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Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Sep., 1949), pp. 265-272
Published by: Pacific Affairs, University of British Columbia
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2751798
Accessed: 15/01/2012 15:43

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NOTES AND COMMENT

The Role of the Village in Vietnamese Politics

THE basic problems of Vietnam—whether they concern cooperation or resistance, nationalism or communism, the programs and roles of the political parties, or similar questions—can be properly understood only if they have been appraised from the standpoint of the villages. Since the end of the war the French have succeeded in re-establishing themselves in certain of the cities of Vietnam, but not in the interior of the country, the stronghold of the villages. Since time immemorial these villages have held the key to the social structure of the country and to its outlook on life.

The conservatism of the villages used to be contrasted with the new aspirations of those relatively few urban intellectuals whose attitudes had been molded by contact with the French. In the present situation, however, it is chiefly the conservative elements that seem to have congregated in the French-held cities, while large areas of the countryside have resorted to armed resistance under leftist leadership. The explanation of this anomaly is not that the two groups have exchanged positions, but rather that formulae applicable a generation ago are so no longer.

It is essential to discard at once any notion that in Vietnam the French are dealing with nothing more than a mass of apathetic peasants who have been terrorized by their leaders. When the writer had occasion two years ago to travel behind the Vietnamese lines, he found widespread evidence of an organized popular movement both at the front and in the rear.

On what ruins was this new order built? Many old institutions have certainly been destroyed, and in more than one instance, especially in the south, the notables who represented them have been executed by their own countrymen. What were the historical antecedents of these events, and to what extent was the sad fate of these notables due to their former activities? In waging an anti-revolutionary campaign in the Vietnamese countryside, the French were sometimes tempted to employ the complex of communal institutions for security purposes (including information, propaganda and repression), but they could not do so without converting it into a political tool and thus warping it from its normal functions. Both in 1930 and in 1940-41 this complex was used for such purposes, a fact which may explain why, since 1945, when new leaders took over, the traditional institutions have been subverted by conditions utterly alien to the wonted rhythm of village life.

Sheltered by their quiet ponds and dense bamboo stands, the villages were formerly largely autonomous. "The king's law," an old proverb said, "bows before village custom." The collective obligations of each community in such matters as taxes, compulsory unpaid labor, and the provision and maintenance of a contingent for the national army were calculated on the basis of a roster of names which, though in theory revised every five years, was quite inaccurate. The council of notables, co-opted from among members of the village oligarchy, was responsible for the fulfillment of these obligations; it assigned duties and supervised other details of communal administration. The State had no contact with individuals as long as they remained in their village. To be sure, in military, judicial and religious matters the State was centralized and authoritarian: no village could defy it. But in the political and economic fields its rule was light. It entrusted to the village most administrative chores, including the supervision of public works, as well as the payment of public officials, which therefore constituted only a small drain on the national exchequer.

French policy in respect of this traditional structure was governed by two, often contradictory, motives. The one was a sincere desire for modernization and assimilation; the other was a mistrust of too speedy an evolution. The best-qualified "colonial" experts opposed rapid assimilation and seemed disposed to rely on the traditional institutions. On the whole, however, the modernist tendency prevailed in the end, and assumed concrete form in three groups of reforms: (1) the institution of regular registration of births and deaths, which permitted the compilation of more accurate tax rolls; (2) the imposition of tighter French control over the councils of notables, particularly in tax and budgetary matters; and (3) the substitution of election for co-optation of council members. The first two of these reforms undermined the patriarchal system by curtailing the considerable administrative—and consequently financial—latitude with which the councils of notables had been accustomed to function. The third reform encouraged the taxpayers to look after their own affairs.

The French expected that the transition to the new order would be eased by the election to the new councils of former notables familiar with local needs. Events, however, proved otherwise. Men who were qualified by virtue of Western-style education generally lacked a following or other influence in the villages. On the other hand, the traditional notables, the natural leaders of the people, who stood to lose heavily by the change in their status, faded out of the picture and engineered the election to the councils of men of little worth (who were usually under their influence), and then joined the ranks of the opposition. In the end, it became quite clear that the leaders of the countryside disliked the innovations and that these were

doomed to failure. Accordingly, in 1941, with the approval of pro-Vichy French authorities, an imperial decree abolished the elective councils which had been established twenty years earlier, and restored all of their traditional prerogatives to the councils of notables.

Some observers of the Vietnamese scene contend that peace could be restored if the French would encourage an over-all reversion to the traditional institutions of the country. The facts, however, do not support such a contention: the root causes of the present state of affairs are not administrative or political so much as cultural and economic in nature.

The French are inclined to write history from official records, thus running the risk of attaching too much importance to official orders instead of investigating their actual results in the field. History thus conceived is really little more than a record of intentions. And, although French intentions in the matters under discussion have been expressed most excellently, the concrete results are surely more significant. Why is it that none of their plans concerning rural organization, always so wisely motivated even though sometimes contradictory in effect, has ever produced the expected results? One explanation, accepted in certain of the conservative and traditionally anti-French Vietnamese circles on which French policy today is partly dependent, interprets French communal policy as a deliberate attempt to curb the councils of notables by bringing them ever more closely under French administrative control. If the French at first altered and then abolished the traditional status of the councils, their purpose, according to these critics, was to convert the councils into instruments of their own. If the French subsequently changed their tactics yet again and restored power to the councils, that was simply in order to secure an even firmer grip on them through a return to traditional forms which the French now recognized to be more effective. In any event, the French failure in this respect would be due to noncooperation on the part of the notables in the face of unreasonable demands.

At first sight this argument seems to contain a grain of truth. The French did indeed gain control of the councils of notables, and did burden them with ever-mounting responsibilities until they became accountable for a great variety of things: for tax collections and labor recruiting for different purposes; for prevention of damage to transportation and communications installations and equipment; for care of forestlands; for suppression of alcohol smuggling; and so forth.[1]

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[1] An extreme-leftist source has described the steep rise in local tax assessments in the following terms: "Between 1890 and 1896 direct taxes doubled. Between 1896 and 1898 they increased by one-half again. The villages had no alternative but to accept these increases because there was nobody to whom they could protest."

Yet, for a clear view of the question, one should take into account the problems that confronted the French authorities. Some of their difficulties were involved in their colonial objectives; others were due to local conditions. The main problem still confronting Vietnam today is basically one of transition—from a loosely knit, inexpensive, traditional state to a modern organization with a large budget. In the earlier form, inspired by Confucianism, centralization in religious and military matters was offset by decentralization in economic and social affairs. The king delivered judgments, bestowed titles, tried to expand his territory, and, most important, by means of unending ritual observances sought the favor of the gods on behalf of the people. For the rest, the life of the country was concentrated in the villages, and the costs of the central administration were accordingly slight. The army comprised contingents provided and maintained by the villages, and public works were carried on by *corvées* recruited in similar fashion. Except for a few engaged in producing luxury items, no urban group of artisans was able to support itself on the low prices with which rural handicraftsmen, whose main source of livelihood remained the land, were satisfied—and this was one reason for the small number of cities. The busy rural marketplaces contributed little to the state revenues, which a century ago were estimated at only three million francs. Nor did the state provide any of the economic or other services essential to a modern society.

In order to survive, the country needed new and larger facilities—railways, highways, telecommunications, industries, financial and commercial establishments, educational and public health equipment—as well as a fresh understanding of their uses. Clearly such needs exceeded by far the resources at the command of the Vietnamese government as long as its revenues depended on the traditional administrative structure. The new administrative system, the onus for whose unpopularity was borne mainly by French colonialism, was therefore not simply an outgrowth of a "colonial" outlook. Whatever the immediate goals of French policy in Vietnam, the over-all shaping factor was the need to adapt the economy to modern requirements. And this was impossible unless the fabric of society were reshaped.

For example, when the French first installed a telegraph system in the country, the peasants were delighted: they speedily removed the overhead lines and put them to various uses in their homes. To stop this practice, the French made the village notables responsible for the protection of the telegraph lines—and also for the supervision of forestlands, highways and waterworks as well as tax returns. In other words, as the demands of the new civilization increased, the obligations of the councils of notables became proportionately greater.

The drama peculiar to Vietnam, as shaped by history and geography, is

that, once these needs had been calculated in accordance with the new ideas, it was necessary to meet them out of existing resources, the greater part of which were dependent on the old order. For the traditional world was not dead; it still held sway in the countryside, even though its scale of economic values was highly anachronistic. In 1939 the annual budget of a peasant family with eleven members was found to be 32 piastres—a sum indicative of a static economy. Of this total, direct taxes took 6 piastres, or 19 per cent! Yet in certain areas it was customary to pay but one cent for a whole day's work. For a workman to receive one cent for a day's work and to have to pay about six piastres as an annual personal tax makes no sense whatsoever. The first figure reflects the monetary value of labor in the traditional society; the second expresses its value in a modern economy. Such a state of affairs, in which the people's livelihood is calculated in terms of one world and their taxes in those of quite another, cannot endure. The Vietnamese peasant must therefore adapt himself to new circumstances: he must henceforth consider his personal budget in terms of monetary value rather than of immediate personal needs, and accustom himself to the concept of extrinsic value—a notion quite foreign to his traditional outlook. But it is quite clear that once he has learned to calculate his own economic capacity in such modern terms —and learn he must if the national exchequer is to meet its growing expenses—he will no longer be content with a non-individualized status within a gregarious traditional community, governed by the council of notables. This is the price that must be paid if the country is to develop economically and to justify its claim to nationhood in the modern world.

In some respects French colonial administration provided the catalyst that hastened the advent of this necessary period of transition, and the recent war precipitated the social revolution, lending it paroxysmal violence. Basically, however, the present process of change stems from an economic revolution on a national, or even a world, rather than a colonial level. A modern-style monetary tax, based on the regular registration of births and deaths, induces the taxpayers to consider their rights and duties, strips them of their cloak of communal anonymity, and converts them into individuals who must be reckoned with in social and political as well as in economic affairs. It is safe to predict that in Vietnam, as in many other economically undeveloped countries, the translation of the economy into monetary terms will in time create a need for ballot boxes.

In former days the councils of notables were essentially councils of elders. The most striking feature of the new Vietnamese communal organizations in the resistance areas is the prominence in them of young men. "Since 1945," according to Pierre Gourou, "armed adolescents have replaced the

peaceful councils of notables." "This," he adds, "is not necessarily an improvement." No—but it is a fact; and its historical antecedents are worth examination.

The war, the Japanese occupation and, most of all, the Vichy-inspired reforms, although markedly conservative, instead of turning back the tide of history, succeeded only in accelerating the course of events in Vietnam. The French seem to have attempted to adapt the Vichy "national revolution" to the Vietnamese monarchy by linking Maurras with Confucius. The Japanese, on the other hand, apparently were disgruntled because Admiral Decoux, by holding out the prospect of a united Indochina, diverted Vietnam from participating in the war of "Asian liberation" and from taking much interest in the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." In those days Vietnamese youth was arrayed in serried ranks under French guidance to the tune of "Marshal Pétain, we are here". This mass training of youth has since been utilized for other purposes.

Vietnamese schoolteachers, as well as some local Catholic priests, seem to have exerted a powerful influence on events. Just as elementary-school teachers in France are overloaded with extra-curricular duties, so in French-governed Vietnam instructors have usually been overworked and underpaid. Their education enabled them to criticize the traditional institutions of their country without, however, giving them sufficient understanding of the economic and historical bases of rural society. These teachers were entrusted, in the name of the Marshal, with the task of preparing the youth for what Vichy termed "the national revolution". Thus, owing partly to French initiative, elements of a popular revival were assembled in the intimacy of the Vietnamese countryside, behind the protective hedges of the villages.

Combatant groups would be very much mistaken if they should imagine that they have singlehandedly introduced a new phase in their country's history. The cell-like revolutionary committees have undoubtedly played a leading part in the course of events. But several other historical factors, some of them local in character and certain others dependent on Franco-Vietnamese intercourse, have contributed to the same end result. These factors the Vietnamese should keep in mind when the time comes for them to tackle the classic problem involved in the demobilization of any resistance force.

Perhaps nothing blocks the solution of any and all issues more hopelessly today than the belief held by each of the opposing groups that it can control the future course of events only if it retains sufficient power to be able to destroy its adversary if it should choose to do so. This attitude suggests that even the much-desired termination of the military conflict may exacerbate rather than ease political difficulties. Regardless of what group may in future enjoy a majority in the Vietnamese government, the position of the opposi-

tion, whether it is rightist or leftist in nature, will be of critical importance in the evolution of a comprehensive national polity. A leader of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam once remarked to the writer: "Nothing can prevent us from executing those whom we regard as traitors." While such sentiments may be permissible in wartime, peace—and first of all peace in the villages, without which peace in the country as a whole is unthinkable—will require a somewhat different approach.

In the interests of peace it will be necessary for the French, as well as for the conservative Vietnamese, to desist from efforts to pacify the country by re-establishing traditional village institutions as part of a political and military "security network"—a concept which, as has been noted, is economically and socially obsolete. A country which, partly with French inspiration and assistance, has begun to realize its modern potentialities cannot be pacified merely by being forced to contemplate its past. A transitional link in the national development (which has perhaps been promoted rather than interrupted by the revolution) might possibly be found in the revolutionary phase itself. Traditional rural society contained a multitude of specialized social groups—councils and subcommittees, classes based on age, neighborhood groups and literary, religious, corporative, women's and children's associations. Here perhaps is where the two worlds—the old and the new—have a point of contact. In certain respects the "revolutionary" front imitates the traditional structure of society by proliferating groups, not only of workers, soldiers and peasants, according to the hallowed formula, but also of women, children, old people, merchants, former soldiers, and the like. These associations originated as a network of cells, an aspect which they will not easily shed as long as the war continues. But in peacetime they are more likely to become more broadly and normally representative of rural society. They have already helped to establish the technique of elective institutions in the villages, and have played an instrumental part in the recruiting of local administrative committees. They may help to satisfy the Vietnamese predilection for a civil hierarchy, henceforth based on ability instead of on privilege.

A vigorous Resistance party, aware that the economic development of the Vietnamese masses is less advanced than its own leftist doctrine, might wish to impose an autocratic government on the people without reference to their inclinations. Or, alternatively, Vietnamese of all political complexions might come together in agreement that their people, in the course of its long and painful history, has demonstrated enough good qualities to warrant its deciding its own future without having first to mortgage it. The latter course, however, will draw on all of the capabilities of the country in all of their diversity; if a joint effort is attempted, certain compromises will be necessary. In sum, therefore, it is likely that Vietnam will be unable to realize all of its

potentialities until a sufficient number of former notables have rejoined the innovators in the village councils, whatever the shape and nature of the national government.

Such being the case, if French actions in the months to come should be calculated solely to advance Vietnamese reconciliation and reconstruction by every possible means, France, together with Vietnam, would return to an undertaking to which she has contributed in the past (even during the "colonial" period) in obedience to a law more powerful than anything man can oppose to it—namely, the law that ultimately only national history can be written in the territory of any nation. Whatever fails to contribute to the unity and proper stature of the nation can play at most only a passing role on the local scene—and the final decision concerning what its stature and destiny should be must lie with the nation itself.

Paris, July 1949 PAUL MUS

Repatriate Organizations in Japan

REPATRIATES from the former Japanese overseas territories constitute an important element in postwar Japan and a key to certain aspects of the Japanese attitude toward the Occupation and the lost war. The organizations which they join after returning home indicate in some measure the degree of success of their rehabilitation and their attitudes toward conditions in Japan. Their importance in the present political scene is evidenced by the attention accorded them by the political parties, which, in an effort to enlist the support of the large number of voters influenced by them, have advocated various repatriate-assistance programs.

The end of the Pacific War found 6,600,000 Japanese subjects (half of whom were in the armed services) outside Japan Proper. To repatriate these millions to an already over-crowded country would have been a gigantic task under ordinary circumstances; for a country just defeated in war and under an Occupation whose policies were not yet clear, it seemed an impossible one. Yet it was accomplished, and remarkably quickly.

Allied policy was to repatriate all Japanese from "Greater East Asia", excepting those whose technical and professional skills were needed until suitable native replacements could be trained. The program was administered almost wholly by the Japanese, under the supervision of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers and of the governments concerned.

The first phase of the program centered on China, which was anxious to have the 2½ million Japanese in its territory removed as speedily as possible.