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## Conclusion

This book has investigated why socialist collectivisation failed in south Vietnam after 1975. After the country was reunified, the Vietnamese state attempted to implement collectivisation policies similar to those that had been applied in the north of the country during the Vietnam War. Despite the strong will of the new regime to implement this central pillar of socialist ideology, collectivisation was not realised uniformly; it was misapplied and subverted; and, after only 10 years, it was annulled as policy. This set of failings is somewhat of a puzzle for it occurred well before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when socialist ideology in Vietnam was at its peak and was manifest in many aspects of social policy. It also took place when the state was at its most confident and resolute after the successful reunification of the country. Focusing on two case studies (Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng province in the Central Coast region and An Giang province in the Mekong Delta) and based on an extensive review of the evidence, this study suggests that the reasons for variations in policy implementation, and the failure and reversal of policy, were twofold: regional differences and local politics.

The book shows that, at the time of the reunification in 1975, there were significant differences between the Central Coast and the Mekong Delta in terms of the consequences of the country's wars, the impacts of previous agrarian reforms, the natural and socioeconomic conditions and the social structure of rural communities. In Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng (QN-ĐN) in the Central Coast, prolonged war had disrupted or destroyed any positive effects of previous land reforms and development carried out by either Saigon's government or the National

Liberation Front (NLF). It was the war rather than previous land reforms that had transformed the local land tenure system, by causing landlords and a large proportion of the rural people to abandon their houses and land and live in enclosed camps. After the war, many landlords did not return, while others returned but could not reclaim or restore all of their land. Large areas were overgrown with weeds and seemed to have come under a kind of communal ownership. People restored any plot they liked as if it were their own. Thus, the war had changed the land tenure system and flattened the structure of rural communities, leaving the society relatively homogeneous. In addition, after the war, the peasant economy was mainly subsistence-focused. Most peasants were rendered poor and were mainly concerned with producing enough food for their families. As in the north, peasant communities in QN-ĐN continued to practise labour exchange and possessed a strong collective sense in accordance with traditional thinking about reciprocity and mutual assistance, especially during difficult times.

Meanwhile, soon after reunification, the agricultural sector in An Giang in the Mekong Delta had reached a higher level of economic development than that in the Central Coast and in the north in the 1950s. The social structure and rural economy in the Mekong Delta were more diverse. Previous agrarian reforms carried out by the Việt Minh, various South Vietnamese governments or the NLF had significantly changed the land tenure system and boosted commercial agriculture. By 1975 in the Mekong Delta, 70 per cent of the rural population were middle peasants who owned 80 per cent of the cultivated land, 60 per cent of the total farm equipment and 90 per cent of draught animals. Market relations and individual land tenure had been well established. The landless and land-poor could make a decent living by working as agricultural labourers, engaging in small trading or pursuing other off-farm economic opportunities. Many middle peasant farmers owned their own machinery, cultivated land beyond their residential area and, unlike those in the Central Coast, engaged in commercial rather than subsistence farming. Therefore, concepts of mutual aid, labour exchange and reciprocity were unpopular and occurred only among members of an extended family. In general, unlike the agrarian sector in the Central Coast and in northern Vietnam in the 1950s, the agrarian sector in the Mekong Delta was dominated by middle peasants who engaged largely in commercial agriculture and who wanted to continue to farm their own land and sell their own crops.

Differences in revolutionary influence also contributed to the disparities between the two regions. Large parts of the rural areas of QN-ĐN and the wider Central Coast region were under the influence of the Việt Minh during the war with France (1945–54) and then under the NLF during the war with America (1954–75). Therefore, peasants in these regions had a stronger relationship with the Việt Minh and the NLF and were more familiar with their respective political and economic policies. During the American war, the NLF was able to recruit a large number of revolutionaries who operated locally or were sent to the north for training. After the war, thanks to the considerable number of local revolutionaries who survived or returned from northern Vietnam, the Central Coast did not face a huge problem filling local government and party positions. These cadres were familiar with, enthusiastic about and committed to the post-1975 socialist transformation policies, at least in the first few years. Meanwhile, in An Giang during the American war, the area and therefore the population under the influence of the revolutionaries was reduced, local networks of revolutionaries were destroyed and many revolutionaries were killed or deserted. In many locations, no Communist Party cells operated until after reunification and, even then, they were few in number and relatively weak. The new local-level authorities had to recruit new cadres, a majority of whom were not ex-revolutionaries and were therefore not familiar with socialism and were unenthusiastic about the socialist transformation of agriculture and collectivisation.

Despite these regional disparities and the high level of commercial agriculture in the Mekong Delta, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) leaders decided to impose on the south the northern model of socialist agricultural transformation, which was considered a central pillar of socialist construction. As in the north and in other socialist countries, this agrarian reform consisted of two key components: land reform and collectivisation, with the former an essential step to prepare for the latter. Regardless of the existing shortcomings and disappointments of collective farming in the north, the VCP believed that collectivising agriculture in the south was the only way to modernise it, eliminate exploitation, support industrialisation and improve peasants' living standards. VCP leaders were apparently propelled by a commitment to building socialism and socialist large-scale production and a strong belief in their own capacities.

The VCP strongly believed the socialist transformation of agriculture in southern Vietnam could be completed by 1980. The socialist project, however, was not driven solely by the strong will and high ideology of top-level leaders; it also greatly depended on local-level conditions and politics, the main actors of which were ordinary peasants and local cadres. As it happened, the results of the post-1975 agrarian reforms varied from region to region. The implementation of postwar economic restoration measures, land reform and collectivisation was rapid in QN-ĐN and other provinces in the Central Coast. From 1975 to 1978, authorities in QN-ĐN were able to accomplish most of the preparatory measures for collectivisation, such as land redistribution, irrigation, field transformation and the establishment of simple collective organisations and pilot collectives. Authorities in QN-ĐN also met the central government's target to collectivise farming by 1980.

In contrast, authorities in An Giang and elsewhere in the Mekong Delta encountered major difficulties, and to the extent that socialist transformation occurred, it took many years and much effort to complete. Many policies—such as land redistribution and the building of interim collective organisations and pilot collectives—failed to reach the central government's targets and expectations due to strong peasant resistance and the inadequate commitment of local cadres. Local authorities failed to fully establish northern-style collective farms and had to modify and reduce the scale and socialist characteristics of their collectives to ease local resistance. Despite these compromises, collectivisation in the region accounted for less than 10 per cent of agricultural land and peasant households in 1980.

In the period 1981–85, having failed to achieve their targets, the VCP continued to press local authorities in the Mekong Delta to complete socialist transformation. Central Directive No. 100 (January 1981)—which called for the replacement of the work-points system with the product contract system, in which each household farmed separately on their contracted land—collectivisation in the region faced weaker peasant resistance and moved faster than before. Under pressure from the central government, authorities in An Giang and elsewhere in the delta rushed to carry out agricultural transformation, especially from 1984 to 1985. Many collective organisations were hastily established by 'just signing names', and land redistribution divided a commune's land equally between members. By February 1985, the province was declared halfway towards completing collectivisation. By April 1985,

An Giang announced completion of basic collectivisation, accounting for 80 per cent of the province's agricultural land—a minimum index for success. Thus, although the VCP announced the completion of socialist agricultural transformation in the Mekong Delta in the mid-1980s, many collective organisations essentially existed only on paper and fell short of expectations.

Despite encountering great difficulties, VCP leaders were resolute and persisted with the attempt to carry out socialist agricultural transformation and build socialism in the rural south. Only by modifying their policies to ease local resistance were VCP leaders able to establish collective organisations, but still they failed to realise their policy objectives. Collectives became sites of constant struggle between peasants, local cadres and state agencies over land, production and distribution. While VCP leaders were able to force villagers into collective structures, they could not direct peasants and local cadres to behave according to their expectations. This is why collective farming performed very poorly in the Mekong Delta and in the Central Coast region.

During the work-points system (1978–81), villagers in the Central Coast merely went through the motions, trying their best to optimise their work-points rather than the quality of production. In other words, they ended up doing collective work carelessly and deceitfully. Many tried to plunder collective resources and invested most of their energy in their own household economy. Few took care of collective property or worked as enthusiastically as authorities wanted. Meanwhile, the better-off villagers in An Giang tried their best to evade collective farming altogether. To avoid any political disadvantage, some joined production units but did not seriously undertake collective work. Some 'kept one foot within and the other foot outside' the production unit to make a living. Some sent their children or auxiliary labourers to do collective work while they, as their household's main labourers, worked for themselves. Many did collective work carelessly and sluggishly and did not care much about collective property. Although the behaviour of peasants in QN-DN and An Giang was quite different, in both places, the main objectives were to minimise the disadvantages of the system and maximise the benefits to themselves. The aggregate of these individual actions contributed significantly to the poor performance of collective farming.

Other key factors contributing to the poor performance of collective farming were local cadres. Despite being loyal to the VCP's agrarian policies, several local-level cadres in QN-ĐN took advantage of their position for personal gain, at the expense of the collective and the overall purpose of the reform. They strictly controlled peasants' economic activities while managing collectives poorly; they embezzled a considerable amount of agricultural inputs and produce. Some assigned tasks and gave work-points to members at their own discretion or prolonged tasks and inflated work-points to favour their fellow villagers or relatives at the expense of others. Some were prejudiced, bureaucratic, autocratic and patriarchal towards members; their behaviour contradicted the authorities' dictum that 'the collective is home and its members are the masters'.

Meanwhile, local cadres in An Giang were unenthusiastic about agricultural transformation and collective farming policies. Faced with peasant resistance, they were reluctant to carry out policies forcefully according to the official blueprint and instead modified policies to accommodate local concerns. Some used specific parts of the national policies, such as the 'positive and firm principle' of collectivisation, to delay the process or let it drift. Compared with their counterparts in the Central Coast, cadres in An Giang allowed peasants more freedom in selecting whether or not they joined collective farming or participated in collective work; however, they managed collective property poorly. *An Giang* newspaper accounts revealed numerous cases of local cadres' sloppy management of production, theft of collective inputs, cash and peasants' work-points, misappropriation of peasant land and property and bullying of the masses. Cadres colluded with merchants, most of whom were their relatives, which contributed to inflation and aided the survival and expansion of the black market. These were the very things the VCP leaders were trying to control and eliminate.

As in north Vietnam, everyday peasant politics and local cadres' malpractices in both QN-ĐN and An Giang provinces during 1979–81 significantly affected the performance of collective farming. Collective farming in both provinces, as elsewhere in Vietnam, performed poorly and food production deteriorated, falling short of official expectations. Despite authorities in both regions putting great effort into correcting peasants' and cadres' negative practices, these behaviours increased over time. In response to the deteriorating performance of collective farming and the steady fall in the country's food production, the VCP

decided to abandon the work-points system and introduced a new farming arrangement, the product contract system, which was intended to reduce poor practices and motivate villagers to work enthusiastically and responsibly. The product contract system helped improve the performance of collective farming in both provinces for a few years only, and failed to solve the long-term struggles between peasants and local cadres about land, labour and other resources.

During the product contract period (1981–88), villagers in QN-ĐN tried their best to enlarge their household economies by encroaching on collective resources such as land, labour and agricultural inputs at the expense of the collective economy. Despite authorities expecting them to put collective and state interests first, villagers prioritised their own interests. When they failed to produce more than their quota or faced subsistence shortages, many refused to pay their debts to collectives or fulfil their obligations to the state. In the later stages of the product contract system, when it became clear collective farming was less profitable than outside opportunities, many peasants in QN-ĐN decided to accept less contracted land or even abandoned collective land to make a living elsewhere. This had a huge impact on the performance of collective farming in that province.

By contrast, in An Giang, collectivisation during the product contract period transformed the Mekong Delta's commercial agriculture into subsistence farming. Some landowners who lost their land during land redistribution were disappointed and gave up farming or did just enough to subsist. Many land recipients farmed poorly because they did not know how to farm, lacked incentives or had inadequate capital and were not provided enough help by production units; many put a considerable amount of time and effort into working for wages to supplement their livelihoods. Some sold state agricultural inputs to meet their daily needs rather than investing them in the contracted fields. Like their counterparts in QN-ĐN, in the later stages of the product contract system, many An Giang villagers were in debt to production units, and many refused to repay these debts. Some decided to abandon, transfer or even sell their redistributed land to others.

VCP leaders believed product contracts would reduce the number of problems associated with cadres' malpractice by increasing their responsibility for managing certain phases of collective farming. However, despite numerous campaigns during 1981–88 by the

authorities in QN-ĐN and An Giang, aimed at improving the quality of local cadres and correcting and cracking down on their poor behaviour, these problems did not disappear, and in fact increased over time. Local cadres in QN-ĐN tended to shift their responsibility on to villagers by using 'blank contracts' that required villagers to do most phases of farming. Cadres often failed to fulfil their duties, such as spraying pesticides or watering fields on time. They also embezzled scarce collective resources over which they had control, such as agricultural inputs and collective property. From the mid-1980s, when Vietnam adopted a multisectoral market economy, cadres tended to relax their management of collectives and take advantage of opportunities in the free market. For instance, they sold scarce fertilisers on the free market for personal gain—to such a degree that many collectives in Thăng Bình and Quảng Nam did not have enough for their own members in 1987.

Meanwhile, in An Giang, local cadres were guilty of numerous malpractices from 1981 to the late 1980s. Many exploited their positions to steal collective agricultural inputs and funds, and most owed large debts to the state and collectives. Many cadres owed tonnes of paddy and accounted for a majority of the total debt in the province. Although authorities in both places put great effort into correcting and punishing such activities, this sort of behaviour became more prevalent. In addition, local cadres misappropriated a considerable amount of peasants' land, which was supposed to be redistributed to landless and land-poor households. Most production units in An Giang did not operate according to the official product contract system. Rather, they divided land among households to be farmed individually but retained control over household production, distribution and marketing. Production unit cadres monopolised farming services and served members poorly while overcharging them for the cost of these services.

In general, the widespread malpractices of peasants and local officials were at odds with VCP leaders' requirements and contributed to the poor performance of collective farming and the eventual derailment of many national agrarian policies. Collective farming failed to increase productivity or improve peasants' living standards. Collectivisation also aimed to eliminate exploitation but, in reality, it merely created a new class of exploiters in rural areas: collective and production unit cadres. Land redistribution was supposed to benefit the landless and land-poor, but failed to do so. Rather, it largely benefited local cadres

and their relatives. The non-resident cultivator prohibition enabled collectivisation but, in turn, significantly hindered peasants' production capacity and commercial agriculture in An Giang.

The failure of collective farming in Vietnam was manifest well before the collapse of the Soviet Union and before Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia. Staple food production in QN-ĐN, An Giang and elsewhere in Vietnam declined alarmingly between 1985 and 1987. The living conditions of villagers also deteriorated over time. Fed up with collective farming, many villagers decided to abandon or return land to collectives, especially when Vietnam adopted a market economy under the *Đổi Mới* policy in 1986. To encourage peasants to farm their collective fields, some local authorities in QN-ĐN tried new farming arrangements as an alternative to the product contract system. Authorities in An Giang also recognised that most production units were inadequate in quality and that collective farming had failed to improve peasants' living conditions. To increase food production, they tried to correct the shortcomings of socialist transformation by allowing peasants to farm outside their villages and returning some land to productive landowners. These practices happened before national leaders launched a major change to their agrarian policy in 1988.

The poor performance of collective farming and the deteriorating living conditions were not confined to QN-ĐN and An Giang, but occurred in most parts of Vietnam during 1985–87. Villagers were hungry in many locations; they accepted less contracted land and some even abandoned land; and their debts increased over time. In response, many locations tried new farming arrangements to deal with their problems. By September 1987, more than 70 per cent of collectives in Vietnam were using farming arrangements other than the product contract. Realising they would not be able to reverse the situation, the VCP in April 1988 released Resolution No. 10, which endorsed the new local arrangements. The resolution marked a new era in Vietnam's agricultural development: the return to household farming.

In summary, central to the failure and then modification of national agrarian policies in southern Vietnam post 1975 were the widespread practices of peasants and local officials that were often at odds the VCP's expectations of 'the new socialist'. Peasants tried their best to pursue their own household economic interests rather than collective ones. Local cadres often took advantage of their position to benefit

themselves rather than to serve the people, the collectives and the state. Despite numerous official campaigns to correct and crack down on such bad behaviour and even change national policies to accommodate local concerns, these problems did not disappear, but in fact increased. The ultimate consequences were the inefficiency of collective farming, severe food shortages and an economic crisis that eventually forced the VCP to accept and endorse the farming arrangements that villagers and cadres had initiated to deal with their own local problems.

My findings on collective farming in QN-ĐN and An Giang in southern Vietnam reinforce Ben Kerkvliet's proposition about the power of everyday politics.<sup>1</sup> Despite differences in the form and degree of peasant action, their everyday politics had a huge impact on the performance of collective farming and contributed to the failure and change of national agrarian policies. Moreover, it is clear that socialist agrarian reform faced stronger resistance from peasants in the Mekong Delta than in the Central Coast and the north of the country. Resistance came not only from many landowners, but also through a lack of collaboration from landless households. Peasant resistance in the Mekong Delta took various forms, from subtle everyday politics to open and confrontational resistance. However, like ordinary people, many land-rich and upper-middle peasants resisted state policies individually, rather than mobilising others around them to exercise social control together. Only in favourable conditions were these peasants able to use kinship, informal social networks, local institutions and various other measures to evade or make use of state policies for their own gain. For example, after An Giang authorities' Decision No. 303/QD-UB to correct the shortcomings of land policies, from 1988 to the early 1990s, many upper-middle and middle peasants were able to take advantage of this favourable policy to retrieve their previous landholdings.

One might have expected religious factors to be significant in understanding the course of collectivisation in southern Vietnam. Followers of the Hòa Hảo religion, who were prominent in many parts of An Giang province, might have been obstacles for the VCP's agrarian policies. However, I found that the policies encountered major resistance in the Southern Region regardless of people's religious affiliation. The VCP's plans faced even more problems in NLF-influenced areas

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1 Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics*.

such as Tân Hội commune (Cai Lậy, Tiền Giang province) and some parts of Đồng Tháp province. In Long Điền B, Chợ Mới in An Giang, land redistribution and collective farming encountered the same levels of resistance in areas where Hòa Hảo predominated as in areas where the majority of people were Catholic. When interviewing villagers there, I found that Hòa Hảo and non-Hòa Hảo followers had similar views and experiences of the post-1975 agrarian reforms and similar justifications for their behaviour. I found barely any villagers who used their religion to justify their resistance to collective farming. Chợ Mới district was a Hòa Hảo stronghold, but also the first district in An Giang to complete collectivisation. In general, collective farming encountered problems regardless of whether or not the population was Hòa Hảo. In QN-ĐN, villagers in many locations were not particularly religious, but collective farming ran into trouble there, too. It is therefore likely that religion is not an important factor in understanding the course of collectivisation in An Giang and QN-ĐN.

One might wonder whether struggles between villagers and state agencies over land and other agrarian issues have abated since the reestablishment of household farming. It seems such struggles are not over. Land redistribution, which VCP leaders initially considered a temporary measure towards collectivisation, turned out to be a source of long-term tension and struggle between the party and southern society. Land reform and struggles over it occurred from 1975 to the late 1980s, continued to be a hot issue in the early 1990s and remain so today. For example, despite authorities in An Giang dealing with more than 30,000 peasant complaints in 1988–90, a large number of land conflicts have still not been resolved. Unable to settle persistent and widespread land disputes, An Giang authorities decided in the early 1990s to stop dealing with such matters—a decision that angered many villagers who had not yet regained their lost land. Meanwhile, new land conflicts have emerged since the reestablishment of household farming, especially since the late 1990s, as Vietnam's urbanisation and industrialisation have intensified. State agencies have often taken over villagers' fields without proper compensation. Local cadres across all regions of Vietnam continue to abuse their power to misappropriate villagers' land for their personal benefit. These phenomena have exacerbated rural land conflicts.

In recent years, hundreds of villagers from different regions of Vietnam, disillusioned with local government, have gathered in Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City to demand the central government resolve their land disputes.<sup>2</sup> Some of these disputes have their origins in the post-1975 land redistribution, while others have resulted from the recent process of urbanisation. Villagers' demonstrations have become a hot issue in Vietnam today. In other words, land will likely continue to be a source of rural conflict and political discontent in Vietnam in the coming years.

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2 BBC Vietnamese (2016), Dân nhiều vùng lên Hà Nội biểu tình đòi đất [Many people in Hanoi protest about land], *BBC Vietnamese*, 21 January, available from: [www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum/2016/01/160120\\_quynhchau\\_land\\_protests](http://www.bbc.com/vietnamese/forum/2016/01/160120_quynhchau_land_protests) (accessed 4 October 2017).

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