valuable source of meeting their basic livelihood needs in the early Renovation days. Yet, unlike Mrs Han's household, they quickly realized that the six tiny plots, scattered across the village's arable acreage, could only meet their basic needs. 'Back then we produced rice and ate it up straightaway,' Mrs Nhài said, describing her household's situation in 1996, three years after de-cooperativization. This was typical of most village households at the time. Although they were not short of food, they were unable to accumulate any savings from paddy farming alone and could not afford costly expenditures.

In 1996, local village authorities followed up the initial land allocation: they announced that village households, particularly the majority of less successful farmers, should start up small, home-based enterprises such as noodle-making or animal rearing as an alternative to paddy farming. Thus Mrs Nhài started making noodles for sale as a contribution to the household income, operating from a tiny six-square-metre shed built next to the house before delivering them to food stalls both in Xuan and neighbouring villages. A year later, her husband Mr Long joined a team of village bricklayers. They have been building houses, ancestral halls, and tombs, not only for families in Xuan but also customers in nearby villages. 'When the officials announced the by-employment policy, we could still make enough to eat from our land. Yet we knew

we could not live on a single income source alone. Instead we had to be *da gi nǎng*, to have more than one livelihood option to care for our family,' the couple said, explaining their decision to pursue noodle-making and bricklaying. A mere three years later, in 1999, these new enterprises had become their main source of income and they estimated that paddy production had been reduced to a mere one-fifth of their total income.

Thus from around 2000, Mrs Nhai began searching for buyers for their holdings, just like the majority of the village households for whom the arable land had become an unremunerative source of merely basic subsistence. Who she had in mind was her neighbour, and much more successful farmer, Mrs Han. During my fieldwork, I regularly ran into Mrs Nhai who grumbled about Mrs Han's household's consistent refusal to buy her holdings back in 2000.

Because all the richer farming households refused to purchase more land, households like Mrs Nhai's were unable to sell their holdings. Thus they had to keep unwillingly cultivating their holdings. As Mrs Nhai and her husband had become employed full-time in noodle-making and bricklaying, they had to pay other villagers to take on the most labour-intensive tasks of the cultivation processes. 'From the early 2000s, we had to pay other villagers for transplanting, harvesting, and threshing. After deducting these costs, we had no cash surplus left,' said Mrs Nhai.

From the late 2000s, so five years before my fieldwork, keeping the holdings cultivated had become much more challenging for Mrs Nhai's household. One day, I met her at the cooperative office, in a big crowd of villagers trying to sell grain to the state-owned food company. They were disappointed to learn from the cooperative manager that the company still had a large stockpile of grain and could not afford to buy any more that year. This was a common issue elsewhere in the province, arising from local authorities' over-advocacy of the use of the high-yield variety of grain of the kind Mrs Nhai had grown for two years. While boosting the harvest by 30 per cent, the new variety engendered a local supply excess, rendering many households unable to sell their surplus. Worse news was that as the procurement from the state sector disappeared, private wholesale dealers were the only alternative purchasers for paddy and they were pressuring the farmers to accept unreasonably low prices. Mrs Nhai estimated that this would mean a 20 per cent loss compared to what her household had spent on the crop.

A bigger concern for Xuan households at the time of my fieldwork was that the price of key agricultural inputs and services had increased sharply compared to the previous year. This was the effect of the high inflation

rate affecting Vietnam during my fieldwork. Labour was the most rapidly increasing cost. After learning about the decreased paddy price, Mrs Nhai and I visited a household she had paid to handle her cultivation tasks for the past ten years. There she learned that this year one *sào* (360 m²) of land would cost VND 600,000 for transplanting, harvesting, and threshing, a threefold increase compared to the previous two years.⁴⁰

The escalating labour costs exerted enormous pressure on those Xuan households who were short of labour. They include elderly couples with no children living in the village, and households like Mrs Nhai's, in which all members are employed full-time elsewhere, and who thus have to pay other villagers to handle key production tasks for them. 'If we're lucky, we might get 200 kilograms of paddy per *sào*. The price now is VND 6,000 per kilogram, then you get maximum 1.2 million. If we pay for transplanting, harvesting and threshing as usual, the total cost would be 1.4 million. So we will have nothing left in the end, and even incur a loss of VND 200,000 per *sào*,' Nhai said. Of all Xuan households, hers is now among those who face the biggest challenges in cultivating their arable land.

Given this situation, Mrs Nhai's household decided that renting out their holdings to Mr Phuong was their best option. However, their long-term goal was still to find buyers for the holdings. Mrs Nhai told every villager she knew that they would sell their holding for just VND 3 million per *sào*. According to Nhai, after taking inflation into account, the new price was only one-third of the price she had offered Mrs Han ten years previously.

'By pursuing *da gi nǎng* instead of relying on paddy farming alone, we have obtained many bigger income sources: from my noodle-making, my husband's bricklaying wage and my son's factory wage. These livelihoods have given us a good life: our two-storey house, motorbikes, and a refrigerator. Meanwhile, paddy farming has only given us enough grain to eat, and now it has even become a burden for us. Thus if anyone wants to buy our land now, we are happy to sell it cheaply as if we are giving the land away. Yet there's still no buyer,' Mrs Nhai said sadly. Her view is shared by the majority of Xuan households, for whom embracing home-based by-employments and other non-farm livelihood options has come at a cost. They need to hire local labour, but the unexpectedly high inflation rates in recent years has made this

⁴⁰ The VND or Vietnamese Dong is Vietnam's currency unit. Roughly 30,000 VND equal £1.

problematic and they have become frustrated by the unwillingness of the better-off farming families to purchase the holdings.

So Xuan households do not think in terms of ‘moral economy’ like farmers in many parts of India⁴¹ and China.⁴² The latter hold onto unproductive farmlands at all costs because it is ‘cherished ancestral land’ or a source of basic subsistence, considering it everything they will ever need, and with no desire to find new ways of making commercial gains. Instead, right from the early Renovation days, most Xuan households recognized that paddy farming would provide them with little more than basic subsistence. They thus pursued the *da gi nǎng* portfolio strategy and made an amazing jump to today’s totally different world of commercial activities such as by-employments, retailing, and factory work. With these much more remunerative options, they have provided their families with what everyone now considers a decent life, comprising not just basics, but things like proper housing and motorbikes.

Most households, therefore, have long wanted to sell their arable land. For them the tiny holdings, which only provide them with basic essentials, are no longer a safety net worth keeping. And for households like Mrs Nhai’s, the arable holdings have now become a burden that they desperately want to get rid of. Unlike the state’s criticisms that rural households keep unprofitable farmlands because they have a culturally irrational love for their land, or because they are incapable of judging what is in their best interests as both producers and title holders, they have their own reasons for still being in possession of the holdings: although everyone with such holdings would be willing to sell them cheaply, no-one wants to buy such land.

Fear from the past

In contrast to Mrs Nhai’s household, Mrs Han’s is typical of those whom village officials expected to buy land voluntarily from less successful cultivators so as to make the ‘natural transition’ to large-scale commercialized farming of the kind predicted by Deininger and Jin.⁴³ One day a village cadre came to Mrs Han’s house to try to persuade

⁴¹ M. Levien, ‘The Land Question: Special Economic Zones and the Political Economy of Dispossession in India’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 39(3–4), 2012, pp. 933–69.

⁴² X. Guo, ‘Land Expropriation and Rural Conflicts in China’, *The China Quarterly*, 166, 2001, pp. 422–39.

⁴³ Deininger and Jin, ‘Land Sales and Rental Markets’.

them to become farmers of big consolidated fields. That was the latest of many visits the village officials had made since the early 2000s to convince them to accumulate more land, after witnessing their success in paddy farming in the early years of Renovation.

Mr Nham, Mrs Han's husband, said nothing while the official was in the house. Yet immediately after the cadre left, he began criticizing his suggestion, telling me that buying land was very dangerous. He feared that if land reform recurred, it would produce the same deadly consequences his natal family had faced, just because they had held one of the most sizeable holdings in Xuan. 'Then whoever had more land than average was doomed,' said Nham. He recalled vividly the day land reform cadres had come to his family's house, tied up his father, locked him up with other villagers classified as landlords, and charged him with using land to exploit sharecroppers. Later that week those villagers were dragged out to the open-air site used by revolutionary cadres for public punishments. 'He was hung from a tree for days, without food or water, with people shouting denunciations at him and pelting him with mud and filth,' Mr Nham recalled.

His fears about what might happen today are the result of those grim experiences he remembered from his childhood, particularly because the stigma of a bad class classification had such dire repercussions for the children of those identified as landlords. All of Mr Nham's siblings who fled to the South in 1956 never returned to live in Xuan. They all lost touch with their parents during the anti-American war and eventually fled to the USA after the 1975 unification for fear of being punished for their association with the American-client state, the Republic of Vietnam. 'They only regained touch with me ten years ago, but can only return and visit me once every three years,' Mr Nham wept when recalling the pain of family separation.

Those who stayed in Xuan in 1956 also faced harsh conditions. Mr Nham recalled that after the land reform, his family was reduced to one of the poorest in Xuan, even suffering from food shortages, forcing his parents to scavenge for edible wild roots to feed him. When farmland was distributed after the land reform, his family, like all other landlord households, received the smallest holdings with the poorest soil quality. When Mr Nham grew up, because of his bad class background, he never had the same opportunities as those with good class backgrounds, such as college education and overseas contract worker postings.

'Now the village officials repeatedly encourage us to buy land. Of course, if we grow rice on a big scale, we can get lots of money. Yet

who knows, someday they might take back everything, and even treat us as criminals for having too much land, like my father. Even if we have money, we still think that buying land is a stupid move that will jeopardize [the] family's safety,' Mr Nham said firmly. He was against the consolidation of large holdings not because his household lacked financial resources, but because what the authorities advocated was, for many like him who still had painful memories of the anti-landlord campaigns and the disastrous results for the families of big cultivators, a dangerous prospect.

Mrs Han concurred. Although her family had not experienced the same traumatic fate as the landlord families in 1956, she also felt it was necessary to avoid accumulating large holdings. For her, it was the memories of having their farmland collectivized when the cooperative was formed in 1958 that informed her decision. As we walked along the embankment of a field that Mrs Han remembered was part of her family holdings received after the land reform, she recalled the painful memories of her parents at the time of cooperativization. Like all other villagers, they were forcefully told by village cadres to flatten the very embankment they had happily erected two years previously to earmark the family holding, as the land would be incorporated into big fields under the management of the cooperative.

'When the authorities gave us the land in 1956, none of us expected they would take it back just two years later. That's why, although the village officials keep encouraging us to buy out holdings from other villagers, we still think we must not rely on paddy farming alone. If everything we have is a big farming enterprise, then a single policy change can put our family in immiseration. But because we pursue *da gi nǎng*, we now also have incomes from pig rearing and retailing. With these additional incomes, we have greatly improved our family's living conditions. More importantly, with these new safety nets, we have never had to worry about losing our lands, and about our family becoming impoverished again,' said Mrs Han.

While the village officials accuse successful, rich farming households like these of having an instinctive fear of change or an irrational sentiment about land, what villagers are actually doing by pursuing the *da gi nǎng* portfolio strategy is maintaining a critical strand of clear-headed thinking about risk, which is nothing like being risk-averse in classic 'moral economy' language. Building on personal history and more general knowledge of the state, households like Mrs Han's believe that, despite the positive autonomy they have gained under Renovation, they have not been liberated from the vagaries of state policies which, as

adherents of ‘natural transition’, Deininger and Jin, and Ravallion and van de Walle suggest should be the case.⁴⁴ Instead they think that one day the state’s view of acquiring large consolidated holdings might change and families who commit their resources to this as a livelihood strategy may be defined in ways that will be disastrous for them.

So for those households, there is no inconsistency between their active support of de-cooperativization in the early Renovation period and their enduring refusal to become large-scale farmers. Instead villagers have consistently followed a principle central to their *da gi nǎng* strategy, which they consider to be a matter of morality and ethical obligation. Alongside their clear-headed thinking about market conditions and economic calculations about labour and input costs, a central element is factoring the unpredictable nature of state policies into their decision-making. By so doing, they are ensuring the well-being their family as a whole, not only in terms of the achievement of ever-improving living standards, but also the protection of its hard-won security.

Worries about the future

While examples like Mrs Han’s household challenge the widely shared model of ‘natural transition’, those like that of Mr Phuong, the renter, call into question Akram-Lodhi’s model of ‘capitalism from below’.⁴⁵ Mr Phuong’s father was an overseas contract worker in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s, widely considered in Xuan to be a key factor of economic success under Renovation, yet an option available to only a few households. In 2002, when Mr Phuong was in his twenties, his father financed a two-year apprenticeship in a carpentry workshop in the provincial centre. This training would have been impossible had it not been for his father’s savings from his overseas work. Upon Mr Phuong’s return, his father gave him money to build his own house. After marrying, besides cultivating their holdings with his wife, Mr Phuong opened a carpentry workshop in his house, making wooden furnishings for other villagers. Thanks to the good returns from the workshop, five years before, Mr Phuong had managed to add a second storey to the house, making it even bigger than Mrs Han’s. Mr Phuong’s household is now among the one per cent most well-off in Xuan.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Ravallion and van de Walle, *Land in Transition*.

⁴⁵ Akram-Lodhi, ‘Vietnam’s Agriculture’.

They began renting land from other villagers four years previously, when they decided to find a source of additional income by utilizing the time they felt they could spare from the carpentry workshop and cultivating their own holdings. Mr Phuong had some training as a mechanic, so he applied for a loan from a local state-owned bank, using his own house as collateral, to purchase the combine. When I first met him, he was operating the machine on the fields. In an hour, the combine had finished harvesting an area that would usually take two farmers a full day to reap. With the machine, the couple could manage two hectares of rented land, ten times the average holding of a village household. The gain from paddy farming constituted two-thirds of their income and twice the earnings from the carpentry workshop.

Ownership of machinery and economies of scale are the reasons why renters like Mr Phuong can profit from extending the scale of paddy farming, while other small cultivators like Mrs Nhai's household are losing money by having to have their holdings cultivated. The combine not only spared them from the fluctuations in service quotes, but also saved them the harvesting and threshing fees, worth 20 per cent of their total cost, and gained them another 10 per cent by performing paid services for other villagers. The large area under cultivation also meant they could buy large amounts of inputs and qualify for the 15 per cent wholesale discount. They also saved money by stockpiling inputs when they were substantially cheaper to buy. Mr Phuong showed me his house's second floor which was packed with fertilizer sacks he had bought when they were cheap during the previous crop, saying that he had saved 20 per cent compared to current prices. The floor was also packed with sacks full of freshly harvested paddy. Unlike small-cultivator villagers who needed to sell their grain quickly to cover their costs, thus being subject to price-squeezing by dealers, the couple planned to keep the grain until just before the next harvest, when the price normally increased, thus giving them more bargaining power.

Most other villagers are envious of the renters, whom they describe as having the financial advantage to practise capital-intensive cultivation that most of them cannot. Quite apart from the substantial cost of stockpiling inputs and storing grain for an extended time, Mr Phuong's combine alone costs VND 300 million (£10,000), unaffordable to most other households. As well as surplus from the household's carpentry production, they also had the advantage of obtaining low-interest large loans from the local state-owned bank, as the bank's local director was a friend and former fellow worker in Czechoslovakia of Mr Phuong's father. These factors make Mr Phuong typical of the renters, whom the

other villagers reported as having critical connections with the village authorities or finance-providing agencies that guarantee them access to larger loans inaccessible to most Xuan households.

Yet like all other renters, Mr Phuong's household has consistently refused to buy land from those desperately struggling to cultivate their holdings. One day I met Mr Phuong and Mrs Nhai at a village funeral. She told him that from the next crop, she would be taking back the land he was currently renting. He was naturally unhappy about this. On the way home, he asked me to accompany him to the fields, where he showed me that the holding concerned happened to be the entrance to a large part of Phuong's rented holding, which would be blocked if the plot was taken back. When the harvest came, Mr Phuong would have to take a long detour to deploy the harvester on his land. He further complained about his rented holdings being scattered all around the fields. He hypothesized that if he purchased the same area in a single plot, he would both save lots of time and 25 per cent of the petrol that was currently being wasted on travelling around. He could also make long-term investments in improving the soil quality to boost the output by 15 per cent, which would be unfeasible as the land could be recalled at any time. Phuong's concerns received much sympathy from Chairman Hung, whom we met at the paddy fields. Upon hearing Mr Phuong's complaints, Mr Hung immediately urged him to sell his carpentry workshop to raise money to buy the land that was then being sold cheaply by Mrs Nhai and other households, and he promised that the People's Committee would sponsor any loans he might need.

Yet after Mr Hung had left, Mr Phuong immediately told me that an ill-judged move to commit his household's resources to a big purchase of land was not a sensible risk to take, as it could endanger their family's hard-won economic security. It was clear that he considered the source of this risk to be unpredictable policy changes. To him and the other renters, there was every reason to believe that today's policies regarding property ownership could change overnight.

One of his concerns was the possibility of another land appropriation scheme, forcing any big farmer to relinquish the holdings they had worked hard to acquire in exchange for a small amount of compensation.⁴⁶ Yet what made him even more worried was the

⁴⁶ The issue of rural households' reluctance to purchase large holdings for fear of unexpected land appropriation schemes has been widely addressed in the scholarly

ongoing debate among policymakers that he saw on television, read in the newspapers, and heard from villagers with urban relatives. He feared that when the 20-year tenancy expired in 2013, the state could easily revert to the 1993 version of land allocation. This revolved around a principle of equalizing for all. Sharing out land to all farming households on that basis would abrogate the gains made by those who had acquired big, consolidated holdings. Mr Phuong said he would still feel unsafe even if he received official assurances that placed his new holding on a secure footing. Neither an extension of the length of his title, nor even a grant of full household ownership rights would allay his doubt, he told me.⁴⁷

Mr Hung must think that I am too coward to buy land. But he does not really understand the situation that farmers like us are facing. Here policies change all the time, every day and hour. Even if you feel absolutely secure today, with no sign of problem whatsoever, tomorrow things can become totally different. You can never predict anything. It is tempting to invest everything we got in paddy farming. Yet we would rather pursue the *đa gì năng* strategy, as we can't risk our family's future. Our plan is to use our savings to find an additional livelihood strategy instead. That way we not only have more income, but also have another safety-net to protect our family.

Mr Phuong was serious when he said this: six months later, he not only still had the carpentry workshop, but he had also used savings from carpentry and paddy farming to relocate the workshop to the back of the house and to modify the front half into a clothing shop, selling fashionable clothes to young villagers and inbound migrant workers coming to work in Xuan's industrial park. Mr Phuong and his wife took turns to man the shop: his wife during day and him at night, after he had finished his daily work at the carpentry workshop and on their rented paddy land.

In terms of the 'capitalism from below' literature,⁴⁸ Mr Phuong's is evidently one of the village's few rich farmers best-placed to pursue new opportunities in large-scale capitalist farming. Yet even for those rich

literature on land use and agrarian transformation in contemporary Vietnam. See Taylor (ed.) *Social Inequality in Vietnam*; Ravallion and van de Walle, *Land in Transition*; A. Kim, 'Land Taking in the Private Interest: Comparisons of Urban Land Development Controversies in the United States, China and Vietnam', *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 11(1), 2009, pp. 19–31; Kerkvliet, 'Protests over Land in Vietnam'.

⁴⁷ According to the new 2013 Land Laws, effective since 1 July 2014, Vietnamese rural households still do not have ownership title to land. However, tenancy was automatically extended from 20 to 50 years.

⁴⁸ Akram-Lodhi, 'Vietnam's Agriculture'; Byres, 'Neo-Classical Neo-Populism'.

farming households, state land policies in Renovation are still too unreliable to justify the kind of land use strategies the officials have encouraged them to embrace. Clearly the reason is not because they are incapable of seeing how to utilize their advantageous economic and social capital in their best interests, but because they consider themselves to be responsible decision-makers, who must carefully anticipate unpredictable policy shifts so as to protect their family's security.

Conclusion

This article explores the surprising ways in which rural populations in northern Vietnam have negotiated both the risks and opportunities of the state's push to de-cooperativize and marketize village livelihoods in the Renovation era. I show that since the early days of marketization, Xuan households have been enthusiastic about new land-use policies and have actually succeeded in making the shift from cooperative farming to farming as individual households. For them, these new market policies provided valuable opportunities that enabled them to secure basic essentials for their families, which they had long wanted yet been unable to achieve before Renovation. This contrasts with the market policies that posed fatal threats to rural households' subsistence documented by anthropologists in Eastern Europe,⁴⁹ China,⁵⁰ and India.⁵¹

However, after 30 years, there has not been a shift from small-scale family farming to large-scale, capital-intensive production, neither the 'natural transition' expected by Deininger and Jin⁵² nor a 'capitalism from below' transformation much criticized in the peasant studies literature.⁵³ The reason is that most households still pursue the *da gi nãng* portfolio strategy which village officials consider to be irrationally risk-averse and 'backward', one that is incapable of treating land as a

⁴⁹ Burawoy and Verdery (eds), *Uncertain Transition*.

⁵⁰ R. Yep and C. Fong, 'Land Conflicts, Rural Finance and Capacity of the Chinese State', *Public Administration and Development*, 29, 2009, pp. 69–78.

⁵¹ K. Walker, 'Neoliberalism on the Ground in Rural India: Predatory Growth, Agrarian Crisis, Internal Colonization, and the Intensification of Class Struggle', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 35(4), 2009, pp. 557–620.

⁵² Deininger and Jin, 'Land Sales and Rental Markets'.

⁵³ Byres, 'Neo-Classical Neo-Populism'.

marketable asset and appreciating what is in their best interests as producers and title holders.

This article, however, shows that there is no contradiction between Xuan households' positive experiences and active support of the land allocation policy in the early Renovation period and their enduring refusal to amass big holdings and use paddy land in ways that the party-state considers rational. Instead, villagers have consistently followed a local moral principle relatively undocumented in the literature on peasant life in Asian marketizing contexts. For Xuan households, everyone must be a responsible decision-maker and actively weigh the pros and cons of marketization and state policies so that two goals can be pursued at the same time, rather than prioritizing one at the expense of the other. These are to improve family living standards and to protect the family's safety. Despite claims that Renovation will create a safe haven from which to pursue large-scale farming for everyone,⁵⁴ or at least for a few rich farmers,⁵⁵ all Xuan households, even those best placed to pursue big capitalized rice cultivation, still regard the state's policies around land possession as too uncertain. Today's market-friendly official stance could easily be replaced with a new version of land-to-the-tiller, stripping away the gains of those who do today what the state might hate tomorrow. Thus, for villagers, refusing to move into large-scale farming is a carefully thought-through and responsible decision to protect their families' hard-won security.

⁵⁴ Ravallion and van de Walle, *Land in Transition*.

⁵⁵ Akram-Lodhi, 'Vietnam's Agriculture'.