NOTES ON
THE SOUTH VIETNAMESE PEASANT OF
THE MEKONG DELTA

Gerald C. Hickey

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PREFACE

This RAND Memorandum was prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs. Its author, a professor of anthropology and consultant to RAND's Social Science Department, is currently in South Vietnam, engaged in social and ethnic research. The present paper was conceived as a series of impressionistic sketches that describe some of the traditions, institutions, practices, and political attitudes of villagers of the Mekong River delta. It is based on the author's close acquaintance with that sector of the country and its people, among whom he has recently spent a total of about four years. In 1956/57, as a member of the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, he traveled extensively throughout southern Vietnam, concentrating his special research effort on the Mekong delta village of Khanh Hau, in Long An Province. Many of the examples cited in this Memorandum are, in fact, drawn from his study of Khanh Hau village society. In 1962, Dr. Hickey undertook a three-month research project for The RAND Corporation, which took him to various parts of the delta. He returned to Vietnam on his current assignment early in 1964.
SUMMARY

The Mekong River delta in the southern part of South Vietnam was settled by villagers from the central coastal plain of Indochina about a century ago, and its society still bears certain characteristics of the frontier. The southern peasants, being descendants of nineteenth-century migrants who successfully adapted themselves to the unfamiliar physical conditions of the delta, lack some of the parochialism and inflexibility of those Vietnamese whose ancestors have lived a thousand years in the same villages, where customs, institutions, and the social rank order have undergone little change. Though respectful of their spiritual heritage, of the old cults and taboos, they tend to be more pragmatic and more receptive to innovation. Their relative isolation from the centers of Vietnamese culture has loosened the bonds of tradition, permitting the mandarin system to be superseded by a social rank order in which wealth is the most decisive factor and the village elite includes the large landholders and commercial entrepreneurs. The changed environment led the settlers to experiment with unfamiliar varieties of rice and new agricultural techniques, and available space permitted the acquisition of land to an unprecedented degree. In many instances, visible economic advantage came to outweigh the peasant's innate conservatism as he contemplated changes in his way of life.

The present study is a series of short sketches on different aspects of Mekong delta society, including religious beliefs, social institutions and practices, and relationships within the village and with the world beyond it. The author points to the continuing and
pervasive force of the Vietnamese cosmology, inherited from the
Chinese, and discusses especially the concepts of individual destiny
and of harmony with the universal order. The impact of this cosmological
view is evident in the peasant's attitude toward his fate. Though the
stars and other cosmic forces may predispose a man for good or bad
fortune, it is up to him to influence those forces through the
observance of rituals that will maximize the power of the good and
contain the evil, and he need not resign himself fatalistically to
drought, disease, and other adversity. The peasant's continuing
strict adherence to the ritual practices of the past is a factor
in the spread, during recent decades, of two new religious movements,
Cao Daism and Hoa Hao. The former is an amalgam of Buddhism, Taoism,
and Confucianism, with admixtures of Catholicism and Indian mysticism,
and a hierarchy modeled on that of the Catholic Church. The latter,
described as Reformed Buddhism, also joins existing religious elements,
but adds no new beliefs or deities and acknowledges no hierarchy.
Both movements owe much of their appeal to their admission and
perpetuation of the popular traditions and cults, so important to
even the more educated and sophisticated Vietnamese. Moreover, they
satisfy the people's nationalistic aspirations, for although founded
on the great religions, they are explicitly Vietnamese movements.

It requires considerable worldly means for the peasant to be
able to observe the Cult of the Ancestors, for example, and periodically
to gather and entertain his larger family (the common-descent group)
in an effort to preserve kin solidarity. The importance of meeting
these social and religious obligations thus becomes for him a major
incentive to economic betterment. The striving to acquire the
symbols of affluence -- large landholdings, a substantial house, and stone tombs -- and to provide well for one's family lest its members be forced to disperse in search of a livelihood, has made the peasants receptive to certain profitable agricultural and technological innovations and willing to try their luck at some simple capitalist enterprises that exploit the supply-and-demand ratio and the potential role of the middleman. The great majority of peasants continue to be poor, and they satisfy most of their basic needs from the resources of the village. However, there is a minority whose material demands, purchasing power, and commercial relationships involve a dependence on the larger population centers that has helped to break down the barriers of isolation and has contributed to recent changes in the ways of the Mekong delta village.

The aforementioned characteristics of the delta peasants suggest an essentially homogeneous society. But the common cultural roots and uniform behavior pattern do not necessarily make for strong communal identification. The delta village is an agglomeration of hamlets, which often are far apart, and neither the community dinh (temple) nor the Council House adequately functions as a focal gathering place for all members of a village. The villager's sense of solidarity, therefore, tends to be restricted to his hamlet or, even more narrowly, to his residence group (a cluster of farmsteads within a hamlet, often composed of related families). He is willing to trust and help his immediate neighbors, but he is wary of mutual-aid arrangements at the village level, as was shown in the failure of an attempt at a village-wide cooperative not long ago.
Politically and administratively, the traditional autonomy of the village has been yielding to the encroachment, first, of the French administration and, more recently, of the central government. In many cases, the ruling Village Council has dwindled from the former twelve village venerables, who served mainly for the honor of their positions, to three younger men, who draw the fixed salaries of civil servants and lack the prestige and authority of their predecessors. Since the establishment of the republic in 1955, the ministries in Saigon have had an increasing role in village education, public works, agricultural programs, financial affairs, justice, and civil order. But the peasant is as yet far from identifying himself and his interests with the central government. In his eyes, it has not changed greatly since colonial days. He regards it as the source of frequent interference in village matters, and of frustrating bans on gambling, plural marriage, concubinage, and other cherished institutions. The government's Strategic Hamlet Program, wherever it has been implemented too rapidly and at too high a cost to the individual, has not been popular, and many of the southern peasants resent relocation in principle.

Years of guerrilla warfare have greatly disrupted village life. They have generated conflict and suspicion, rather than unity, and the villager has turned inward. He clings to the familiar -- the corner of his hamlet, his house, his garden, and the reassuring presence of kinfolk and close neighbors. His chief concerns are for his family and his farm, if he has one, and in his war-weary world he has learned that the most important thing is survival.
Though there are pro-Viet Cong and pro-government factions in the villages, most peasants do not actively take sides. They are paying a higher price in casualties and property damage than any other Vietnamese group. But they have come to understand that to refrain from alliance with either side is the best way to survival, and they passively comply with whichever side is in control of their area at any given moment.
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I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present some insights into the value system of the peasant of southern Vietnam. The method of presentation is to begin by focusing briefly on the place of the Mekong River delta in Vietnamese history, for, as the most recently settled part of Vietnam, the delta retains many frontier characteristics. This historical sketch will be followed by a series of short essays on various aspects of southern peasant society. Each of these essays has something to say about the peasant's way of life and, implicitly, about his motivations and aspirations.

The first essay deals with the traditional cosmological view, which the Vietnamese have inherited from the Chinese. This cosmology affects all aspects of their society, and it explains a great deal about their social practices, behavior patterns, and institutions. The next two essays deal with two different facets of the society -- religion and economic activities -- which are related to one another in that both tell us something about social change and the peasant's willingness to accept innovations. The note on religion, which emphasizes the importance of this social institution in the life of the peasant, analyzes some of the reasons for the recent spread of

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1These insights are the result of approximately four years of experience in South Vietnam, much of it spent among Vietnamese peasants. As a member of the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, the author was able to travel extensively throughout southern Vietnam during 1956-57, and to do concentrated anthropological research in the Mekong River delta village of Khanh Hau, Long An province (to which reference will be made from time to time) during 1958-59. The RAND Corporation made it possible for him to return to Vietnam in 1962 and conduct research in various parts of the delta.
two religious movements, Cao Daism and Hoa Hao. The discussion of economics, with special emphasis on motivation and innovation, returns to the importance of religion in pointing out the place of the Cult of the Ancestors in economic activities; values associated with this cult are intrinsic to the peasant's desire to own land (particularly family patrimony), a fine house, and stone tombs. Some of the economic developments that are taking place in southern Vietnamese society will be examined as illustrative of the peasant's attitude toward new ideas and methods.

The fourth essay focuses on the village as a social unit and briefly analyzes the social milieu of the peasant, with emphasis on the relationships within the village. The fifth and final essay deals with the peasant and his relations with the world beyond the village. It points out some changes in village administration which exemplify the outside world's increasing encroachment on village society and some of the peasants' reactions to it.
II. THE MEKONG RIVER DELTA

Historically, the Mekong River delta has been a frontier area, and southern Vietnamese society has retained many frontier characteristics. When the French occupied Vietnam in the middle of the nineteenth century, settlers from the central coastal plain were in the process of establishing their villages in the delta. These settlers were pioneers; they were clearing, planting, building, and generally adjusting themselves to the broad, humid, well-watered delta, which presented a contrast to the narrow, arid coastal plain of south-central Vietnam.

Geographically, this southern society was removed from Hanoi and Hue, the focal centers of traditional Vietnamese culture. This isolation was compounded by the administrative organization of the area, when the French established the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam in what are now northern and central Vietnam, and the colony of Cochinchina in the south. These factors contributed to the emergence of a new society in the Mekong River delta. This society is identifiably Vietnamese, with many of the culture traits of northern and central Vietnam, yet it contains many other features as well, and is receptive to new ways of doing things.

The pioneer farmers adopted new techniques and new tools for their cultivation, and changed to indigenous varieties of rice and other food crops that were suited to planting conditions in the delta. In this spacious area, they could spread out their villages, and an ambitious man could accumulate land. Although mandarin titles continued to be used under the French colonial administration, the
mandarin system as such, as it functioned in central Vietnam, never was established in the Mekong delta, and it was thus possible for a new elite to emerge, which was strongly influenced by French culture and values. The traditional intellectual-farmer-artisan-merchant hierarchy gave way to a rank system in which wealth assumed the most important place, whether it derived from large landholdings or from commercial activities. Finally, the social structure of Vietnamese society lost much of its rigidity in the south. This greater flexibility is manifest in the rule that women inherit land (very rare in northern and central Vietnam), in a new way of selecting the family head, and in a constantly changing Village Council. In short, the delta society is one in which the old ways are not necessarily sacred.
III. THE PEASANT'S VIEW OF THE COSMOS

Although few peasants could articulate it, they share a cosmological view that is daily manifest in their behavior and expressed attitudes. It is a notion about the universe deeply rooted in the Chinese philosophical tradition and absorbed into Vietnamese culture during the long period of Chinese domination. Universal order is the essence of this cosmology, and from it spring a number of other concepts, one of which is individual destiny. Villagers believe that the individual's destiny is guided by a particular star -- the lucid manifestation of a cosmic force -- that shone brightly at the time of his birth. The relationship of this star with other stars affects the cosmic force, augmenting or diminishing it, and thus boding good or evil for the individual, who, in this context, may be said to be "predisposed" rather than predestined.

Because there is a recurrent pattern in the relationships among the stars, horoscopes, permits the individual to prepare for good or bad periods. By the same token, horoscopes can be provided for the collectivity. Thus, in addition to the individual horoscopes prepared by soothsayers, the lunar calendar advised everyone as to auspicious and inauspicious days. There is prescribed behavior for maximizing the good influences of the favorable periods, as there is for evading the bad effects of the unfavorable periods. Certain rituals also give the individual some control over his fate; in the Cung Sao ritual, for example, a person makes a prescribed offering and burns a great many candles on the day that his star reaches its zenith, so as to draw the light of his star and thereby maximize the good cosmic influences.
Another, related concept is harmony. When there is harmony with the existing universal order, the individual experiences a sense of well-being; he is healthy, happy, and prosperous. When there is disharmony, the opposite occurs. Harmony with the five elements (metal, wood, earth, water, and fire) is the basis of geomancy. There is harmony also in attaining the favor of good spirits and avoiding evil spirits. To violate a taboo is to invite disharmony and trouble. A nation's existing good fortune is a manifestation of harmony and of the approval of thien (the celestial forces) for those in power, who, in effect, have the mandate of heaven. Floods, droughts, and other catastrophes are indicative of disharmony and the disapproval of heaven. They are signs that it is time for each mang, or "change of mandate," the literal Vietnamese expression for revolution.

The concept of harmony also is intrinsic to Vietnamese folk medicine. If any one of the ba hon (three souls) and chin via (nine vital spirits) which sustain the human body departs, the imbalance results in sickness, insanity, or death, and the healer's first invocation is for the souls and spirits to return to the victim and thus restore him to good health. In the principles of Nham Than, which guide the practitioners of Sino-Vietnamese medicine, there are around one thousand vital points in the human body, and each corresponds to a specific hour, date, and odd or even number in the lunar calendar. For the successful treatment of ailments, there must be harmony between the locus of pain in the body and the auspicious point in the calendar.
All Vietnamese peasants retain something of this cosmological view, whether they become Christians, receive secondary schooling, or for some reason are removed from the traditional ways. The notions of destiny and of harmony with the universal order are deeply ingrained, and it would be an unusual villager who did not consider his horoscope or adhere to at least part of the folk medical beliefs.

While this cosmological view generates a certain conservatism in the peasants, it does not commit them to fatalism. They may approach innovation with some skepticism, but will accept technological change when there are patent economic advantages.

Moreover, rather than resign themselves fatalistically to a stroke of bad fortune, they will do everything possible to prevent further harm. In the 1958 drought, for example, farmers tried in every way to save their crops. Some frantically scooped water from meagre pools into their wilting seedbeds; others resorted to irrigating with the brackish canal water, though they knew of its bad effect on the soil, in the hope that the rains would come in force. When the drought continued, some peasants were lucky enough to find buyers for their seedlings (among farmers who lived near the Mekong, where the river water is fresh). The less fortunate, in despair, permitted their cattle to graze among the flaccid plants.

A similar attitude governs the peasant's behavior in the event of sickness. The usual pattern is for the family of the sick person to try to effect a cure without recourse to any medical practitioners. There is an abundance of home remedies, the ingredients of which are grown or gathered nearby or purchased at the local pharmacy, and
families also keep prepared medicines on hand. If an outside agency is required, the peasant will look either to the local pharmacist, who usually is adept at some form of traditional medicine, or to one of the local healers, most of whom prepare medicines as well as invoke the intervention of a spirit or deity. Where traditional therapy fails, those who can afford it often try western medicine. Although hospitalization continues to be anathema to most peasants, they may resort to it in desperation. Only when all possible means have been tried and the ailment continues or worsens do the peasants become fatalistic: if a man's legs swell and a woman's face puffs up, there is nothing to do but wait for death.
IV. CHANGES IN RELIGION

In writing on Vietnamese "religion," Père Cadière, one of the foremost experts on the subject, explicitly used the singular in characterizing it as an omnipresent phenomenon, enveloping all the individual's daily acts. At the village level of Vietnamese society one finds the Mahayana Buddhist-Taoist-Confucianist ideology mixed with the popular beliefs and practices of the oral tradition -- the popular cults -- and this amalgam affects almost all aspects of village society.

The Buddhist-Taoist-Confucianist tradition is part of the Chinese heritage, but popular beliefs and practices have numerous origins. Some can be traced to Chinese sources, some are uniquely Vietnamese, and some have been borrowed from the Cham, Khmer, and highland groups with whom the Vietnamese have had contact. Certain cults, such as the Cult of the Guardian Spirit of the Village, are found in all villages, while others are confined to particular regions. As a result, the mixture of religious elements varies somewhat from one area to another.

In the Mekong River delta, the religious amalgam has been enriched by the relatively recent introduction of two religious movements -- Cao Daism and Hoa Hao. Cao Daism was founded in 1925 and at first was centered in Tay Ninh, where the Tam Ky Pho Do sect established its holy see. Described by its leaders as Reformed

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Buddhism, it aims at combining the great religions of the world in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The result is a syncretic mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism with smaller elements of Catholicism, Indian mysticism, and a variety of popular beliefs and practices. The Cao Daist hierarchy is modeled on that of the Catholic Church, but it includes female cardinals.

Because of disagreement with the pope's policies, members of the hierarchy left Tay Minh in the early 1930's to found separate Cao Daist sects and, eventually, to establish holy sees of their own. The Chieu Minh Dan holy see is in CanTho, the Minh Chon Ly in My Tho, the Tien Thien in Soc Sai, the Ban Chin Dao in Ben Tre, the Minh Chon Dao in Bac Lieu, and the Chon Ly in Tan An. With the exception of the Chon Ly, these sects adhere to the same tenets as the Tam Ky Pho Do, and their hierarchies are similarly organized. Whereas the Tam Ky Pho Do supported the French during the Indochina War, however, the other sects, particularly the Tien Thien and Ban Chin Dao, supported the Viet Minh, and their leaders were jailed. With the end of the war and the subsequent struggle between President Ngo Dinh Diem and the Tam Ky Pho Do, the latter lost their army and their lands, as did the Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen. The other Cao Daist sects, not having participated in this struggle or been identified with the national movement to end French rule, functioned without restraint, and they have expanded considerably since 1955.

Cao Daism has successfully established itself among the peasants because it holds numerous attractions for them. The convert is
allowed to retain his traditional cults, and this is important to the many who believe that the omission of cult observances invites ill-fortune. In becoming a Cao Daist, moreover, the peasant enlarges his pantheon to include some of the deities of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the ritual symbols and forms (kowtowing, gongs, joss, and food offerings) are borrowed from the Taoist-Confucianist-Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and adjustment to the religion therefore is not difficult. Cao Daism also appeals to the peasant's nationalist sentiments because it is the first religion that is both explicitly Vietnamese and aspiring to become one of the world's great religions.

Hoa Hao, another form of Reformed Buddhism, also amalgamates the existing religious elements, but adds no new beliefs or deities. Rather, the movement seeks to recapture the purity of early Buddhism in propagating such principles as the notion that Buddha cannot be represented by any image; in Hoa Hao pagodas, a framed red board in the middle of the main altar is the only symbol of Buddha. The Hoa Hao also hold that an organized priesthood or monkhood is not necessary. All members of the movement are considered equal, and they disclaim the existence of any hierarchy. Much of the success of the movement as it became widespread in the trans-Bassac region of the Mekong delta can be attributed to the charismatic character of Huynh Phu So, founder of the sect, who, until his death at the hands of the Viet Minh in 1945, was considered a living Buddha.
V. ECONOMIC MOTIVATION AND INNOVATION

The striving to provide well for one's family, combined with some of the basic beliefs associated with the Cult of the Ancestors, contributes to the Vietnamese peasant's strong motivation for economic gain. In seeking to improve his lot, the peasant desires to have land, a fine house, material comfort, and education for his children. In addition, there is an economic side to some aspects of the Cult of the Ancestors, such as the notion of kin solidarity. One of the dreads of poverty is that the family may disintegrate as members quit the village to seek a livelihood elsewhere. It is imperative that the immediate family remain together, and that members of the common-descent group -- that is to say, all those related through the male line to a common ancestor (the paternal grandfather in southern Vietnam) -- retain their identity as a social group. There is comfort in having kinfolk about, and an unbroken lineage means immortality; the aging peasant, seeing his children and their children, is happy in the thought that his line is continuing.

Also, bliss in the afterlife is the reward for having observed the Cult of the Ancestors with proper veneration and offerings for the deceased. In the absence of this cult, the soul becomes a co-hon, a miserable errant spirit, one of the most malevolent in the pantheon. The essentials for the continuance of the Cult of the Ancestors are well defined. One must have a son, for it is the males in succeeding generations who bear the responsibility for maintaining the cult. Custom demands that there be the financial means to invite gatherings of kin and friends for cult observances.
The guarantee for this is in the traditional huong hoa patrimony\(^3\), the term given to that part of one’s landholdings which by legal declaration is dedicated to supporting the Cult of the Ancestors. According to Vietnamese law, the income from this land must be used to defray the cost of ritual celebrations associated with the cult, and title to the land is vested in the truong toc\(^4\) or head of the common-descent group.

The strong value attached to the ownership and acquisition of land is manifest wherever villagers find the means toward realizing their desires. Landless villagers try to save money with which to buy land; in Khanh Hau, there were numerous examples of tenant farmers who assiduously put aside small amounts, so as eventually to purchase about one-half hectare as a foundation on which to build. One villager sold his treasured inlaid cabinet on which the altar of the ancestors was arranged, and with the proceeds he bought several hectares of paddy land.

The pattern for those who inherit land is to accumulate capital and purchase additional holdings. Because in southern Vietnamese society women inherit land, there is danger of rapid fragmentation.

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\(^3\)In southern Vietnam, there are two types of huong hoa: huong hoa vinh vien, which is inalienable, and huong hoa co phan, which is alienable with the consent of all adult members of the common-descent group. The 1956 Agrarian Reform law restricted the huong hoa to fifteen hectares.

\(^4\)In northern and central Vietnam, the truong toc is either the eldest male in the common-descent group or the eldest male of the senior line. In southern Vietnam, the truong toc is elected by adult members of the common-descent group.
of landholdings, which may result in downward social mobility. In one family, for example, holdings dwindled from the paternal grandfather's 7 hectares to 0.467 hectare for each member of the present adult generation. This plunge into poverty necessitated the sale of the ancestral house, a disgrace for a peasant family.

It is very important for the southern Vietnamese to have a house, which after one generation can be designated a nha ong ba, or ancestral house. Not only is a well-constructed house of wood or masonry with tile roof a symbol of affluence, but it also is the sanctuary for altars honoring the ancestors, and the place where cult rituals are performed. A spacious house serves as a gathering place for the numerous members of the common-descent group who come to venerate their common ancestor, and this affords an occasion for them to reaffirm their relationship and introduce the members of the younger generation. Stone tombs also are considered desirable, for they will endure as reminders of the debt owed to the ancestors, and in some of the rituals associated with the Cult of the Ancestors they are themselves objects of veneration.

Most peasant families of southern Vietnam lack the material symbols of lineage, solidarity, and longevity. They own no land. Their houses are of perishable thatch, and their graves are mounds of earth scarcely identifiable after a decade of rainy-season floods and pulverizing hot-season suns. Although these families scrupulously observe rituals associated with the Cult of the Ancestors, their celebrations are necessarily modest and include only immediate kin. As a result, their common-descent groups tend to disintegrate as members leave the locality and lose touch. Still, even the poorer
peasants continue to strive in the hope that their destiny may hold good fortune. In Khanh Hau, this faith of the landless was bolstered in 1958 when a relatively poor tenant farmer won 1,000,000$VN in the national lottery. He immediately purchased land and declared a portion of it huong hoa. He then constructed a masonry house with tile roof, and altruistically donated 30,000$VN to the village for construction of an additional classroom at the primary school.

Conservative though they are in many respects, Vietnamese peasants display a readiness to accept innovation when it is shown to be useful. Though traditions are strong, and taboos and sanctions rigidly observed, they are flexible enough not to inhibit the peasants' economic activities. For example, one of the universal guides, the lunar calendar, prescribes or prohibits specific actions for specific days; but, though it may advise a farmer against planting on a certain day, it invariably allows him to plant the following day, and the short delay involved is likely to cause no loss or inconvenience.

Agricultural activity, particularly paddy cultivation, is highly patterned, but this does not mean that farmers are bound by habit to plant the same crops every year. Innumerable varieties of rice are cultivated in the Mekong delta, and every year during the dry season the farmers decide which kind they will plant with the coming rains. They sit about in their leisure hours discussing the prices of the previous year, anticipating price fluctuations, and listening attentively to those among them who are considered particularly
knowledgeable, that is to say, the well-to-do. In their region, the cost of chemical fertilizer and pesticides is a factor to be considered. Essentially, however, each farmer must make his own decisions, which depend on such questions as the relative height of fields (those with higher fields do well to cultivate fast-maturing varieties of rice because of the possibility that the rains may subside too soon), soil composition (for fertilizer), and the availability of fresh water (for double cropping). This provides scope for considerable individuality of choice. One Khanh Hau farmer, for example, realized a good profit by planting glutinous rice when all other farmers avoided it because the price of this variety had fallen the previous season. He reasoned that it was a good risk because there would always be a demand for glutinous rice (it is the kind that must be used as a food offering in rituals and that is considered the best nourishment for those in ill health), and, with no one else in the village cultivating it, the supplies would be low.

Economic innovation is not uncommon among southern Vietnamese peasants. In the past, Vietnamese settlers adopted Khmer varieties of rice and a Khmer style of thatching for their houses. They also selected a Khmer plow in favor of the heavier traditional plow of the Vietnamese. The threshing sledge, so ubiquitous at harvest time today, is a relatively new artifact. Some of the vegetables cultivated in many village gardens were introduced by the French, and, after the French established a medical service, many peasants became favorably disposed toward Western medicine.

Many of the technological and material innovations are confined to villagers of the upper economic level. At the lower level, peasants
are far more self-sufficient and satisfy most of their basic needs from the resources of the village. They exploit the physical surroundings, constructing their houses of available logs, bamboo, and thatching, and sustaining themselves for the most part on rice, vegetables, fruit, fish, and occasionally meat, that is to say, food which they can grow, catch, or raise in the village.

They make their own tools and furnishings, and, except for clothes, kitchenware, altar accoutrements, lamps, oil, and some condiments, they have no need for goods manufactured beyond the village.

As one ascends the socioeconomic ladder, however, the villagers' dependence on the outside increases. Houses are constructed by specialists (often from outside the village), who use other than local material, and their furnishings are manufactured in Saigon or one of the large market towns. The more prosperous villagers consume a good deal of food bought in the markets of the larger centers, including, occasionally, some canned French food such as peas. Many have either a motor scooter or a motor bicycle, and all of them, being farmers, must purchase chemical fertilizer and pesticide. Since they are relatively mobile, in touch with the outside, and financially able to take some risks, they are the ones who bring new things to the village. In Khanh Hau village, the highest venerable and wealthiest resident introduced chemical fertilizer by using it on one of his many hectares of land; when other farmers had observed its advantages, they followed his example. Another well-to-do villager has the first gasoline-powered
irrigation pump in Khanh Hau, and twelve wealthy families have installed new brick ovens in their kitchens in place of the traditional braziers.

Since 1950, a new pattern of entrepreneurial activities has emerged among a segment of Khanh Hau society. Before then, it was common for the well-to-do to increase their wealth by lending money at relatively high rates of interest. Some villagers grew richer by selling rice at the central market in Cholon. When the French administration first began importing equipment for small rice mills, villagers with the necessary capital constructed mills in and around the village. (The local maker of hand mills had to shift to general carpentry.) The mills, in turn, encouraged local rice merchandising, which attracted many villagers with capital to invest. The highest venerable in Khanh Hau built several rice mills in Long An province and opened a rice-vending shop in Tan An. Another farmer extended his rice merchandising to Moc Hoa in the Plain of Reeds, where rice prices are high.

In the years following, some of the more venturesome villagers extended their entrepreneurial activities even further. Several brothers (one of whom had been Viet Minh village chief) purchased a truck and loaded it with paddy, which they sold in Ban Me Thuot, a town in the highlands where little rice is cultivated and prices therefore are high. With the profits they purchased timber, which is plentiful in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot, and sold it in Tan An, where timber is scarce. This middleman operation yielded sizable profits, until an accident with the truck ended the business. Another
of the new capitalists was the village chief, who had gained wealth by inheriting land, marrying two well-do-do women, and engaging in rice merchandising, and who, in 1959, invested 100,000$VN in a new gasoline station next to the Tan An bridge.
VI. THE VILLAGE AS A SOCIAL UNIT

The proverb "Phep vua thua le lang" ("The laws of the emperor yield to the customs of the village"), known to all the people of Vietnam, reflects the reputation of the Vietnamese village as an autonomous, homogeneous community jealously guarding its way of life -- a little world that is disregardful (if not disdainful) of the larger world outside. There is indeed a certain homogeneity in the village way of life because of the inhabitants' common cultural tradition. But this does not necessarily imply strong social bonds and a sense of solidarity. These are qualities that exist within the village but do not apply to village society as a whole.

Several prominent factors can be isolated in this lack of communal solidarity. First, the Mekong delta village, unlike the agglomerative village of northern and central Vietnam, is composed of a number of dispersed hamlets. This fragmentation makes for social distance between those who live far apart; it is not uncommon for hamlets of the same village to be five kilometers apart, and for their residents to meet infrequently. There are no single focal centers that might attract large segments of the village population, giving them the opportunity for social interaction. The dinh, or communal temple, often is described as the social and religious center of the Vietnamese village, but in southern Vietnam this is true in only a limited sense. In the course of

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5The dinh, found in every village, is the repository for the imperial document naming the guardian spirit of the village. This structure also houses the altars honoring the guardian spirit and village ancestors. In effect, it used to be the symbolic bond between the village and the emperor.
the year, four rituals are held at the dinh, but attendance is required only of Cult Committee members, who usually number around one hundred and fifty, and some spectators can be expected to come from the hamlet in which the dinh is located. Periodically, there are other, special occasions (such as the "communist denunciation" meeting), but they attract only particular groups.

The Council House also falls short of being a community center. A villager only visits there occasionally, to take care of such administrative necessities as registering a birth, death, or land transfer, or to resolve a conflict with another villager. Nor do the temples of the different faiths serve adequately as social centers for the village. In Khanh Hau, neither of the two Buddhist pagodas had an active congregation of more than fifty people. The Cao Daist temples have larger congregations, but even they constitute only a fraction of the population.

The lack of communal identification manifested itself in Khanh Hau in the shortlived attempt to organize a village cooperative. Although limited to those who farm, it was the first cooperative effort whose members came from all hamlets of the village. But the trust and cooperation needed to make a success of the movement clearly were lacking. In their last meeting before the cooperative disbanded, some members openly admitted their reluctance to entrust money to the group.

There is greater solidarity at the hamlet level, particularly if the hamlet is not large or where the hamlet chief is popular, for he is the village official with whom the peasants deal. The people
of a hamlet will rally to the aid of a fellow-resident, and they may
be willing to cooperate on a hamlet project, such as a new canal,
from which they will benefit collectively.

The closest relationships in the village are found within
families that have the means to hold periodic gatherings associated
with the Cult of the Ancestors, and also, and even more commonly,
among the residence groups. These are the clusters of farmsteads
within the hamlet, many of them composed of related families, where
one finds face-to-face relationships, unqualified mutual aid (in
irrigating, transplanting rice seedlings, or thatching the house),
and common participation in family celebrations. In many instances,
proximity supersedes kin ties as a basis for strong social bonds.
This is reflected in the much-quoted Vietnamese proverb, "Buy close
neighbors, sell distant kin."

The political events of the past several decades have greatly
disrupted village life. Whereas war may have the effect of generating
solidarity in a nation, the guerrilla warfare characteristic of the
Indochina war and the present struggle have only bred suspicion and
conflict. Without battle lines, without an identifiable enemy, the
war is everywhere. There are pro-Viet Cong and pro-government factions
in the villages as there used to be pro-Viet Minh and pro-French groups.
Most villagers, however, do not actively take sides. Their primary
concern is with survival, and they have learned that to refrain from
alliance with either side is the best policy.
Since the end of the nineteenth century, historical events and the ways of the outside world have increasingly affected southern Vietnamese village society, and the village has become less and less isolated. Some of the resultant changes, such as the introduction of new religious institutions and innovations in economic activities, have already been mentioned. Changes that can be attributed to Saigon are in the area of village administration. In 1904 the French sought to standardize the village councils by issuing legislation that clearly defined the prerogatives and responsibilities of all councils. The new laws delineated the secular functions of the village councils, but ignored the traditional sacred functions associated with the village-sponsored "Cult of the Guardian Spirit of the Village." This precipitated the formation of village "cult committees," unofficial bodies of village venerables whose primary responsibility is the upkeep of the dinh and maintenance of the cult. The cult committee is a hierarchy in which the highest positions invariably go to former village chiefs, who, consequently, exercise considerable influence in village affairs.

The trend since 1904 has been toward a smaller village council. The pre-World War II council of twelve was first reduced to five members in most villages, and by 1961 had dwindled to three members. This reduction in size has been accompanied by a steady increase in paper work and the diminution of council prerogatives as outside governmental agencies have assumed greater responsibility in village affairs. The traditional autonomy of the village has been yielding, first, to the French administration, and, more recently, to the
central government. Through their subordinate bodies at the provincial and district level, the ministries in Saigon have had an increasing role in village education, public works, agricultural programs, financial affairs, judicial matters, and civil order. Furthermore, since the establishment of the republic in 1955, there has been a growing number of village organizations and associations such as the Five-Family Groups, Self Defence Guards, Hamlet Guards, and the abortive Village Cooperative and Republican Youth.

Whereas in the past the village leaders emerged from the older segment of the sociopolitical elite and received at best only modest salaries (prestige being more important than money), council members now are appointed by provincial authorities. They are younger, on the average, than their predecessors, and receive fixed salaries as civil servants. If Khanh Hau is typical of the situation throughout the Mekong River delta, the qualified villager no longer aspires to a high position on the village council. Not only is it perilous (in many cases the village chief has to seek the safety of a nearby market town at night), but the council is thought to have lost its authority. As one farmer said, "The people used to be the servants of the village council, and now the council is the servant of the people." To an outsider this may look like a democratic development, but to the peasant it means simply that the council has given up its power, as if the father in the family had yielded to his children.

With the coming of the republic, the administration passed into the hands of the Vietnamese for the first time. It is a moot point, however, whether the peasant has developed a sense of
identification with the central authority and thinks of it as his government. Saigon continues to be for him an alien place, constructed by the French and harboring many foreigners. In the past, it was the center of bothersome interference in village affairs and of the imposition of taxes and corvees. Today, it continues to be much the same source of irritation, with such added interdictions as the bans on gambling, divorce, plural marriage, and concubinage. Wherever the Strategic Hamlet Program has been implemented too rapidly and at too great a cost to the individual, many have resented it, and relocation is disliked by all peasants.

The Indochina war prepared the peasant for his role in the current conflict. Though some of the peasants are pro-Viet Cong and some pro-government, most of them have learned that nonalignment is the best way to survival. Thus, they passively comply with whichever side is in control of their area. If the Viet Cong enter the village during the night and force the peasant to dig up the road, he digs it up; and if government troops come the following day and order him to repair the road, he does so without complaint. He knows that he has no choice and that, of all the groups in Vietnam, it is he who is paying the highest price for the war. Casualties

6Several elderly farmers in Khanh Hau expressed the desire to become American citizens. When told that they would have to reside in the United States, one of them commented, "Why is that? When the French were in Saigon, we could become French citizens."

7One Khanh Hau farmer, in recalling that gambling had been one of the major pleasures during the lunar-new-year celebration, pointed out that, while the government forbade the people to gamble, it maintained the National Lottery and the Phu Tho race track. When peasants were asked what they thought of the Family Bill (forbidding divorce, plural marriage, and concubinage), they simply laughed and said it was only for those people in Saigon.
are higher among the peasants than among the military, and villages are shelled and strafed in the course of operations. The Vietnamese farmers are tired of the war. As a farmer in Binh Duong province put it, "Now we don't expect anything from the government or from the Viet Cong"; and he added wearily, "we just want to be left alone."
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