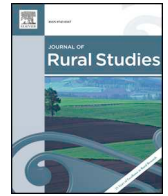




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# Economic transition without agrarian transformation: the pivotal place of smallholder rice farming in Vietnam's modernisation

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## ABSTRACT

Vietnam's economic transformation has been widely celebrated. Since the onset of market reforms in the late 1980s, rural communities with endemic rural poverty in the Red River Delta have become middle-income settlements. While there are many reasons for this uptick in economic prosperity, keeping land holdings for rice growing is not one of them: rice cultivation is unprofitable, hard work, and exposes families to significant opportunity costs. In an era of enhanced land commoditization and plentiful off-farm employment, what accounts for the widespread insistence on maintaining household rice land? Through a mixed methods study of three communes in northern Vietnam, we argue that smallholders are simultaneously reflecting historically on their family's embedded relationship to rice cultivation, thinking beyond the farm to other opportunities in the present, and hedging future economic risks against the constancy of rice land and what it can yield. Rural households pivot between past, present, and future when considering the value and role of their rice land. We show through the cases of these three communes that rural economic growth and national structural change do not automatically result in a diminution of rice farming. Understanding this 'fact' requires an approach that is sensitive to the shadows of history, aware of the multiple and different pressures in the present, while also being alert to people's sense of what the future might hold. This resonates with smallholder farming across Asia, the direction and shape of the wider agrarian transition, and helps to explain why policies aimed at agricultural modernisation have often failed, at least in their own terms.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most enduring challenges in agrarian studies is to understand the nature and direction of agrarian change, or agrarian transition. As countries develop and are transformed, what happens to agriculture, farming and rural livelihoods? This was first set out by Karl Kautsky more than a century ago, in *The agrarian question* (1998 [1899]). He predicted that the dynamics of capitalist agriculture would lead, inescapably, to the demise of the family farm. A century on, and the family farm – much changed, to be sure – survives across the globe. In a survey of farms, smallholder farms and family farms, Lowder et al. (2016, p. 27) write:

“We assume that at least 90% of the world's more than 570 million farms are held by an individual, small group of individuals, or household, as was the case for our 52 country sample. This leads us to estimate that there are more than 500 million family farms worldwide.”

Indeed, the family farm is likely the most numerous production unit in the world today. This often goes unremarked, but on reflection should be counted remarkable given the 'logics' of economic transformation.

In Asia, the surprise – that family farms have not been consigned to history by processes of capitalisation – goes one step further. Not only does the family farm survive, but the *smallholder* family farm survives (Rigg et al., 2016). So, along with the farm 'enterprise' remaining largely in family hands, as it has in other world regions, there is little evidence (yet) of land consolidation in Asia, and the emergence of large farms run as family-owned businesses. This dual persistence, of smallholder-cum-family farms, is important theoretically, but also in policy terms because it raises trenchant questions regarding the modernisation of the farm sector. As Otsuka et al. (2014, p. 1) have warned, “unless drastic policy measures are taken to expand farm size, Asia as a whole is likely to lose comparative advantage in agriculture ...”. What is missing

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from this discourse in which the smallholder is problematised as a break on the modernisation of farming (see Subpawathanakun, 2016 [on Thailand]; Government of Malaysia, 2010 [on Malaysia]; and Huang, 2012 [on China]), is an understanding of why rice smallholdings persist. We suggest that it is not enough simply to observe that, for example, the “rice farming sector [in Thailand] needs a transformation that turns small-scale farmers into large-scale farm operators to ensure productivity and profitability” (Subpawathanakun, 2016). We need to begin by understanding the place and role of rice farming in rural household livelihoods. Why have the dramatic transformations unfolding in rural areas of countries like Vietnam – the country that is the object of this paper – not yielded a corresponding disassembly of smallholder farms?

Another point to make in introduction is that most scholars do not expect to see the demise of the family farm any time soon:

“Those who still expect family farming soon to disappear are likely to be disappointed. What has been described in this short article is a constantly renewed set of contradictory forces in rural organization, within which the family mode of organization, arguably perhaps the oldest in all farming, has shown constant adaptability and therefore resilience” (Brookfield, 2008, p. 121).

In this paper, we dissolve these broader theoretical and practical questions in the grounded realities of farm household decision making and agrarian change in Vietnam, and specifically in Hanoi's peri-urban region. We explore how and why smallholder family farms persist in our field sites, focusing particularly on rice agriculture, and then use the nature of their survival to reflect back on the issue of smallholder family farm persistence more generally, and the policy and more theoretical implications that arise.

We make sense of the paradoxical survival of the small family farm in Vietnam through the lens of the agrarian ‘pivot’. The farm is pivotal in two senses, in temporal and in livelihood terms. As regards the former, we should be careful not to see the farm and farming as an inheritance from and reflective of the past, but rather as an adaptive pivot between past and future. And in livelihoods terms, the farm and farming are similarly not singular but intimately intertwined with Vietnam's ongoing and often extraordinary transformations in land laws, family dynamics, working opportunities, infrastructure and education. Far from being a brake on modernisation, the smallholder rice farm is a pivotal element in modernisation.

An important part of the reason for the ‘failure’ of Vietnam, and by extension other Asian countries too, to conform to type, is because we are asking the wrong questions, of the wrong analytical units, with the wrong set of assumptions about the nature of background development conditions. More specifically: the questions to be asked need to encompass matters non-farm, as well as farm, and consider consumption as much as production; we need to entertain the possibility that our basic analytical units – ‘household’, ‘farmer’, ‘worker’ – do not capture the ways in which economy and society are evolving in rural Vietnam; and we also need to be cognizant of the possibility that the direction of agrarian change in Vietnam may not echo the historical experience of the West. This is important because it sheds explanatory light on key policy questions concerning the modernisation of farming, national food security, the ‘exit’ of smallholders from rural areas, and rural poverty (see World Bank, 2007).

## 2. Agrarian transitology in peri-urban spaces

The term ‘transition’ implies a pathway of change with, at least in some readings, an ineluctable logic. So, when scholars write of agrarian transition, tacit is the assumption that rural spaces and people residing there are on the way to becoming something else. This process of transition is propelled by economic forces that are hard to resist; time's arrow, as it were. Nowhere is this likely to be more prevalent than in Asia's peri-urban zones, where intersecting pressures and processes of

urban expansion, industrialisation, pollution, population growth, land speculation, and land conversion, all make these regions prime sites of transition. If smallholder farms are going to come under pressure anywhere, it would be, one would think, in developing Asia's peri-urban fringes.

It has been noted for some time that Asia's densely settled wet rice growing lowlands exhibit an interleaving of rural and urban, farm and non-farm. Dating from Terry McGee's early work in Java (McGee, 1991; and see also McGee, 2002, 2008; and Firman, 2004), scholarship on these *desakota* regions has since been extended to China (Xie et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2017), the Philippines (Ortega, 2012), Thailand (Sajor and Ongsakol, 2007), and Vietnam (Kontgis et al., 2014). Much of this research has paid attention to the quite particular ways in which densely settled rural landscapes, dependent on high productivity wet rice culture, can also support processes of industrialisation, creating hybrid rural/urban spaces or *desakota* regions through processes of *kotadesasi*.<sup>1</sup> What is less explored is why this occurs, not just from spatio-economic and agro-ecological standpoints, which are the focus of McGee's work, but socio-economically, socio-politically, and temporally. Even though such agricultural regions may be able to support populations in excess of 1000/km<sup>2</sup>, this minor miracle of agricultural production still challenges most other trends and tendencies which, together, would be expected to work against such farming tenacity.

Hanoi's urban fringe presents just such a context where we might expect agrarian transition to become agrarian transformation, as social, economic and environmental pressures inexorably exert their authority over rural space and farming. But instead of being caught up in broader currents of economic change, these sites present a series of agrarian paradoxes:

- Rice farming is barely profitable, and sometimes unprofitable, but many villagers continue to allocate time and effort to the cultivation of rice;
- agriculture delivers only a fraction of household income, but few contemplate giving up their land, even when other opportunities are abundant;
- land is lent to relatives and neighbours with no expectation of receiving any payment – whether in cash or kind – in return;
- rural populations who are thoroughly commercially minded and aware often continue to view rice, and to take decisions regarding its cultivation, through a subsistence-inflected livelihood lens; and
- rice cultivation persists even though young people (with the support of their parents) seem intent on gaining the skills that lead them inexorably away from farming.

An elderly farmer in Hát Môn commune, one of our field sites, cast light on these rice-growing paradoxes as follows:

*It's hard work to plant rice ... and we can't get a significant income from its cultivation. ... We have to spend quite a lot on agricultural services such as ploughing ... we have to pay for irrigation services ... we have to pay for insecticide spraying ... we have to contribute money to the agricultural extension budget ... we have to buy seedlings, pay money for rice sowing and harvesting. Many households are [therefore] leaving their rice fields uncultivated. Despite farming being so hard, it's easy to lose a crop. More and more the young are choosing to work for companies. Only the elderly farm.*

But he also added:

*... because we have been peasants for so long, we do not know what to do other than farming.*

Nguyễn Đình Tung (66 years, male, Hát Môn)

<sup>1</sup> The term *desakota* is derived from the Indonesian words for town (*kota*) and village (*desa*), a spatial confection produced and sustained through the process of *kotadesasi*.

Rice cultivation, it seems, is unrewarding, laborious and unappealing. And yet farmers with tiny plots of land either continue to cultivate rice, or they allow others to do so; rarely do they contemplate selling their land.

With these matters in mind, in this paper we address a relatively straight-forward question, and one which speaks back to broader debates regarding Asia's truncated agrarian transition with which we opened the discussion: Why do households in Hanoi's dynamic peri-urban region keep hold of their land and continue to grow rice? The answer, and thus the significance of this research, lies in how farmers narrate their rice land, cultivation strategies, and subsistence-based livelihoods not solely as timeless facts of rural life but as transformational dimensions of a rapidly shifting set of opportunities and threats, which become readable and therefore understandable when viewed as a temporal and livelihood 'pivot'. Rice cultivation ranges from being an aspirational hedge against potential future precarity to a cumbersome inheritance, and is frequently described in both of these ways. Thus, rice farming is dependent on, but not confined by, temporal markers like historical conditions, present-day possibilities, and future-oriented concerns. These three markers – past, present, and future – form the basis of our respondents' relationship to rice farming.

From a policy perspective, our findings encourage thinking about rice farming as a stabilizing force on rural lives. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, the respondents in this project prove that rice cultivation is not, in itself, going anywhere but is nonetheless very much part of Vietnam's modernisation experience. This point disputes conventional perspectives that forecast a hollowing out of rural areas as people inevitably abandon their land, lose their cultivation strategies, and drop their subsistence-based livelihoods in favour of purportedly more lucrative off-farm employment opportunities. From a governance perspective, it is perhaps more accurate for policy-makers to set recommendations based on the embeddedness of rice farming rather than beginning policy discussions with the forecasted demise of the family rice plot.

### 3. The field sites: Đại Bái, Hát Môn and Lam Điền communes

The empirical discussion is drawn from fieldwork in three communes, and the characteristics of each are summarised below and tabulated in Table 1.

**Đại Bái** commune is located in the Western part of Gia Bình district, Bắc Ninh province, and covers a land area of 619 ha, of which 385 ha is classified as agricultural land. Its population in 2016 was 10,516 in 2715 households, and of these the number of poor households, as

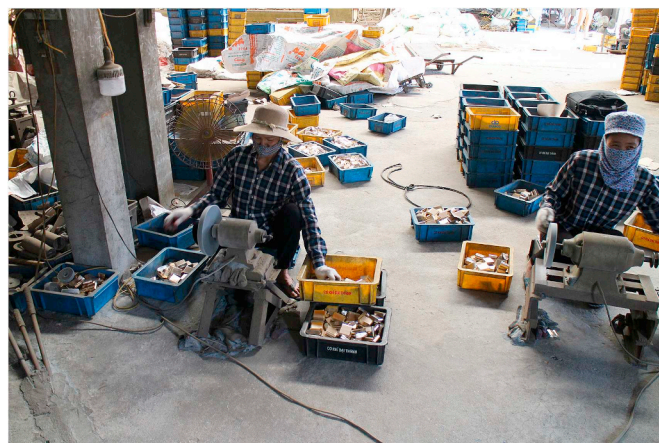


Illustration 1. Craftworkshop in Đại Bái commune.

identified by the People's Committee, was 121. Along with rice and other crops, pigs, poultry, buffalo and cattle were raised in the commune, and there were some 50 ha of fish ponds. Đại Bái village (one of three villages in the commune) consists of four hamlets and is known as a craft village specialising in light metal production (mostly bronze casting), an activity that locals date back to the eleventh century. To begin with, each hamlet specialized in one feature product. Tây hamlet has historically produced trays, Ngoài pots, Giũa kettles, and Sôn flowerpots. Since then, however, the hamlets have diversified and modernised production (Illustration 1). Some craft workshops have started using modern equipment in the production process, such as casting, metal cutting, and polishing and milling machines, which have contributed to a rise in productivity and product quality. The flipside to this growth has been intensive environmental degradation as producers release their waste into the commune's rivers, streams, and aquifers. The area is now arguably as well-known for its toxic physical environment as it is for its bronze casts of Vietnamese historical and religious figures. Notwithstanding this craft-working tradition, farming continues to be an important activity.

**Hát Môn** is among 23 rural communes in Phúc Thọ district, now incorporated within the administrative boundaries of Hanoi city. The commune covers 434 ha, including 254 ha of agricultural land. In 2017 the population of Hát Môn was 8401 in 1843 households, of which 89 were defined as poor and 103 as 'near poor'. Of the 5711 residents of working age, 42% made a living in agriculture. Like Đại Bái, Hát Môn

Table 1  
Summary data – Đại Bái, Hát Môn and Lam Điền communes.

	Lam Điền	Hát Môn	Đại Bái
Distance from Hanoi (km)	~25 km	~30 km	~40 km
Total population	12,013	8401	10,516
Total number of villages/hamlets	5	10	3
Total number of HHs	2820	1843	2715
% HHs defined as 'poor'	4.4%	4.1%	4.0%
Total land area	811 ha	434 ha	619 ha
Total area of farmland	548 ha	254 ha	385 ha
Total area of rice paddy	285 ha	164 ha	286 ha
% HHs with farm land	74%	70%	69%
% HHs engaged in farming	69%	68%	60%
% HHs engaged in rice farming	65%	64%	60%
% HHs engaged in livestock raising for sale	13%	5%	4%
% HHs for whom cropping (rice and other field crops) is their principal livelihood activity	21%	18%	15%
% HHs for whom cultivation of orchard crops is their principal livelihood activity	3.5%	4%	0%
% HHs for whom livestock raising is their principal livelihood activity	9%	< 1%	< 1%
Average Income (VND/person/year)	30,140,000 [US\$ 1,400] (2017)	40,000,000 [US\$ 1,800] (2017)	36,000,000 [US\$ 1,600] (2016)

Notes: these data are distilled from various People's Committee Census sources (2016 and 2017).



**Illustration 2.** Hát Môn's mixed fields of rice, corn and vegetables.

has a mixed agricultural economy encompassing crops and livestock. In addition to farming, the commune supported 202 carpenter's workshops, 35 small mechanical workshops, and 260 shops. This commune could be considered the most agriculturally-based of the three sites because it is also – besides being a major rice cultivation area – a prominent commune for fruit and vegetable growing (Illustration 2).

The commune of **Lam Điền** is situated in Chương Mỹ district, also now administratively part of greater Hanoi. Given its close proximity to Hanoi's city centre, it is arguably the most urbanised commune of the three, but still supports a significant agricultural sector (Illustration 3). It encompasses a land area of 811 ha, of which 524 ha is agricultural land. The five hamlets that make up Lam Điền supported 2820 households with a population of 12,013 people in 2016. Along with farmland there were around 70 poultry farms and 20 pig farms. Like Hát Môn, 40% of villagers work in farming, the remainder in various non-farm jobs in or outside the village. In addition, there are approximately 100 people working overseas (mostly [female] domestic helpers and [male] construction workers). Most income comes from non-agricultural work; farms are mainly to meet household consumption needs and most of those who work in farming are aged 40 years or over, their work supplemented by workers arriving from poorer neighbouring communes on short-term, largely informal contracts. This is true, indeed, of all three communes.

There are three points to note about the study communes, and the data in Table 1. First, while these communes have undergone considerable structural change and are within the functional ambit of



**Illustration 3.** Paddy fields of Lam Điền.

Hanoi, between two-thirds and three-quarters of households continue to own farm land. Second, not only do they own land; some 60%–65% still farm rice. But, and third, for only one-fifth of households or less was the cultivation of field crops (including rice) their principal livelihood activity.

#### 4. Methods

This paper utilizes a collaborative mixed methods approach that includes interview data from households in the three case study communes, survey questionnaires drawing out household profile information, informant interviews with key village leadership, and content analysis of local government reports on land use, holdings, sales, acquisitions, and titling.

The three villages were chosen after pilot visits by the authors to six different locations in northern Vietnam. Final locations were chosen because of their proximity to Hanoi, and because each is subtly if importantly distinct. We drew on a mix of surveys, government reports, and brief interviews with local leaders to compile Table 1, while more detailed production and expenses figures in the empirical sections that follow are primary data drawn from interviews and the survey. The paper is part of a wider project covering ten countries of Southeast and East Asia (Thompson et al., 2019) tasked with understanding the breadth and temporalities of agrarian change in the region.

Groundwork for the research was laid by the first co-author who in 2015 initiated contact with the local Party leadership in each of the communes. The survey questionnaire data were collected by the first author and local Vietnamese research assistants who made bi-monthly visits to each of the communes. In addition to baseline demographic information, the questionnaire covered the role of farming in household economic activities, perceptions of wealth and poverty among villagers, land use and value, labour activities and conditions, and issues facing farmers and agriculture in the villages.

Once official permission was granted to work in the communities, the other co-authors joined the lead author in the field for short periods in 2016, 2017 and 2018. It was during these visits that around a half of the interviews for the project were undertaken. Structured interviews with the three project investigators and individual households constitute the remainder of the qualitative data gathered for the research. Respondents were identified through a mixture of introductions by local government contacts, existing relationships between villagers and the lead investigator or research assistants, and via snowballing. With the exception of local officials, we interviewed subjects in their homes, usually in a group context although often one person would take the lead in answering our questions. Only rarely did we interview individuals and in cases when we did, these respondents were either widows or divorced (in the case of our female participants) or unemployed or retired (in the case of our male participants).

The methods undertaken reflect our interest in navigating (in an explanatory manner) the often complicated explanations shaping the intersections of agrarian livelihoods and land use in Vietnam. While the statistical data were helpful in understanding the changing dynamics of the villages over time, interviews brought us closer to the meaningfulness of people's multifaceted attachments to their land and rice. Bringing surveys and interviews into dialogue with each other provides a deeper engagement with the textures of rapid socio-economic transformations occurring in Vietnam since economic reforms were instituted in the 1980s (see below).

In total we undertook over 100 semi-structured interviews with household members in the three case study sites, which were conducted in Vietnamese and subsequently transcribed and translated. Additionally, we held formal interviews with members of each commune's Communist Party leadership on six occasions, three with the first author present and three with all three authors present. These conversations contextualized each village's population and economic profile, and gave us a lens into the unique opportunities and challenges

facing the villages.<sup>2</sup>

Interview questions were standardized across the three villages. We began by confirming baseline data such as name, age, marital status, number of children and members of the family, occupation(s) of each family member, and length of time spent living in the home. We then introduced questions to understand farmer livelihoods, such as size of farmland and rice land, livestock, and on-farm and off-farm economic activities. From there, questions moved on to discussions about past, present, and current uses of – and expectations behind – farming, the role of technology in agricultural labour, the future of their land, and average income and expenses. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one and a half hours, with an average of around one hour. Each household was given a small honorarium for their time (50,000 Vietnamese *dong*, or approximately 2.5 US dollars each), which is normal in Vietnam.

If we look past the formal data to the informalities of interview conversations, what stands out is how self-reflexive farmers were as they narrated their personal finances against broader political and cultural mores. Off-the-cuff recollection about the numbers representing their economic decisions clarifies the extent to which peasants understood the consequences of maintaining their holdings. Household accounting systems were extraordinarily precise – including almost instant recall of historical revenue, inputs, expenses and yield – and most farmers were aware of the economic ‘irrationalities’ shaping their decisions to grow rice. For example, most research participants could quickly, without notes and with little uncertainty, remember the value of their land, how much of it had been sold or transferred over the years (to whom and at what price), and how much gains and losses they received from their different forms of off-farm work and agricultural activities. They were aware of cultivation costs down to last few thousand Vietnamese *dong*, and farmers were even sure of how much lower grades of rice were fed to their livestock, rather than consumed or sold. It was these conversations, above all, that helped us to understand the paradox of rice farming outlined at the start of the paper. It is not as if respondents were unaware of the opportunity costs of working their land and growing rice, but this becomes understandable when placed in temporal and livelihood context.

Pragmatic explanations surrounding rice growing also feature prominently in the details that follow. Rice *should* be cultivated in rural areas of northern Vietnam, the argument goes, and there is a timelessness underpinning the spirit of this point, or what could be called a pivot to the past. How this cultivation happens is subject to change, however. If there is an idealism to rice's role as a cornerstone of northern Vietnamese smallholder identity then the ways in which that role is maintained with Vietnam's achievement of ‘middle-income’ country status deserves further scrutiny.

## 5. Vietnam's agrarian reforms

In 1988, agricultural land in Vietnam was decollectivized following the promulgation of Resolution 10, transferring farm decision making from collectives to households. The 1993 Land Law and 2013 Land Law<sup>3</sup> took this further, redistributing land – or at least land *use* – to

<sup>2</sup> As noted, Vietnam is one country in a larger comparative project studying smallholders and agrarian change across East and Southeast Asia (see Thompson et al., 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Article 126 of the 2013 Land Law stipulates that the term for lease of agricultural land to households or individuals must not exceed 50 years. At the expiry of the term, households or individuals that have continuing demand shall be considered by the State for continued leasing of the land. Article 129 of the 2013 Land Law stipulates that the allocation quotas for land for annual crops, aquaculture and salt production for each household or individual directly engaged in agricultural production are prescribed as follows: not exceeding 3 ha for each type of land in provinces and centrally run cities in the southeast region and Mekong Delta region; not exceeding 2 ha for each type of land in other

individual farm households through the issuing of Land Use Certificates (LUCs).<sup>4</sup> The initial allocations of land to households were based on the number of adult members in a household: an adult received a land ‘share’, which was calculated according to the adult population of each commune and the land available. In Hát Môn, one of our field sites, for instance, it was 540 m<sup>2</sup> or 1.5 *sào* per adult family member.<sup>5</sup>

The background to these reforms was agrarian failure reflected in stagnant, even falling levels of productivity and endemic rural poverty. It was recognised, from as early as the late 1970s but increasingly through the 1980s, and perhaps not a moment too soon, that the commune system was failing. A process of spontaneous individualisation was already quite far advanced in areas of the north, where farmers were pursuing practices that “were often at odds with what collective farming required, what authorities wanted, and what national policy prescribed” (Kerkvliet, 2005, p. 234; and see Kerkvliet, 2009; and Kerkvliet and Porter, 1995). The 66-year-old farmer in Hát Môn quoted above [Nguyễn Đình Tung, 66, Hát Môn], said that his family became cooperative members in 1960. Over time, as the commune failed to deliver on the promise of better rural living standards, ‘*more and more households were keeping pigs [individually] at home rather than growing rice [collectively]*’. While central authorities might have viewed such progressive individualisation with displeasure, it was permitted, even encouraged, by commune leaders at the coalface of local rural livelihoods. In the south, meanwhile, the process of cooperativization never truly took root, with a good deal of foot dragging and resistance from rural households. This was the case during “American War” efforts by the South Vietnamese governments to establish “strategic hamlets” in the south and post-war initiatives driven by a newly unified Vietnamese Party from Hanoi (Biggs, 2012). In 1986, eleven years after collectivisation had begun, only 5.9 per cent of farms in the Mekong Delta belonged to cooperatives (Do and Iyer, 2008, p. 535).

This situation, in both north and south, set the scene and provided the impetus for the progressive liberalisation of farming from the late 1980s, leading to the *de facto* emergence of an agrarian system based on smallholder farms that operated as individual economic production units. Inevitably, in a rural area that was historically densely populated and where urbanisation – and therefore rural-urban population movements – were curtailed by state *fiat*, not least through the household registration or *hộ khẩu* system (Hardy, 2001, Nguyen et al., 2012), the areas of land (re)distributed to households in the Red River Delta were small. Even with the ‘free’ production increases that followed reforms,<sup>6</sup> rural standards of living placed the majority of rural households below, or very close to, the extreme poverty line. In 1993 when the Land Law was introduced, based on data from Vietnam's General Statistics Office

(footnote continued)

provinces and centrally run cities (Quốc hội [The National Assembly]. 2013. Luật Đất đai [Land Law]. ([http://vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class\\_id=1&page=1&mode=detail&document\\_id=171639](http://vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=1&page=1&mode=detail&document_id=171639)), accessed October 2019).

<sup>4</sup> In 2009, the Vietnamese Government issued Resolution QNo. 63/NQ-CP on ensuring national food security. One of the objectives of the Resolution is to protect 3.8 million hectares of land for rice production to meet demand for domestic consumption and exports of about 4 million tons/year by 2020. In order to achieve the objectives in the Resolution, one of the tasks is to protect strictly areas of rice land producing two crops per year and produce land use maps at commune and household levels to meet this aim (Chính Phủ [Government]. 2009. “Nghị quyết về đảm bảo an ninh lương thực quốc gia [Resolution on ensuring national food security].” ([http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class\\_id=509&mode=detail&document\\_id=92364](http://www.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?class_id=509&mode=detail&document_id=92364)), accessed in October 2019).

<sup>5</sup> In Northern Vietnam, one *sào* is equivalent to 360 m<sup>2</sup>; in Central Vietnam it amounts to 500 m<sup>2</sup>; while in the Mekong Delta, a *công* extends over 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> By ‘free’ we mean production increases that came from deploying labour and other resources more efficiently and effectively, not through greater use of new technologies. In other words, arising from the incentive to work harder and better that the reforms delivered.

(GSO), 66 per cent of Vietnam's rural population were defined as living below the poverty line. In the Red River Delta, the figure was 63 per cent (JDR, 2007, p. 4 and 7).

Rural households responded by challenging the *hộ khẩu* system, becoming increasingly mobile in a context where there were quite stiff barriers to mobility, both bureaucratically and, sometimes, culturally (i.e., kinship linkages). It was by inter-leaving agricultural pursuits with non-agricultural activities, local and extra-local, that households were able significantly to raise their incomes above the poverty line. In 2008/9, on World Bank criteria, Vietnam progressed – nationally – from low- to middle-income status. Between 1993 and 2006, the national poverty rate fell from 58 to 16 per cent, and the rural poverty rate from 66 to 20 per cent (JDR, 2007: 4). The economic growth underpinning this fall in income poverty was concentrated in and around Vietnam's two large urban centres, Hanoi in the north and Ho Chi Minh City in the south, but it was felt by households far beyond these cities.<sup>7</sup>

This is the wider national development story that finds its local reflection, and particularities, in our three study sites. Indeed, the years between the end of the American (or Vietnam) War and the beginning of land reform were infamously known throughout Vietnam as the “subsidy era” (*thời bao cấp*), a period of intensified poverty concentrated in the rural north where our study is located. These were places where farming provided only a bare subsistence and the majority of households could be counted as poor.

For example, in Hát Môn commune, agricultural products in each year from 1977 to 1979 did not meet the year's plan objectives. Agricultural productivity was very low. In some communes, one day's work earned the equivalent of 0.5–0.6 kg of rice, barely enough to survive. Peasants were in a situation of real deprivation, poverty and difficulty.<sup>8</sup> In Hát Môn, in these years, the commune could not meet economic targets because of bad weather and bureaucratic intransigence. In 1977, for instance, and notwithstanding great efforts, Hát Môn transplanted only 480 mẫu of rice land<sup>9</sup>; the plan was to cultivate 980 mẫu.<sup>10</sup> In 1985, Đại Bái commune was also in a situation of poverty and there was widespread hunger in the early months of the year.<sup>11</sup>

All of the study sites are now within reach of a daily commute of Hanoi, but until quite recently they were thoroughly rural in complexion and mainly agricultural in terms of local activities and livelihoods. The fact that the difficult conditions that afflicted all three communes in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to harvest failures could not be cushioned through non-farm work emphasises the degree to which they were, first, reliant on farming and, second, could not easily take succour in Hanoi due to state-patrolled constraints on personal mobility. In fact, of the three sites only Đại Bái continues to hold a rural land designation; the other two villages have quite recently been absorbed into Hanoi's city jurisdiction and are now officially “urban” (Labbé, 2014). The privations of the past were accentuated by controls

<sup>7</sup> Poverty became increasingly concentrated in more remote rural areas and, particularly, in the uplands of the north and centre. Between 1993 and 2006 poverty in the Northern Mountains declined from 81.5 to 30.2 per cent and in the Central Highlands from 70.0 to 28.6 per cent. In the Mekong Delta, it declined from 47.1 to 10.3 per cent and in the Red River Delta from 62.7 to 8.8 per cent (JDR, 2007, p. 7).

<sup>8</sup> This information is gleaned from: Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Hát Môn – Huyện Phúc Thọ [Hát Môn Commune Communist Party Committee - Phúc Thọ district]. 2017. Lịch sử cách mạng của Đảng bộ và Nhân dân xã Hát Môn (1930–2015) Revolutionary History of Hát Môn Commune Communist Party and Lam Điền People (1930–2015).

<sup>9</sup> 1 mẫu = 10 sào; 1 sào = 360m<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Sourced from: Đảng bộ huyện Chương Mỹ, Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Lam Điền [Chương Mỹ District Communist Party Committee, Lam Điền Commune Communist Party Committee], 2016: 152.

<sup>11</sup> Sourced from: (Đảng ủy – Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Đại Bái [Communist Party Committee - People's Committee of Đại Bái Commune], 1996: 128).

on mobility, and among our respondent households there was a widespread appreciation that local livelihood needs as well as the requirements of national development could be met, today, only by moving beyond the spatial confines of the commune and the sectoral alignments of agriculture.

## 6. Why grow rice?

*... rice farming is hard work but does not generate a good income. ... Many people leave their rice fields uncultivated because rice growing is not economically profitable any more. ... their children are working in companies, [and] the old do not have enough health [to work the land].*

Đặng Việt Du (male, 46 years old)

So, to return to the question we asked at the start: why do households in Hanoi's peri-urban region continue to grow rice? In the three communes included in this study, and as noted, 69–74% of households had access to land through LUCs, 60–65% cultivated rice, and land planted to rice accounted for 52%, 65% and 74% of the area under crops in the three communes (see Table 1). And yet we also know that this region of Vietnam is undergoing profound economic and social change. On the ground, there appears to be a surprising ‘stickiness’ to agrarian change given broader transition processes. In the rest of the paper, we seek to explain this (widening) gap between the narrative of Vietnam's economic transition on the one hand, and the experience and practice of agrarian change on the other. In pointing this out, we are also paying attention to a broader debate in the literature on the political economy of development and agrarian change, both in the global South generally (Carlson, 2018) and more specifically in Southeast and East Asia (Arnold and Campbell, 2018; Masina and Cerimele, 2018).

The answer to this core question – why grow rice? – is not singular but lies at the intersection of economic logic, bureaucratic determinism, agro-ecological dependency, social insurance, cultural inertia, historical inheritance, and future aspirations.

### 6.1. Rice growing: historical paths, cultural inheritances, economic logics, and future precarities

There are many ways to present the story of rice in the Red River Delta. Here we adopt a temporal approach. The situation as we found it, is not only bound up with matters of contemporaneous significance. The past and the future cast their shadows over the present. The past suggests persistence; the present compels change; and the future urges protection.

#### 6.1.1. Looking back: rice-growing in historical and cultural perspective

From a historical standpoint, that rice should persist and continue to dominate the farm lands of the Red River is not remarkable; rice has been grown here for millennia. The agro-ecological demands of wet rice are particularly well served in this area and, moreover, its cultivation over many years has shaped the landscape in ways that make its simple conversion to other agricultural uses, difficult. For Bray, “wet-rice cultivation shapes and divides a landscape decisively” and fields “which are undrained and permanently waterlogged are suitable for very few other crops ... and rice-farmers must make a long-term choice as to the proportion of land to be allotted primarily to rice ...” (Bray, 1986, p. 116 and 117). There is also an inertia to farming. Leaving land unused, whether idle or abandoned, has ecological consequences. Trịnh Thị Thi (Hát Môn, 42 years old) explained that idle land attracts rats. This has implications for individual land owners, but for neighbours too. In addition, to maintain land quality it is necessary to till the soil and cultivate the land. *‘It's a way of nourishing our fields’ [gi’ cho đất màu mỡ]*, Nguyễn Thị Nhu (37, female, Đại Bái) told us.

The sedimentations of history also see their echo and repetition in a cultural predisposition towards rice cultivation, reflected in the implied circular logic, ‘we are rice farmers because we are rice farmers’. That

subsistence farmers have a deep-seated, almost innate, attachment to the land and to rice is a *leit motif* of agrarian studies. In Southeast Asia, the centrality of rice to life, reflected in language and life course events are highlighted to make the point that rice is not just ‘another crop’ but has a meaning and significance that sets it apart. As Nguyễn Đình Tung said to us, ‘because we have been peasants for so long, we do not know what to do other than farming’ [Bởi vì chúng tôi làm nông dân lâu rồi nên không biết làm gì khác ngoài làm nông dân]. Phùng Thị Thu, a 39 year-old farmer with three sào of land, and two sào planted to rice, provided an insight into this ‘culture of rice’ argument when she told us, ‘I grow rice to eat. Because we are farmers, we should farm.’ These statements hint at the possibility that it is necessary to go beyond the economics of rice cultivation to uncover the reasons for its persistence in places like the Red River Delta. Rice, Bray et al. (2015, p. 21) write in their explanation of the ‘Rice is Nice’ epithet, has an “exceptionally high degree of symbolic magnetism” for both producers and consumers. It also shows that history matters not solely because of the significance of the land our respondents were born on, but what livelihoods they developed on those lands, and the identities that subsequently emerged.

Along with these historical, cultural and agro-ecological reasons for the persistence of rice cultivation, there is also the legacy of Vietnam’s former command economy. Notwithstanding the agrarian reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, the state continues to play a significant role in shaping agrarian processes. Farmers are not, in other words, free decision-making agents, even against the backdrop of the individualisation of farming. The Vietnamese government and commune authorities specifically protect rice farming by preventing fields defined as ‘rice land’ from being planted to other crops, let alone converted to other uses. ‘If any household wants to change their land use’, Kim Thị Trung (48, female, Hát Môn) explained, ‘they have to submit a request to the Commune People’s Committee’. When we asked Nguyễn Thị Nhu (37, female, Đại Bái commune) why she did not plant other crops if rice was so unprofitable, she was adamant: ‘[we] are not allowed. We all have to follow the regulations on land use of the local authorities.’ In these cases, landholders must seek permission from local authorities before they can diversify into other crops.

So, while farming is putatively individualised, the authorities have not been willing to devolve quite basic land use decisions to individual households. This is grounded in the desire to ensure that Vietnam remains self-sufficient in rice (Tran Cong Thang and Nguyen Le Hoa, 2016). A paddy land designation policy stipulates that around 35 per cent of all agricultural land be reserved (‘designated’) for rice, which represents some 90 per cent of land under rice cultivation (Giesecke et al., 2013). This desire to protect rice land from conversion to other crops and uses is informed by recent history, namely the acute food shortages in parts of the north during the late 1970s (Bryant, 1998). Rice, as it were, is too important a crop to be left to the vagaries of the market on the one hand, and the sometimes wilful decisions of farmers on the other, who might grow crops that are not in the national interest. Even leaving rice land uncultivated entertained the possibility of official retribution. Nguyễn Thị Thu (56, female, Đại Bái commune) told us that in the previous year the local authorities had warned farmers who had left their land uncultivated they were at risk of having their land use rights ‘revoked’ [thu hồi]. While the risk that a household’s land use rights might be reallocated to another family was important, there was a strong moral sense that land *should* be cultivated – that not to do so was wrong. On the few occasions when households did relinquish their land, selling the use rights, this was only either when families had secure and sustainable alternative livelihoods or, more likely, *in extremis*. The rich had the existential latitude to relinquish their land and the poor and vulnerable the existential necessity to do so. Nguyễn Thị Mạnh (55 years old, female), thought that the latter occurred mainly when there was illness in the family, and certainly the power of serious illness to throw a spanner in the livelihood works has been noted in other contexts (see Krishna, 2010).

Recent years have seen a further justification to grow rice for own



Illustration 4. Tombs amidst rice fields in Lam Điền commune.

consumption, even when the costs of cultivation make this a marginal activity: food safety. Fears that food is no longer safe have grown. Stories, real and fanciful, from China had raised awareness of such matters among our respondents (see Ehlert and Faltmann, 2019). Kim Thị Trung (48, female), for instance, thought that commune members ‘still keep growing rice so that they have “clean” rice, which is grown by themselves, to eat ... to protect their health’ [Tiếp tục trồng lúa để họ có lúa sạch do họ trồng, để ăn ... để bảo vệ sức khỏe]. Additionally, participants frequently invoked the purity of their crop quality in justifying their contemporary commitment to maintaining household rice production. Nguyễn Thị Thu (56, female, Đại Bái commune) explained that because it was their own rice, grown on their own fields, they knew exactly how it was cultivated and what chemicals were used, and when.

In all these ways, history, culture and agro-ecology conspire to provide a quite compelling explanation for the presence and persistence of rice farming and smallholdings in our study communes, and on the lands of the Red River. In a real sense, and for agro-ecological, cultural, political and historical reasons, the fields we saw and talked about were not land planted to rice, but *riceland*. Walking through fields peppered with the tombs of long-dead ancestors emphasises that there is an oryzaline to be traced, as well as a patriline (Illustration 4). The latter binds families through time, the former to space. But, when we ask the question not against the backdrop of culture and environment, and the sedimentations of history, but against the realities of contemporary life in these communes, the fact of continued rice cultivation seems far from ordained.

#### 6.1.2. Reflecting on the present: rice-growing in the shadow of profit, loss and opportunity

Without exception, our interviewees reported that farming rice – economically – was a marginal activity. It was also widely perceived to be hard work and, among the young, unattractive:

*Although we still keep growing rice, we do not spend much time and concern for rice growing. ... we can earn much more money from [other] jobs rather than spending time rice growing.*

Nguyễn Thị Du (female, Đại Bái commune)

*Now rice is cheap [to buy] and difficult to cultivate. Cultivating rice does not bring much [financial] benefit, so people do not want to grow rice.*

Nguyễn Thị Mạnh (55 years old, female, Đại Bái commune)

*Growing rice is hard work, requiring much cultivation expense, but generating an insignificant profit.*

Nguyễn Thị Nhu (37, female, Đại Bái commune)

*The cost of cultivating rice is similar to the price of buying rice.*

Hoàng Văn Tuyền (male, 38, Lam Điền commune)

Table 2 outlines the costs and returns of one farmer with 3 sào (1,080 m<sup>2</sup>) of rice land. The net profit per year amounted to around 3 million VND, or US\$136. To put this net profit into perspective,

**Table 2**

Costs and returns to rice over 3 sào of land (2018).

Source: household interview, Lương Xá hamlet, Lam Điền commune, 2018.

	per sào (360m <sup>2</sup> )	Over 3 sào (1,080m <sup>2</sup> ) of rice land	
		per season	per year
<b>Production and returns</b>			
Production (kg)	150	450	900
Market value (VND)	1,350,000	4,050,000	8,100,000
<b>Costs (VND)</b>			
Commune fees	100,000	300,000	300,000
Ploughing	140,000	420,000	840,000
Transplanting	300,000	900,000	1,800,000
Fertilizer	200,000	600,000	1,200,000
Harvesting	180,000	540,000	1,080,000
Total costs	920,000	2,760,000	5,220,000
<b>Net profit (VND)</b>	<b>430,000</b>	<b>1,290,000</b>	<b>2,880,000</b>

Note: commune fees are levied per sào per year; US\$1 = 22,000 VND.

agricultural wage labourers were paid around 250–300,000 VND per day, so the profit from farming three crops of rice over three sào of land amounted to around ten to twelve days' – or two weeks' – work. As Đặng Thị Hạ, a 37 year-old female farmer told us: *'If we depend only on our fields, it is impossible to make ends meet'*, then asking rhetorically: *'How can we live like other people when the cost of paddy rice is just 600,000 VND [US\$27] a quintal [100 kg]?'*

Nor is the 'trouble with rice' just an issue of costs and returns. As the interview quotes above indicate, rice cultivation is also regarded as hard work and while older villagers may say *'we have been peasants for a long time, so we don't know what to do if not agriculture'* (Nguyễn Đình Tung, 66, male, Hát Môn), for many younger villagers, farming had few attractions, and many had never farmed. Mr Hoàng Văn Tuyển (38, male, Lam Điền commune) had three children and admitted that *'No, they don't know [how to grow rice]. They have never, ever done rice growing.'*

The educational ambitions that almost every couple had for their children was to ensure, as best they could, that they would have opportunities other than to farm. Deliberating over historical conditions and current uncertainties had led many heads of households to project a post-farming future for their offspring, a future often emboldened by better educational opportunities than they had. Mr Trần Đình Ca (Hát Môn commune) explained that people hoped that educating their children might provide an opening for employment in a government office. This, as he put it, would mean they would *'have a certain position in society'*. This perspective on the relative attractions of farming and non-farming, and therefore on the value attached to education, was echoed on many occasions:

*No, I do not want our children to follow us [into farming]. I want [my children] to study ... to go out [and to] know the world.*

(Nguyễn Thái Hà 35 years old, female, Đại Bái commune)

This emphasis on education made the young's extraction from farming almost inevitable. Not only did it provide the skills to engage in other (non-farm) work, it also reinforced the notion that farming was best avoided, and meant that the young were no longer acculturated to be farmers:

Q: Does your daughter know how to cultivate rice?

A: *She is a student, so she doesn't know how.*

Q: Does your son?

A: *No, for example transplanting seedlings, he does not know how to do it.*

(Interview: Lương Xá hamlet, Lam Điền commune)

Older villagers, by comparison, recalled becoming farmers, inexorably and inevitably:

*When I lived with my parents, I both studied and cut grass and fed the buffaloes. At that time, I helped my parents transplant several sào of rice land. At the age of 19, I got married and had [my first] baby when I was 21.*

(Interview: Trịnh Thị Thi, 42 years old, Hát Môn commune)

All of this, at first blush, would seem work against the historical, cultural and environmental logics outlined in the last section. Rice cultivation pays poorly, is hard work and unattractive, and many younger villagers have never farmed. What is missing in this interpretation, however, is a forward-looking appreciation of the prospects, as well as the current returns, to farm and non-farm work.

### 6.1.3. Looking forward: rice-growing and the spectre of precarity

Vietnam's integration into the global economy has been remarkable. From afar this story of market integration can seem not only astonishing, but also seamless. Close up, in people's homes, it is rendered less astonishing, and more turbulent and differentiated. It provides an opportunity to connect the process of industrialisation-by-globalisation with ruralisation-through-subsistence and, in so doing, connecting – in an explanatory way – the inheritances of the past and the logics of the present with the prospects for the future.

While there has been a proliferation of non-farm opportunities both locally and in the wider Hanoi region, these are not available to everyone, equally. Kim Thị Trung, a 48-year-old farmer and mother of four in Hát Môn, cultivated 768 m<sup>2</sup> of rice land. Like almost everyone, she confirmed that other work brought a higher income. But, for her, the prospects of a life beyond farming were limited. *'At my age [48 years]'*, she told us, *'it's not easy to get a job ... jobs in the industrial zone are normally for the young who are around 18–35 years old'*. She continued:

*We keep growing rice just in case we lose our [other] jobs. If we no longer have any employment, we still have our rice fields which bring us an income.*

(Kim Thị Trung, 48 years old, Hát Môn commune)

Nguyễn Đức Kha was just such a villager who had abandoned farming, because the returns were so poor, but had not given up his land. He was 40 years old and had employment as a metal worker. He also had LUCs for two sào of land (720 m<sup>2</sup>) which he lent to a relative to farm. He received no rental, nor did he receive any of the production. But he was not minded to sell his land, even though he continued to pay irrigation and other fees which meant that he was at a net loss. It is *'just for a rainy day'*, he explained. *'If I fail in this job, then [at least] I still have my rice land to work'*.

For older villagers, the perceived good sense behind keeping their land was clear: *'I will never give up my land'*, Phạm Văn Phú (46, Đại Bái commune) told us, *'I will do it [farm rice] until I get old, until I die. Without land ... I will face poverty.'* Evidently, there was a generational angle to patterns of work; but this pattern was often embedded within multi-generational households where production and distribution occurred across spaces and sectors, and between the generations. The young could take advantage of better paid, but potentially more risky, non-farm work. The elderly could remain in low return farming, but at least provide for the family's subsistence needs – each year, to fill the rice bin (Illustration 5). Addressing the vulnerabilities of low return farming and the precarity of high(er) return non-farm work was through spreading risks, rather than concentrating them. There was also a widespread view that, in time, the young would likely return to farming, notwithstanding the poor returns and hard work involved:

*I am not sure whether our children will keep growing rice ... If they don't, our rice fields will be left uncultivated. My son seems not to like growing rice ... but I think when he gets married, it is likely that he will continue with rice growing. ... Many people growing rice are 65, 70 years old.*

(Nguyễn Thị Nhu, 37 years old, female, Đại Bái commune)





Illustration 5. Rice storage bin in Đại Bái commune.

It was the perceived uncertainties of much non-farm work which explained one of the surprises of our research; that households would, in effect, subsidise other commune members to farm their land:

*In general, out of ten households there are three who have abandoned [given up cultivating] their land. They have other jobs but they still keep their land, even paying other people to cultivate it for them.*

Phạm Văn Phú (46 years old, male, Đại Bái commune)

We saw a concentration of farming among some households, but not a concentration of farm land. Mrs Nguyễn Thị Ca (61 years old, Đại Bái commune) and her 63 year-old husband Nguyễn Văn Hạ, farmed a large plot by local standards, extending over 7200 m<sup>2</sup>, or 20 sào. They had LUCs for only 1400 m<sup>2</sup> or 20 per cent, however. The bulk of the land was owned by Mr Nguyen's brothers. They lent it for free; indeed, they paid the rice land tax so were, in effect, paying Mr and Mrs Nguyen to manage their land. The couple only paid the direct costs of production. Mrs Nguyen explained:

*No, we don't [have to pay any rental to the land owners]. That we cultivate their land is a way to keep and save [i.e. maintain access] the land for them. If not, their land is left uncultivated ... and unweeded for a long time. And it is possible that they will lose the right to access the fields ...*

Thus, lending land to a relative or neighbour to farm is a way to ensure that it is not reallocated: *'Although they don't get much money from letting out their fields, it's a way for them to maintain their ownership of the land'* Đặng Việt Du (male, 46 years old). All of this was brought together in an exchange with Nguyễn Thị Anh, a 40-year-old woman in Đại Bái commune:

Q: Does cultivating rice bring benefits?

A: No.

Q: Why do you keep your land (then)?

A: *If I don't, they [the authorities] will take over my land. I want to keep the land for my children.*

## 7. Making sense of smallholder farming in Vietnam

*I let them [my children] study so they have good knowledge and vision, and they don't have to depend on the land. For example, my family is poor, but someone who buys two sào of land pays several hundred million dong. To use that amount of money to buy a good motorbike, good mobile phone, and just in several years the money [will] run out. So I do not want to abandon the land. When a household faces poverty, they have to sell the land. We want our children to study and use that knowledge to work.*

Kim Thị Nga (45 years old, female, Hát Môn commune)

We opened the paper by remarking that analyses of agrarian change in Vietnam, and more widely in Asia, often misconstrue the underpinning forces because they ask the wrong questions, of the wrong analytical units, with the wrong set of assumptions about development conditions. We are now in a position to expand on this, drawing on the empirical discussion.

Vietnam does not face the (close to) famine conditions of the recent past. Nor can the households in the three communes studied here be regarded as 'subsistence', or even 'semi-subsistence' in orientation. Many would be best described as akin to Andrew Walker's (2012) 'middle-income peasants' in northern Thailand. They are also thoroughly embedded in Vietnam's market development and processes of global integration, and are increasingly mobile. And yet time and again, our respondents articulated subsistence inflected observations and values when it came to describing and explaining why they farmed: *'In case we have no money, [at least] we still have rice to eat'* (Nguyễn Đức Ngọc, 53 years old); *'We know well the source and the origin of the food we eat'* (Đặng Việt Du, 46 years old); *'[we] keep the land to provide for our meals'* (Hoàng Văn Tuấn, 56 years old); *'nobody farms to make a fortune, but you will not face the fear of hunger'* (Trịnh Thị Lý, 47 years old); *'land is gold'* (Kim Thị Nga, 45 years old). To understand this paradoxical interleaving of subsistence sensibilities and market enthusiasm, it is necessary to ask questions of farming in relation to non-farming; of individual actions in relation to household needs; and of current returns against future risks. This final point alludes to the nature of market transition in Asia, which is taking a shape in rural areas distinct from the experience of the industrialised North.

There is a temptation to see the survival of the small, family farm in Vietnam and wider Asia as a reflection of the inherent attractions of farming relative to other activities and occupations. Our study is not so sanguine. Farming persists in these extraordinarily vibrant zones of transformation not because of the attractions of farming, but because of the perceived shortcomings, or livelihood risks, of other forms of work. Rice cultivation provides a spatial anchor with which to pivot through time and between sectors, and thereby to hedge against an uncertain future. In the main, households do not cling to a romantic farm ideal. They recognise that farming is hard, holds few attractions for the young, and is barely profitable in terms of profit-and-loss accounting. But there is also the recognition that farming plays a complementary role in the bricolage of rural livelihoods, where place-based, semi-subsistence activities are an insurance against the future. There is nothing, then, unsound or illogical with farmers' approach to making a living in Hanoi's peri-urban zone: of maintaining access to land and growing rice for home consumption while at the same time enthusiastically engaging with non-farm work locally and further afield, and educating their children so that they have the means to make a living away from the land their parents so carefully cultivate.

The paper also raises questions about the very nature of the transition process in countries like Vietnam. Both the direction and quality, or texture, of agrarian change in our study sites suggests that the future of farming and the future of farmers might not ape the experience

elsewhere. The farm-size transition, the urban transition, and the industrial transition can all be shaded rather differently when viewed from the rice fields of the Red River Delta. This finds resonance in other studies from Asia. Arnold and Campbell, for example, write that “contemporary developments in Mekong Southeast Asia challenge [the] historicist narrative” of modernisation theory (2018, p. 184). McCarthy (2019), in his study of smallholders in Aceh in northern Sumatra, Indonesia, makes the point that transition is not from one state (rural, farm, agriculture, peasant) to another – usually opposite – state (urban, non-farm, industry, worker) but rather a ‘sideways’, crab-like progressive shuffle that keeps all states and possibilities in play. Terms such as ‘pre-capitalist’ imply a teleology where one mode of production will necessarily be supplanted by another. In these fields and farms in northern Vietnam, a close reading of the dynamics of change reveal no such clear and obvious transition. It is possible to argue that we see in Vietnam, and more widely in Asia, economic transition without agrarian transition or, even, deagrarianisation without depeasantisation.

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### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.12.008>.

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