Introduction

Vietnam has long been primarily an agrarian country. Land has always been an essential source of livelihoods, security and social status for the peasantry. Land is not only an important means of production, but also an important means of wealth, and has historically provided the strongest base for social and political power. In other words, land is the major concern not only for peasants, but also for political leaders competing for power and people’s allegiance and support. As in many other agrarian countries, in Vietnam, agrarian reforms have been carried out intermittently throughout its history, aimed at either stabilising existing power structures or consolidating new ones.

Soon after Vietnam was reunified, leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) in the central government launched full-scale social, economic and political reforms in the south to bring it into line with conditions in the socialist north and reunify the country politically, socially and economically. VCP leaders called this reform scheme the ‘socialist revolution’, and its aim was to transform Vietnam into a socialist country similar to other socialist states. The socialist revolution included socialist transformation and building. Socialist transformation was aimed at converting non-socialist elements into socialist ones, replacing private ownership of the main means of production with public ownership (collective and state) and eliminating institutions perceived to be ‘old’ and ‘backward’ and responsible for

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class exploitation in order to build ‘new and advanced’ ones. Socialist building meant establishing and reinforcing new (socialist) production relations, new productive forces and institutions and a new culture.

The VCP’s leaders reasoned that, through socialist tools of planning and ‘proletariat dictatorship’, they could successfully build up large-scale socialist production and a ‘rationally’ structured agro-industrial economy, the two equally balanced legs of which (agriculture and heavy industry) would help move the economy rapidly forward. The party leaders also believed that, under socialist production relations and systems of ownership, Vietnam would be able to end poverty and class exploitation and become an advanced country with a socialist system of large-scale production.²

Having won the war and achieved the political reunification of Vietnam, the VCP strongly believed it could succeed in carrying forward the socialist revolution by building a centrally planned economy with large-scale production—a task it had not accomplished in the north. As Vietnam was an agricultural country, the VCP leaders considered agrarian reform a key component of the socialist revolution. Their reform or ‘socialist transformation of agriculture and agricultural collectivisation’ in the south had two main components: land redistribution and collectivisation. Redistribution was considered an important initial step of socialist agrarian reform. Socialist large-scale production or collective farming was the end goal of the transformation project. With high expectations of their capacity, the VCP leaders believed they could complete these projects within a few years.

This book shows that the results of land redistribution and agricultural collectivisation in the south varied from region to region. It also shows that, overall, socialist agrarian reform fell short of leaders’ visions and expectations. There are two main reasons for this: regional differences and local politics. In the Central Coast region, the initial conditions seemed to be favourable for collective farming. Prolonged and destructive war had rendered most peasant households poor, and the social and economic structures of rural communities were flattened and relatively homogeneous. The region’s new local authorities were

quickly consolidated thanks to a considerable number of returned southerners and ex-revolutionaries who were able to fill government positions. They were familiar with and loyal to VCP policies and were able to mobilise people to implement these.

In contrast, in the Mekong Delta, conditions even initially were unfavourable for collective farming. Living in more favourable environmental and socioeconomic conditions and with less devastation from the war, peasant households in the Mekong Delta were better off than their Central Coast counterparts. Their social structure was also highly stratified and diverse: land reforms before reunification had led to the development of a middle strata of peasants and, by 1975, this group accounted for a majority of the peasantry and was largely engaged in commercial agriculture. They preferred individual to collective farming. In addition, the new local authorities in the Mekong Delta and elsewhere in the Southern Region (Nam Bộ) found it difficult to exert social control and carry out the VCP’s postwar policies. Due to a shortage of cadres to fill new positions, local authorities had to recruit new cadres, a majority of whom were not former revolutionaries or southerners returning from the north. They were not familiar with the VCP leaders’ post-1975 land redistribution and collectivisation policies and showed little enthusiasm for them.

Thus, implementing land redistribution and collectivisation was completed faster and more easily in the Central Coast than in the Mekong Delta region. By 1980, the Central Coast had largely completed its socialist agricultural transformation. Meanwhile, the Mekong Delta failed to meet its target and, by the end of 1980, only 8 per cent of peasant households and 6 per cent of agricultural land had been brought under collective farming. The slower transformation in the Mekong Delta was a result not only of stronger peasant resistance, but also of local cadres’ lack of commitment to the socialist project. Opposition to collectivisation and land redistribution came from both landowners and the intended beneficiaries of these reforms, some of whom even engaged in open and confrontational resistance and other kinds of politics. Meanwhile, local cadres were unenthusiastic about and lax in implementing the socialist transformation policy; they took steps to implement it only when higher-level authorities pressed them to do so.
However, being resolute and persistent in their efforts to build socialist large-scale production, VCP leaders launched numerous directives and campaigns to urge local authorities in the south to complete the process. Only in the mid-1980s, after a decade of great effort, struggle and several policy modifications to ease local resistance, did authorities in the Mekong Delta and elsewhere in the Southern Region announce the completion of agrarian reform and collectivisation. Despite their efforts to establish collectives and bring peasants into these structures, VCP leaders were unable to direct peasants and local cadres to behave in line with their expectations. Thus, collective farming in Vietnam’s southernmost region performed poorly and failed substantially to achieve its stated goals.

Although villagers in the Central Coast appeared to comply with the policy of collectivisation, they tried their best to maximise their individual earnings regardless of the outcomes of collective work. They undertook collective work carelessly and deceitfully, and often stole collective inputs and equipment and encroached on collective land, while they devoted time and material investments to their own household’s economic activities, often at the expense of collective farming. In the Mekong Delta, many tried to evade collective farming as much as possible. Some joined collectives but did not actually participate in collective work; some participated in the work but just went through the motions; most did not take care of collective property. Many spent most of their time and effort on making a living somewhere else.

Local cadres in both places also manifested various forms of misbehaviour. They were caught between their orders from the top and the reality of the peasants they governed. With a lack of pressure from higher authorities, cadres, especially in the Mekong Delta, were reluctant to enforce the socialist transformation policy; often they modified policies to accommodate villagers’ concerns and to protect local interests. However, when under pressure from the central government, local cadres carried out policies hastily and modified them to make them easier to implement, with little regard for either the overall purpose of the state’s policies or villagers’ interests. In addition, several local cadres increasingly abused their positions and became self-serving. They managed collectives poorly, embezzled a considerable amount of agricultural inputs and produce and misappropriated peasant land.
Despite numerous campaigns by the central and provincial authorities to crack down on and correct such ‘bad behaviour’, these problems did not disappear but seemed to increase over time.

As in the north, in both the Central Coast and the Mekong Delta, due to evasion and noncompliance by peasants and local cadres, collective farming performed poorly. Although collectivisation helped improve irrigation systems, increased the number of crops per year and succeeded in introducing new seeds and technology, it performed poorly compared with the family-based farming that it tried to eliminate and replace. In fact, collective farming could not produce sufficient food for the society. By the mid-1980s, Vietnam faced a serious fall in food production and was on the brink of an economic crisis. In this context, the Sixth National Congress (in December 1986) released a ‘renovation policy’ (chính sách đổi mới) that abandoned the centrally planned economy and adopted a market-based one.

The economic component of đổi mới opened the way to new forms of ownership and management, and the resurgence of the private sector and the market. In this context, collective farming faced even more difficulties. Local cadres became even more lax about management and abused their positions to make use of market opportunities for personal benefit at the expense of collective farming. Meanwhile, many villagers refused or were not able to pay their debts or fulfil their obligations to the collectives. Some even returned land or abandoned it when they saw that their contracted land was unprofitable.

The ultimate consequences of such deviant practices were a gradual demise in the efficiency of collective farming and consistent falls in food production and peasants’ living standards. Faced with local food shortages, villagers and local cadres had to initiate new farming arrangements. The aim of these experiments was to encourage villagers to work on collective land and keep collectives alive; however, this gradually derailed collective farming from its original intention and amounted to an informal return to individual farming. In other words, the failure of socialist agrarian reforms and collectivisation in the postwar era resulted significantly from the widespread involvement by peasants and local officials in everyday practices that deviated from official guidelines and the VCP leaders’ expectations.
A few studies have addressed the agrarian reforms in southern Vietnam from 1975 to the late 1980s. Most are short articles, but they also include a few books and dissertations in Vietnamese. Recent books by Đặng Phong and Huy Đức reveal some secrets about how political and economic decisions were negotiated and formulated at the top leadership level. However, the existing literature provides scant detail and insufficient analysis of VCP leaders’ approach to post-1975 agrarian reform and how such policies were carried out at the local level. In addition, the existing literature is largely silent on explanations of variations in villagers’ behaviour and policy outcomes across regions within southern Vietnam, and on the key factors contributing to the failure of socialist large-scale production and the shift in state agrarian policies.

Writing on northern Vietnam’s agrarian reform, Ben Kerkvliet gives a rich account of everyday politics and convincingly explains how it significantly contributed to the demise of collective farming and modifications to Vietnam’s national policies. According to Kerkvliet, everyday politics includes ‘quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that indirectly and for [the] most part privately endorse, modify, or resist prevailing procedures, rules, regulations, or order’. It involves


little or no organisation. Due to their discontent with collective farming, peasants relied on their own strategies for survival—aimed at making a living, raising their families and wrestling with daily problems. For example, they tried their best to ‘minimize the cooperative’s claim on their labour and to maximize their household-based production’.\(^6\) They tried to minimise their effort, time and costs while maximising work-points. They took advantage of any opportunity to steal collective inputs, produce, time and equipment, while devoting time, materials and effort to their own household plots. According to Kerkvliet, although these tactics were low-key, dispersed, largely unorganised and nonconfrontational, and were often carried out individually, they occurred in many places at the same time and the cumulative effects of thousands of such actions therefore had a huge impact on the performance of collective farming in Vietnam.

James Scott also claims the outcome of state policies almost always ‘depends on the response and co-operation of real human subjects’. In innumerable instances, ordinary people have played significant political roles. In particular, they have proven capable of undermining, resisting or even transforming state policies, even in authoritarian settings. For example, collectivisation of Soviet agriculture and ‘villagisation’ in Tanzania failed badly, largely because they encountered strong resistance from peasants, ‘including flight, unofficial production, and trade, smuggling, and foot dragging’.\(^7\) The goal of such resistance is to thwart material extraction by states or dominant classes rather than to directly overthrow or transform them. Scott has shown that, in socialist states, foot-dragging and evasion in response to unpopular forms of collective agriculture can short-circuit grandiose policies dreamed up by national leaders.

In this book, I adopt and expand on James Scott’s notion of everyday forms of resistance and Ben Kerkvliet’s concept of everyday politics to examine how everyday politics played out under and affected post-1975 national agrarian policies in different regions of southern Vietnam. By focusing on two case studies—Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-DN) province (now two separate provinces, Quảng Nam and Đà Nẵng) in the Central Coast region and An Giang province in the Mekong Delta—

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 2.
the book traces the rationale for and content of post-1975 agrarian reforms and socialist building in these two places. It examines how national agrarian policies were carried out and shows how everyday politics at the local level was able to divert the direction of policies issued by top-level VCP leaders. In particular, it examines similarities and differences in peasants’ and local cadres’ behaviours and politics in these two places, and the effects of local conditions and local politics on the ability of local authorities to implement the post-1975 agrarian reforms. As such, it provides regionally specific insights into postwar experiences of socialist agrarian reform and the local factors that led to the failure of and a shift in such policies nationwide.

This book argues that peasants’ everyday politics and local cadres’ malpractices and corruption played an important role in derailing the VCP’s post-1975 agrarian reforms in both the Central Coast and the Mekong Delta. Significant variation in the outcome of land reform and collectivisation policies arose from regional differences with regards to socioeconomic conditions and political capacity, and the forms and magnitude of peasant politics and local cadres’ noncompliance. Despite the variation, as in the north, in the Central Coast and the Mekong Delta, collective farming performed poorly; it was inferior to the private farming that it tried to replace and could not produce sufficient food for the society. Thus, collective farming failed to fulfil the VCP’s objectives of increased productivity, improved living standards for peasants and ending class exploitation in the countryside. To cope with production problems, local cadres and their fellow villagers had to modify or initiate new farming arrangements. Despite VCP leaders’ persistent efforts to strengthen and consolidate collective farming and crack down on local evasion, resistance and malpractice, these problems could not be rooted out, but rather persistently increased over time. Faced with food shortages and many other problems related to collective farming, VCP leaders gradually modified their policies, and eventually accepted and officially endorsed local initiatives. The accumulated effects of piecemeal policy modifications led to collective farming gradually departing from the VCP’s original intentions for it. Finally, national leaders shifted their policies back to household-based farming in the late 1980s and, from then, collectives lost their purpose and were gradually dismantled nationwide.
1. INTRODUCTION

Approach and methods

For my research, I selected the Mekong Delta in the south and the Central Coast in the north of what I call southern Vietnam, the territory formerly under the governance of the Republic of Vietnam (1955–75). In both regions, food crops, especially rice, have long been the primary farm produce. This sets the two regions apart from the South-East Region and the Central Highlands, in which industrial crops, rather than food crops, have been prominent—rubber and fruit trees in the former and coffee and rubber in the latter. While the Mekong Delta and the Central Coast have similarities, there are also notable differences. Population density on arable land in the Mekong Delta is lower than in the Central Coast. Village settlements in the Mekong Delta follow rivers and channels whereas most villages in the Central Coast are relatively isolated and surrounded by hedges and rice fields. Pre-1975 agrarian reforms seem to have had a greater impact in the Mekong Delta than in the Central Coast. This led to more commercial farming of food (including rice) and greater complexity in rural social structures in the Mekong Delta compared with the Central Coast, which had greater levels of subsistence agriculture and relatively homogeneous rural communities before 1975.

Within the two selected regions, I focused on two provinces: Quảng Nam province (previously part of Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng) in the Central Coast and An Giang province in the Mekong Delta. Within each province, I focused on one district: Thăng Bình in Quảng Nam and Chợ Mới in An Giang. In both districts, agrarian reform and collectivisation campaigns after 1975 were rather intense, perhaps more than in some other parts of the two provinces. In Thăng Bình district, I examined two communes (xã): Bình Lãnh, where provincial and district authorities established a pilot collective on 30 October 1977, and Bình Định, which underwent normal collectivisation. Most of my interviews were in Bình Lãnh’s Hiền Lộc village and Bình Định’s Thanh Yên village. In Chợ Mới, An Giang, I focused on Long Điền B commune in which provincial and district authorities built pilot production units (tập đoàn sản xuất) in the summer–autumn crop season of 1979 (after failing to experiment with collectives in the province). In Long Điền B commune, I interviewed villagers across its eight different hamlets.
Interviews were one main source of data. I conducted two rounds of fieldwork: from September to October 2004 and from June to December 2005. I spent most of my fieldwork time interviewing ordinary villagers and current and former officials at different levels who had experienced the socialist transformation of agriculture and collective farming from 1975 to the late 1980s. Most of these people were more than 50 years old. The interviews were open-ended, rather than structured questionnaires. I asked people about their experiences, observations and their assessments of post-1975 agrarian issues related to my broad research questions. The specific questions asked of each informant varied depending on the person’s background and involvement, their comments and the information they provided, and what I had learned during the course of my research. When I found it convenient, I asked permission to tape-record interviews.

In Hồ Chí Minh City, I was able to interview two officials who had previously been staff members of the Committee for Southern Agricultural Transformation (Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp Miền Nam, or BCTNNMN). In An Giang, I was able to interview three former staff members of the An Giang Committee for Agricultural Transformation (Ban Cải Tạo Nông Nghiệp An Giang, or BCTNNAG). In Chợ Mới, I interviewed three district officials and more than 15 commune, hamlet and production unit cadres who were directly engaged in carrying out agrarian policies from 1975 to the late 1980s. In Quảng Nam, I was able to interview three provincial officials, one local journalist, two district officials and more than 15 commune, collective and brigade cadres.

In terms of ordinary villagers, I was able to stay in selected villages for a total of four months in each province, so I had many opportunities to chat with and interview individuals and groups. In particular, I was able to interview more than 100 male and female villagers in each province. The interviews were carried out mostly in their homes, varying in length from 20 minutes to two hours. Some individuals were interviewed more than once. In my first round of fieldwork, I took notes to record my interviews. However, in the final round of fieldwork, thanks to the rapport established, I was able to tape-record more than 60 interviews in each province. For the safety of informants, I generally use pseudonyms when referring to them.
Documents are another primary source. In Hồ Chí Minh City, I was able to access and photocopy some relevant books, dissertations and national newspapers such as Nhân Dân (The People), Đại Đoàn Kết (Great Unity) and Sài Gòn Giải phóng (Saigon Liberation) in the General Sciences Library (Thư viện Khoa Học Tổng Hợp) and Social Sciences Library (Thư viện Khoa Học Xã Hội). When interviewing staff members of the BCTNNMN, I was given some valuable committee reports. In An Giang and Quảng Nam, I acquired relevant materials—published and unpublished—from numerous government agencies at different levels, such as people's committees, departments of agriculture and rural development, departments of statistics and libraries. These documents include reports, surveys, statistics, historical records and studies done by commune, district, provincial and national agencies.

Importantly, I was able to access and copy local newspapers, magazines and reports, ranging from 1974 to the early 1990s in the general library (Thư Viện Tổng Hợp) in Đà Nẵng City for Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-DN) province and from 1978 to the early 1990s in the An Giang Library in Long Xuyên City, An Giang province. (Unfortunately, An Giang newspapers from before 1979 were unavailable because they were destroyed in a flood in 1978.) Although newspapers were organs of the VCP with a political propaganda purpose, I found them to be a valuable source of information if read carefully and selectively. The newspapers covered a wide range of information on national and provincial policies, statistics, policy implementation and results and daily struggles at the village level across different places in each province. It was common for articles to reveal or criticise policy shortcomings and problematic activities that had occurred a few years earlier as well as providing more accurate statistics some years after the event than had been available at the time. The newspapers often carried debates over agrarian issues, and local papers also frequently published readers’ letters or petitions regarding their land, property and other agrarian issues or their complaints about the corrupt practices of local cadres.

Organisation

Following this introduction to the book’s themes and approach, Chapter 2 examines VCP leaders’ objectives for the post-1975 agrarian reforms. It also reviews the pre-1975 agrarian reforms and points out how these resulted in regional differences within southern
Vietnam. I found there were numerous political, social and economic objectives for the post-1975 agrarian reforms. The primary objective was consolidating power and building socialism, but VCP leaders also hoped reforms would solve their postwar economic problems and modernise the south’s agriculture.

Chapter 3 looks at post-1975 land reform and other preparations for collectivisation in QN-DN in the Central Coast and An Giang province in the Mekong Delta. I found that, in QN-DN, the local authorities quickly consolidated their power and successfully carried out preparatory policies such as land restoration and reform. Meanwhile, authorities in An Giang and many other provinces in the Mekong Delta faced difficulties consolidating power and had problems implementing preparatory policies such as land reform and crop conversion.

Chapter 4 examines the building of pilot collective organisations and the acceleration of collectivisation. I found that collectivisation in QN-DN was achieved rapidly, but it faced major difficulties in An Giang. The reason was that collectivisation faced weaker peasant resistance in QN-DN than in An Giang. Moreover, local cadres in QN-DN were more loyal to the socialist transformation policy than their counterparts in An Giang.

Chapter 5 examines the performance of collective organisations under the work-points system (1978–81). I found peasants’ everyday politics and local cadres’ malpractices contributed significantly to the poor performance of collective farming. As the process of collectivisation continued, peasants in QN-DN chased work-points at the expense of collective farming. Meanwhile, many of their counterparts in An Giang were not even undertaking collective work; they tried their best to evade or abandoned collective work as much as possible. And cadres in both places managed collectives poorly. Despite many cadres in QN-DN being loyal to the VCP’s agrarian policies, several abused their power at the expense of peasants’ and collectives’ interests. Meanwhile, cadres in An Giang were unenthusiastic about collective farming and exercised slack management of labour, finance, production and distribution of produce. Several also abused their positions and became self-serving. Despite numerous campaigns by the authorities to strengthen collective farming in both places, the malpractice among local peasants and local cadres could not be reduced.
Chapter 6 examines the modifications of the VCP’s agrarian policies and the adoption of the product contract system in An Giang and QN-ĐN. It also examines the second wave of land reform and collectivisation and the strengthening of collective farming from 1981 to the late 1980s in An Giang and elsewhere in the Southern Region. The chapter shows that, in the first few years after the adoption of product contracts, the performance of collective farming improved significantly, in both QN-ĐN and An Giang provinces. In An Giang, product contracts saved some production units from collapse and facilitated the completion of the second wave of land redistribution and collectivisation because peasants seemed to accept the product contract system more than the work-points system. However, from 1985 to the late 1980s, collective farming in both An Giang and QN-ĐN was in crisis and similar problems arose in both places, owing to the effects of local politics. Performance again declined, peasants’ living standards dropped alarmingly and a new class of exploiters started to emerge.

Chapter 7 examines in depth the relationship between local politics, the performance of collective farming under product contracts (1981 to the late 1980s) and decollectivisation initiated at the local level. I found that collective farming under the product contract system continued to face major shortcomings and the impact of local politics. Despite differences in magnitude, peasants and local cadres in both places manifested similar forms of politics and noncompliant behaviour. Villagers in the Central Coast tried their best to enlarge their household economies by capturing collective resources, land and labour at the expense of the collective economy. Meanwhile, An Giang villagers tried their best to ensure their livelihoods by undertaking wage work elsewhere and using collective resources for their daily needs rather than investing in their collective fields. In the late 1980s, villagers in both places increasingly tried to avoid repaying debts and fulfilling their obligations to the collective; they wanted to return collective land or abandoned it when they saw that collective farming was unprofitable.

Local cadres in both places increasingly abused their power and became self-serving. QN-ĐN cadres shifted most collective work tasks to peasants and did not perform their own services well. They stole collective property and irrationally increased the quotas and agricultural input prices for peasants. Meanwhile, An Giang cadres assigned almost all farming tasks to peasants and increasingly
embezzled resources, misappropriated peasant land, mismanaged collective funds, monopolised agricultural services and—in the words of my interviewees and official reports alike—oppressed the masses. It was common for local cadres to misappropriate land anywhere they could and they had more land than ordinary people.

As discussed in Chapter 7 and the book’s conclusion, these kinds of local politics had a huge adverse effect on the survival of collective organisations and led to the failure of collective farming. In the late 1980s, local authorities, especially in An Giang, started to rethink the direction and purpose of collective farming and created policies to correct previous shortcomings. New individual farming arrangements beyond the official orthodoxy were adopted and became widespread, not only in the Mekong Delta, but also in the Central Coast and elsewhere in Vietnam. At first, VCP leaders put great effort into cracking down on such practices, but they were unable to control them and gradually recognised their benefits and accepted them. Finally, they endorsed local initiatives by shifting their policies back to household-based farming.
1. INTRODUCTION

Map 1.1 Southern Vietnam, 2005
Map 1.2 Quảng Nam administrative map, 2005
Map 1.3 Thăng Bình district map, 2005
Map 1.4 An Giang administrative map, 2005
Map 1.5 Chợ Mới district map, 2005