

Promoting the community, autonomy and self-management of traditional village institutions in Vietnam

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Abstract: Throughout Vietnam's history, "villages" have played a crucial role in the nation's economic, political, cultural, social, and spiritual life. Originating as communities formed along riverbanks with subsistence rice farming, Vietnamese villages have persisted through centuries. In Vietnamese culture, villages are the cradle and preservers of material and spiritual values. The imagery of the "banyan tree – communal well – village hall" has long been deeply ingrained in the minds of the Vietnamese people. Thus, studying villages and the issues surrounding them has become a topic of great interest, particularly during the transitional phase towards socialism. To sustain their role, it is essential to preserve and promote the community spirit, self-reliance, and self-governance of traditional village institutions. Through this research, we aim to analyze and propose new approaches to enhance the role of institutions within traditional Vietnamese villages.

Keywords: traditional village institutions, Vietnam

1. INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, adequate attention to the traditional cultural institutions of villages not only contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage but also serves as a means to maintain and promote the national cultural identity and strengthen community solidarity. This task is exceedingly challenging but has been prioritized through major policies of the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam. These policies aim to establish culture as a solid spiritual foundation for society and as an intrinsic driving force to ensure sustainable development and the robust defense of the nation, aligned with the goals of prosperity, strength, democracy, equality, and civilization. In practice, achieving these significant objectives requires in-depth research into village institutions to harmonize the relationship between villages and the State, as well as between the traditional self-reliance and self-governance of villages and the new management policies introduced by the State in the context of Vietnam's ongoing industrialization and modernization.

To fulfill this task, I aim to address the following research questions and hypotheses:

Q1: What are village institutions, and what are their characteristics?

Q2: What roles do village institutions play in fostering community spirit, self-reliance, and self-governance in Vietnamese villages?

H1: In Vietnam, rapid urbanization profoundly affects rural life. The shift in lifestyle from rural to urban settings and from farmers to urban dwellers is altering cultural norms, leading to changes in human behavior and interactions within family and society. It also impacts the transformation of traditional organizational models. On the downside,

urbanization can erode the traditional identity of rural areas. Despite the enduring value of village organizational institutions, some have struggled to adapt to the immediate changes brought by modern society. This situation has created conflicts that must be resolved between traditional rural spaces and modern urban spaces to enable Vietnam's holistic development.

This research will build upon recent studies to address the aforementioned questions. Furthermore, we will incorporate key topics related to Vietnamese villages, as discussed and approved at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party. Additionally, we will utilize reliable and updated reference materials, including books, scientific articles, and proceedings from scientific conferences in Vietnam.

2. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH CONTEXT

One of the notable works providing an in-depth exploration of traditional villages in Vietnam is the study "Some Issues on Vietnamese Villages" by Nguyen Quang Ngoc. This research has been extensively used as a reference for studies on traditional craft villages in Vietnam. The study offers a detailed discussion of fundamental concepts related to Vietnam's traditional craft villages. Additionally, the author provides insightful commentary that serves as a guideline for subsequent research on the characteristics and historical development of Vietnamese craft villages. Furthermore, the author's analysis of the essence of villages and farmers in the [former society] and their connection to the country's development up to the present has provided significant theoretical and practical value (1).

Next, we can mention the study "Vietnamese Villages – Some Economic, Cultural, and Social Issues" by Phan Dai Doan. This work is relatively extensive in terms of content, structured into three main parts: [Part I: Economy, Part II: Society, and Part III: Culture]. The study focuses on analyzing key issues from tradition to modernity, encompassing the

economic, cultural, and social structures of Vietnamese rural villages. Through the content of this book, readers can better understand the critical role of land ownership and household economies in the strategy of developing villages under a socialist-oriented market economy led by the Communist Party of Vietnam. In this context, ensuring a harmonious integration of modern civilization elements while maintaining the excellent traditional cultural values of rural villages is of utmost importance (2).

In addition, the study “Reflections on Researching Vietnamese Villages Using an Interdisciplinary and Regional Approach” by Do Danh Huan has received considerable acclaim. In this work, the author identifies the characteristics of previous research on Vietnamese villages, which primarily adopted approaches rooted in specialized disciplines such as history, cultural studies, ethnology, sociology, law, and economics. There has been a noticeable lack of interdisciplinary and regional studies on this topic. The author also highlights that most research has been conducted by individual scholars, with limited group studies aimed at fostering comparative research both domestically and internationally. Finally, the author introduces an initial perspective on adopting interdisciplinary and regional approaches in studying Vietnamese villages, thereby enriching the theoretical framework to address the research question: Approaching Vietnamese Villages through Interdisciplinary and Regional Studies – Challenges and Prospects (3).

Additionally, the research “Understanding the Institutional Organization of Villages in the Northern Delta During the French Colonial Period” by Nguyen Thi Le Ha stands out as a notable contribution to the study of traditional Vietnamese villages, recently published. According to the author, the current policy of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese government emphasizes administrative reform and the effective implementation of industrialization and modernization programs for agriculture and rural areas. Therefore, examining the institutional organization of villages during the French colonial period provides an important scientific foundation to inherit positive and rational aspects while addressing the limitations and shortcomings. This research contributes to improving administrative reform efforts in rural areas under present conditions (4).

Finally, the research titled “Self-Governance and Its Role in the Activities of Self-Governing Community Organizations in Residential Areas in Vietnam Today” by Nguyen Ba Duong offers significant practical value. The main focus of this work revolves around self-governing communities and village institutions to ensure the optimal promotion of self-governance in residential areas in Vietnam. In this study, the author meticulously examines numerous fundamental concepts related to traditional Vietnamese villages, approaching them from natural and psychological perspectives. For instance, detailed discussions are provided on the concepts of “community” and “communitarianism” within the cultural and social life of Vietnamese people, spanning from tradition to

modernity. According to the author, the self-governance model in villages emerged early in Vietnamese history and has played a crucial role in community development. The research aims to explore the notions of community and self-governance among Vietnamese people to establish a foundation for building national solidarity, which serves as a driving force for economic, cultural, and social development across different regions in Vietnam (5).

3. FUNDAMENTAL THEORETICAL ISSUES ON TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE VILLAGES

Although it is a research topic with a long history, new approaches to the concept of Vietnamese village society continue to expand in order to meet the ever-evolving practical demands. To this day, there are still various interpretations of the term “village society” as well as its characteristics. Moreover, in different societies across Eastern countries, this term is viewed from multiple perspectives and exhibits fundamental differences. To fully understand the formation and development process of the village society, in addition to a solid scientific theoretical foundation, a historical perspective and the ability to deeply synthesize practical realities are essential. Therefore, numerous research projects with various approaches to the concept of village society have been carried out. Notably, the following approaches are distinguished:

Firstly, regarding the terminology, the Vietnamese dictionary defines “village” or “village society” with two meanings: First, it refers to a group of rural residents forming a unit with a shared life in many aspects, and is the lowest administrative unit during the feudal period. Additionally, it can also refer to a group of people with the same profession or engaged in the same type of work (6). Based on a direct approach to the main factors constituting the village society in Vietnam, some opinions suggest that village society is a complex entity, encompassing many elements such as economy, culture, society, space, landscape, and environment, with various institutions like professional associations, regional linkages, age groups, and gender (3). Regarding its historical origin, some argue that the feudal village society in Vietnam, which exists to this day, is an extension of a family or a clan. Furthermore, this concept is often used to refer to a community of residents connected by kinship or having economic and cultural ties, with agriculture being the primary activity (1).

It can be observed that there are still various interpretations in the research activities on villages and related issues in Vietnam. However, most viewpoints acknowledge certain common aspects of this special organization. Studies generally agree that the village is a unique social organization. The village is one of the most tightly knit social structures. A village society is not only an administrative unit but also an economic unit. In this context, it is noted that this unit has defined the living space and the main production methods of a community of residents who are closely connected through several aspects such as: kinship relations, survival methods,

politics, cultural history, and even spiritual and religious factors. To clarify this controversial issue, many Western experts have identified three fundamental characteristics of traditional villages (7): Politically, it is self-governance; economically, it is self-sufficiency; and socially, it is unity, a community. Thus, they tend to equate the concept of “village” with the concept of “village society”. To this day, this remains a widely accepted interpretation.

In summary, the concept of “village” is very familiar and commonly used, but when it comes to defining “village”, there are many different interpretations. Some consider the village a community, while others view it as a residential unit within a specific geographical area. And, fundamentally, the institutions in traditional Vietnamese village societies include: “Dong ho”, “Huong uoc”, “Hoi dong toc bieu”, “Giap”, “Hoi dong ky muc”, “Phuong” and “Hoi”.

The most prominent characteristics of traditional village societies are community and self-governance. In feudal Vietnamese society, the state only intervened in the internal affairs of the village when it needed to address major issues such as: tax collection, conscription, handling criminal cases, resolving civil disputes within the village that could not be reconciled, or intervening during major epidemics. Other matters were left to the autonomy and self-management of the village (8). The traditional symbols of Vietnamese village community are the images of the communal yard, the water wharf, and the banyan tree. Every village has these elements because they serve as the administrative center where important activities like meetings, village discussions, irrigation work, and tax collection take place. Meanwhile, the traditional symbol of self-governance and self-management is the bamboo hedge surrounding the village. In terms of organizational structure in traditional Vietnamese village societies, the institutions and structures were built and organized very systematically. Notably, these elements did not follow rigid aspects but were flexible, changing in various ways and principles. As a result, they created many types and methods of organizing and gathering the community. Fundamentally, the characteristics of the organizational structure of village societies (both traditional and modern) are reflected in the forms of organization or connection, and the ways in which the villagers are gathered, primarily through the following methods:

Firstly, the organization of the village based on kinship (clans, family lines): This is one of the most common traditional village organizations. Some villages consist of multiple clans, while others are made up of only one clan, in which case the village is synonymous with that single family (clan). For example, Phung village in Dan Phuong (now part of Hanoi) is a typical example.

Secondly, the organization of the village based on geographic area (residential land): Each village has a specific area known as the living space, which includes elements such as: residential land for building houses, economic production

land, hills, rivers, ponds, etc. These elements are owned and used by the village community or its members.

Thirdly, the organization of the village based on profession, interests, and voluntary associations (factions - associations, craft guilds, etc.): This is a noteworthy aspect in the formation and development of villages, as it brings together people with common interests in economic activities. Even today, some villages still exist following this model (such as pottery villages, blacksmithing villages, etc.).

Lastly, the organization of the village according to administrative units: In the past, villages were the lowest administrative units during the feudal period in Vietnam.

Basically, the common characteristics of the village can be summarized as follows: (i) The village is the basic residential community of the people, originating from very early times and playing a particularly important role in the history of building and defending the nation of Vietnam. (ii) The village is both an economic community, a cultural community, and an administrative unit (before the revolution). Economically, the highlight of traditional Vietnamese villages is closely linked to agricultural production. (iii) Regarding the population and organizational structure, the population is quite complex, with people of the same family (or many families) whose ancestors settled and reclaimed land, forming the main part of the village. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that the organizational structure of traditional Vietnamese villages consists of institutions with high stability and sustainability, which has been proven by history. At the same time, these institutions have contributed to promoting the sense of community, autonomy, and self-management in traditional Vietnamese villages.

4. THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS IN TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE VILLAGES IN PROMOTING COMMUNITY, AUTONOMY, AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

4.1 Community Spirit

First, we must mention the role of “Dong ho”, or in other words, the institution of the village built on blood relationships. The village is the most sustainable community unit. Particularly, within each community, in addition to being responsible to the country, people are also bound by the customs of the village, the customs of Dong ho, and family life. It is clear that Dong ho plays an important and central role, being the core of village culture. In terms of promoting the sense of community, Dong ho also leaves significant marks. In Vietnam, Dong ho has unique characteristics compared to other countries. One of the most distinctive features is the relationship between Dong ho and the village. They are not separate or opposed to each other but are always closely connected. It should be added that the formation of the village based on blood relationships is common in Vietnam. Accordingly, the element of Dong ho here is not just a simple social institution but also a unique cultural environment. In this relationship, it starts with nuclear families, and then develops into a larger and more organized form. Dong ho creates a sense

of closeness and love among its members. These are the first steps in the formation and development of the community. Initially stemming from family and Dong ho affection, this feeling then spreads throughout the village. Additionally, Dong ho plays a crucial role in educating individuals about noble values such as the tradition of “drinking water, remembering the source” and “sharing with those in need”.

Next is the role of Huong uoc. It is important to note that community is understood as the connection and close bond between families, Dong ho, and the members of the village, working together for collective purposes. The social institution – Huong uoc – is the concretization of the rules and regulations regarding the relationships between individuals and the community in Vietnamese villages. No one is to be isolated or separated from other individuals or organizations. Similarly, the community must be built on a collective of people. Huong uoc plays a significant role in establishing communal relationships within Vietnamese villages, especially when the state’s laws have not yet regulated these relationships. Huong uoc is essential in preserving and promoting the positive traditions of the village. Tradition is a collection of thoughts, feelings, habits in thinking, lifestyle, and behaviors of a specific community that has been formed historically, stabilized, and passed down from generation to generation (9). Like Dong ho, Huong uoc regulates the relationships among all members, educating them to love, help, and support each other. This is the beauty of Vietnamese cultural traditions. The role of Huong uoc in replacing the law to regulate civil relationships in the village has further enhanced the sense of community among the residents. Specifically, the people in the village are not only bound by close familial relationships, but individuals also have obligations toward the collective, contributing to common tasks based on the provisions of Huong uoc. For example, the regulation that young people in the village, upon reaching adulthood, must participate in maintaining and protecting the village’s security, or the regulation requiring participation in building the village’s communal house, temples, and festivals, all contribute significantly to promoting community cohesion in traditional Vietnamese villages.

In addition to Dong ho and Huong uoc, other institutions in the village such as Phe, Giap, Phuong - Hoi, Hoi dong ky muc and Hoi dong toc bieu also play an important role in promoting the sense of community within the village. When it comes to Phuong - Hoi, it is an organization that gathers and links communities of residents with common economic interests, typically in craft villages or fishing villages along the coast. For example, the Bat Trang pottery village (Hanoi), the Non Nuoc stone carving village (Da Nang), and the My Nghiep weaving village (Ninh Thuan). In the past, most rural Vietnamese villages were predominantly agricultural, but later many villages developed groups of residents engaged in different professions who closely linked together to form Phuong, Hoi. Similar to traditional agricultural villages, these villages also needed to establish connections to carry out communal activities together. For instance, in disaster

prevention to protect the village, maintaining order to ensure the peaceful life of the village, and fostering culture, ethics, and lifestyle in the community, family, and individuals.

4.2 Autonomy and Self-Governance

While relationships among members within the village emphasize community, interactions with external communities and higher-level authorities reflect autonomy and self-governance. Autonomy is a key characteristic of traditional Vietnamese villages, described as the “self-regulation and self-management of villages in the socio-economic evolution. Self-regulation and self-management involve minimal direct intervention from higher authorities and represent the multifaceted operation of civil society” (10). Additionally, the autonomy of villages is also reflected in their rights to own and distribute communal land. Vietnamese villages originally emerged as rural communes with a system of collective ownership of agricultural land. Even with the establishment of state governance, these communes retained their rights to own and utilize this land. It should also be noted that the traditional symbol of autonomy is the bamboo hedge, a significant feature of traditional Vietnamese villages. This highlights the closed nature of traditional villages, as reflected in popular sayings passed down through generations: Each village lives on its own land, each village worships its own saint... Autonomy and self-governance, alongside a sense of community, became defining characteristics of village culture. Autonomy and self-governance in the village context can be broadly understood as the deliberate detachment of villages from external influences, particularly avoiding intervention from higher levels of authority. However, it is essential to recognize that the autonomy and self-governance of traditional Vietnamese villages were not merely restrictive features. On the contrary, they also played a crucial role in various aspects of village life. The role of institutions and mechanisms in promoting autonomy and self-governance in traditional Vietnamese villages can be summarized as follows:

First, we consider the role of institutions within the village, such as the Hoi dong ky muc and Hoi dong toc bieu. Hoi dong ky muc was the traditional governing body of villages in the lowlands and midlands of Northern Vietnam. This council was established in the latter half of the 15th century, when the centralized feudal state abolished the xa quan system [under which, for a period, villages were not considered an administrative level in the feudal governance system of Vietnam]. The Hoi dong ky muc was granted full authority over significant aspects of village life, such as amending and supplementing huong uoc (village regulations), dividing or auctioning public land (công điền, công thổ), managing land tenure, auctioning assets, budgeting, repairing communal houses and pagodas, organizing festivals, and managing relations with other villages and higher-level authorities. Hoi dong ky muc operated without fixed terms or limits and was entirely independent of higher-level state authorities. Feudal local governments at the village level had to rely on the council to execute their tasks. For this reason, the establishment of the

Hoi dong ky muc is seen as a factor that encouraged the autonomy and self-governance of villages. Decisions regarding the creation or amendment of village regulations were made by this council, sometimes diverging from the overarching legal framework of the feudal state. The clearest example of this phenomenon is encapsulated in the saying, “The king’s law yield to village customs”.

As for the Hoi dong toc bieu, it functioned similarly to the Hoi dong ky muc as the governing body of Vietnamese villages in the lowlands and midlands of Northern Vietnam. The Hoi dong toc bieu was established in 1921 as part of the French colonial “cải lương hương chính” (village reform) policy. This policy aimed to fundamentally alter governance mechanisms to exert tighter control over Vietnamese villages. At this time, the French Resident-Superior of Tonkin issued a new decree abolishing the Hoi dong ky muc and replacing it with the Hoi dong toc bieu. Fundamentally, the Hoi dong toc bieu retained the same functions and powers as the Hoi dong ky muc. Notably, the autonomy and self-governance of villages continued to be upheld. For example, the council managed all aspects of economic, cultural, and social life within the village.

Secondly, we examine the role of huong uoc - a vital institution in traditional Vietnamese villages - in promoting the autonomy and self-governance of the villages. Huong uoc refers to a set of written regulations outlining behavioral rules that a residential community voluntarily agrees upon and establishes, reflecting the cultural characteristics of each village. These regulations embody the self-governing nature of the community while aligning with the ethical and cultural norms of each locality (11). The practice of drafting and implementing huong uoc in Vietnam over the years has underscored its significance and value in managing social affairs within residential communities. It serves as a mechanism to address and regulate specific relationships in the village that national laws have not yet covered (12).

It is evident that the dynamic and complex relationships within villages and hamlets are areas where state laws struggle to govern effectively. In such contexts, huong uoc, along with village customs and traditions, play a critical role. Consequently, huong uoc has become the standard for regulating relationships in rural villages. It is also worth noting that villages differ significantly in terms of geographical living spaces, economic activities, as well as their social, spiritual, and religious lives. Therefore, huong uoc holds influence only within a specific community and does not apply to or affect other communities. This localized nature of huong uoc has further reinforced the self-governance and autonomy of traditional Vietnamese villages. Initially, villages were groups of residents closely connected through territorial relations. To maintain the community, there needed to be regulations governing interactions among its members. As the community grew and complex, overlapping relationships emerged, more stringent regulations became necessary. These regulations, established specifically for the residents of each village, often

held more significant influence than state laws. They were diverse and comprehensive in content, varying from village to village. This diversity highlights the autonomous nature of villages across many aspects.

Additionally, other factors such as dong ho, phe, and hoi also play significant roles in promoting the autonomy and self-governance of villages. Similar to huong uoc, dong ho (clans or lineages) have their own set of regulations aimed at educating and regulating individual relationships. In rural areas today, dong ho still hold critical roles and exert profound influence over village decisions. However, they are also considered potential seeds for the emergence of factionalism, localism, and conservatism. Characteristics such as patriarchal tendencies, hierarchical order, and a family-oriented lifestyle often interfere in the internal affairs of villages. Villages that are strongly influenced by kinship factors tend to exhibit deeper tendencies toward autonomy and self-governance. This profound impact of dong ho on village life is often seen as both a defining feature and a powerful mechanism for fostering the self-governing and autonomous nature of Vietnamese villages. Thus, dong ho is regarded as one of the key institutions capable of significantly contributing to the development of self-governance and autonomy in Vietnamese rural communities.

5. SOME CONSIDERATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

It should be noted that due to the characteristics of community spirit, autonomy, and self-governance, Vietnamese villages have always maintained a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support, but they also exhibit traits of insularity and conservatism. Both material and spiritual factors play a significant role in shaping the communal and autonomous nature of Vietnamese villages. From a communal perspective, this might appear to be a purely positive trait of traditional Vietnamese villages, but it also has a dual nature. Specifically, the dual impact of communalism influences the lifestyle, thinking, and behavior of Vietnamese people. On the one hand, it fosters a sense of democratic equality, collective social spirit, and mutual support, as expressed in the saying (when one horse is sick, the whole stable stops eating). It also promotes cohesion, solidarity, and mutual assistance within communities. On the other hand, it introduces limitations, such as the emergence of factionalism, a dependency mindset, or a tendency to avoid confrontation to maintain harmony. It can also foster jealousy and erode individual consciousness, promoting an egalitarian ideology that suppresses personal distinctions. This egalitarianism is often one of the primary reasons behind behaviors that prioritize emotion over reason, as reflected in the saying “trăm cái lý không bằng một tí cái tình” (a hundred reasons cannot match a little affection). In terms of autonomy and self-governance, these traits were historically viewed as crucial factors in maintaining Vietnam’s independence and territorial integrity. The autonomy and self-governing structure of villages played a vital role in the country’s struggles for independence and sovereignty, with the saying “mất nước còn làng, mất làng là mất nước” (if the

country is lost, the village remains; if the village is lost, the country is lost) exemplifying their significance.

Historically, autonomy and self-governance have been regarded as key features and roles that enabled Vietnam to maintain its independence and territorial integrity. The autonomy and self-governing characteristics of villages played a crucial role in the struggle for independence and sovereignty in Vietnam, encapsulated in the saying “mất nước thì còn làng, mất làng thì mất nước” (“if the country is lost, the village remains; if the village is lost, the country is lost”). Several factors contributed to the reinforcement and development of autonomy and self-governance in traditional Vietnamese villages, as highlighted by (13):

Geographical Space: Residents of each village lived in relatively isolated spaces, surrounded by bamboo hedges and village gates. Each village functioned like a small, enclosed kingdom, self-contained and self-aware. **Economic Independence:** Villages existed as independent economic units, capable of self-sufficiency, and therefore had little need for external trade relations. **Administrative Structure:** Each village maintained an independent self-governing administrative unit responsible for addressing all matters within the village. **Emotional Bonds:** The members of a village were often related by kinship, resulting in emotionally sufficient and closed interpersonal interactions within the village's confines. **Religious Practices:** Each village worshiped its own tutelary deity (thành hoàng làng), considered the protector of the villagers, and held its own festivals and communal rituals. This independence in terms of geography, economy, administrative structure, emotional bonds, customs, and religious practices made each village operate like a small, enclosed kingdom, largely isolated from the outside world.

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