Tradition, Revolution, and Market Economy in a North Vietnamese Village, 1925-2006, HY V. Luong


Thi Viet Phuong Dang

By Thi Viet Phuong Dang *

This book is a revised and expanded version of the previously published Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988 on a Vietnamese village named Sơn-Dương, a rural community in the Red river delta in northern Vietnam. The idea for the book was originated from a life story of an ancient Sơn-Dương villager- Mr. Nguyễn Đắc Bằng, who was at that moment living in Toronto (Canada). The vivid story of his life along with historical events of northern Vietnam during the war and then the collectivism urged the author to seek for more in-depth understanding of the contemporary Sơn-Dương village. The author’s first field visits to the village were in 1987-88, and continued up to 2006.

The author’s analysis is mainly based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with Sơn-Dương villagers; plus historical evidence collected from the Vietnamese and French archives on the colonial era. In 2004, Luong conducted the study again but on a larger scale using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. He had in-depth interviews with villagers from all walks of life and a quantitative survey with more than a quarter of households in the village on the basis of a random probability sampling.

Through various sources of data, the author describes the life in Sơn-Dương village in colonialism, revolution and renovation. He also tries to examine the restructuring of the political economy and the local sociocultural framework in Sơn-Dương village particularly and in northern rural Vietnam generally. His research also considers theoretical models that can be applied to explain the revolution movements in agrarian societies. Presenting various theoretical models, Luong however argues that no single model can be used alone to explain historical facts emerged in the village and in the North of Vietnam during almost 80 years. He suggests that the structure of capitalism system and the indigenous social formation, or the native sociocultural framework, are two main factors that shaped the historical events in Vietnam in the last century. These structures in turn, were themselves shaped by historical events (p. 21).

The book presents the life in Sơn-Dương village in a chronologic order. It is composed of three parts: Part I covers historical events and village structure in colonial northern Vietnam; Part II is about the revolution in the village; and Part III is reserved for Sơn-Dương village in market economy and local dynamics.

Part I describes a colonial Sơn-Dương and its revolutionary processes in the first half of the twentieth century through the narratives of Bằng’s life history together with archived documents. Mentioning the agrarian revolution in this period, Luong emphasizes the male-centered hierarchy and indigenous traditions as characteristics that nurture the solidarity spirit among social classes during the revolutionary processes (p. 52). The reason for villagers’ taking part in the revolution was due to a distinction between insiders and outsiders, the consciousness of their kinship, their community and their nation (p. 96). Kinship, class-centered and community
structures are the basis for understanding the revolution dynamics of Sơn-Dương villagers in this period.

The revolution in the village covers a period from 1954 to 1988. Through the story of a village, Luong briefly describes the land reform, the collectivism, and then de-collectivism in the North of Vietnam. The land reform, inspired by the egalitarian ideology, transformed class structure in the village. It made significant changes in not only agricultural productivity but also in public facilities and in sociocultural life of the villagers. Socioeconomic differentiation among village households increased remarkably in 1980s, although land was still largely collectivized at that time. Luong argues that the transformation in the village of Sơn-Dương from 1954 to 1988 is a tension between the state raised collectivism and the kinship-centered hierarchical sociocultural model (p. 202-203).

The third part of the book, with three newly written chapters, mostly uses the quantitative data collected in 2004. The author describes Sơn-Dương village in the market economy with a brightly new face: new roads, new schools, renovated public facilities, modern houses, etc. Living standards of villagers improved significantly, with a net per capita income was four times higher than that of the last fifteen years. Together with those improvements, the author finds a relationship between economic development and the intensification of household-centered rituals and the increase of social networks of villagers. Luong also acknowledges the establishment and re-establishment of numerous voluntary associations in the 1990s. However, he states that these local associations do not constitute a civil society as normally conceptualized in Western social science literature. As these associations do not have characteristics such as the emergence of a bourgeois class, the relative independence from the state and from such “traditional” ties as kinship and communal relations (p. 277). The state-society relations are also mentioned via a description of the tensions between villagers and local authorities. The author argues that this relation cannot be fully explained without a cautious consideration of the indigenous sociocultural framework.

The main argument of the work is an emphasis on the indigenous sociocultural framework which is characterized by a class-structured, male-oriented and kinship-centered hierarchy. This model is used to explain social facts in Sơn-Dương village and in the northern rural Vietnam. However, much evidence provided to support this argument seems unsatisfactory. For example, it is oversimplified to take Vietnamese vocative system as evidence of the dominance of kinship-centered hierarchy (p. 268-269). While confirming the popularity of the male-oriented model, Luong also acknowledges a non-male-oriented one (i.e. bilateral system) manifested in ancestral offerings, wedding rituals, division of labor, etc. (p. 61, 77-79). With a sociocultural approach, the author sees the class distinction on the basis of seating arrangements in communal houses (p. 71-72), etc.

The book provides rich historical evidence and vivid social anthropological description of a village in particular and of Vietnamese northern rural society in general in almost the whole twentieth century. It can be a good reference for social science researchers who are interested in Vietnamese studies.

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Dictionnaire insolite de l’Indonésie,

Par Laurence Husson *

Cosmopole, une petite maison d’édition pari-sienne a lancé une collection de dictionnaires insolites aux thèmes aussi variés que les recettes de cuisine d’Alexandre Dumas, les superstitions populaires, le français SMS, des remèdes populaires, de la modernitude, etc. Ce concept de dictionnaire insolite aussi instructif que distrayant s’est étendu aux pays étrangers avec déjà cinq titres, dont quatre concernent l’Asie – Chine, Japon, Vietnam et Indonésie.

L’auteure, très familière de la langue indonésienne et en fine observatrice du pays mais surtout de ses habitants, nous livre à travers un lexique choisi quelques clés pour apprécier la diversité, la complexité, la spécificité et l’originalité de la culture indonésienne.

Après une très, voire trop brève présentation de l’archipel, le dictionnaire aborde cinq grands thèmes : la présentation de la langue,