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Organisational Adventures in District Government: Central Control Versus Local Initiative in Long An Province, Vietnam

Natalie Hicks

May 2005

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University
I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree in the same or other form to any other university.

Natalie Hicks

12 May 2005
Abstract

Most studies of sub-national government in rural Vietnam have focused on the commune and province level governments. This dissertation is an examination of district (huyen) government. It shows that the district was important to the central government both before the Communist victory in 1975 and afterwards and that the district level has remained a primary interface between the villagers and higher authorities. This study also examines tensions between central governments' attempts to control rural areas and localist tendencies that exist within district administrations.

The dissertation focuses on selected districts in Long An province in the Mekong Delta during three periods: the wartime South Vietnamese regime, which existed below the seventeenth parallel from 1955 until its defeat by the Communists in 1975; the late 1970s and 1980s when the Communist government in Hanoi pursued a district-building campaign; and the reform era of the 1990s. Under the South Vietnamese regime and in the pre-reform era of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, local initiative was stifled as policy was dictated by the central government, with disastrous consequences. Most literature on this subject emphasises a sharp break between pre-1975 and post-1975 Vietnam. By contrast, this dissertation highlights the way in which there are important elements of continuity between both regimes in terms of central government measures to control district government through administrative re-organisation and top-down policy implementation.

In the reform era, the dynamics of central regulation versus district control have changed. The district government now has greater latitude to develop innovative
‘local’ approaches to agricultural development. Using a state-in-society approach that is generous enough to avoid definitive boundaries between state and society, the study examines how district officials have been joined by ‘associates of the state’, particularly agricultural extension officers, who act as a link between state and societal objectives. This interaction has contributed to increased prosperity for many villagers while also raising inequality. The study also shows that while the central government has been more willing to allow local experimentation during the reform era, its influence and interests are still felt at the district level.
Acknowledgements

This endeavour would have failed at the first hurdle without the many people who generously gave me their time, support and assistance. Firstly, I would like to express my deep gratitude to my supervisory panel at the ANU: Professor Ben Kerkvliet, Professor David Marr and Professor Jonathan Unger. I reserve particular thanks to Ben Kerkvliet for his unfaltering kindness, his faith in me to finish (when it seemed a very distant prospect), and for his enormous efforts to help me throughout this research project. Also to Melinda Kerkvliet for her good advice and the few, but always enjoyable, chats out on the deck. Also in Canberra, I owe many thanks to the friendship and help of Sina Ende, Stan Tan, Thuy Pham and Ian Bryson. Finally, I want to thank Bev Fraser who amongst her many acts of kindness, found me a warm coat the first day I arrived in Canberra on a very cold winter day.

There is a multitude of people throughout Vietnam who helped me at every stage of this project. I would like to express thanks to Professor Nguyen Van Lich and the Ho Chi National University for their sponsorship of my research. In Long An, I owe a debt of gratitude to the provincial and district authorities for allowing my extended stay in the province. In particular to the district agricultural extension services, who generously gave their time and goodwill to a stranger who turned up one day in their lives wanting to know about the farmers of Long An province. And of course, to all the many, many people throughout Long An who took the time and interest to tell me about their lives and experiences, I cannot thank you enough. Finally I reserve particular gratitude for the friendship and kindness shown to me by Mrs Nguyen Thi Van and her extended family in Long An.
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Natalie Hicks

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Glossary of Terms

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<tr>
<td>ARVN</td>
<td>Army of the Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<td>Bao Chi Long An</td>
<td>Provincial newspaper of Long An province</td>
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<td>COSVN</td>
<td>Central Office for South Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>DBSCL</td>
<td>Dong Bang Song Cua Long (Mekong Delta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTM</td>
<td>Dong Thap Muoi (special ecological area in the east of Long An province)</td>
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<td>FDI</td>
<td>Foreign Direct Investment</td>
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<td>Giay phep</td>
<td>Permission letter</td>
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<tr>
<td>GVN</td>
<td>Government of South Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>HES</td>
<td>Hamlet Evaluation Scheme</td>
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<tr>
<td>HTXNN</td>
<td>Hop tac xa Nong nghiep (agricultural collective organisation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPM</td>
<td>Integrated Pest Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>IZ</td>
<td>Industrial Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Khuyen Nong</td>
<td>Agricultural Extension</td>
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<tr>
<td>LTDSX</td>
<td>Lien tap doan San xuat (agricultural collective organisation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARD</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development</td>
</tr>
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<td>NEZ</td>
<td>New Economic Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<td>NLH</td>
<td>New Life Hamlets</td>
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<td>Nong Vien</td>
<td>Commune Agricultural Extension Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAR</td>
<td>Public Administration Reform</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRG</td>
<td>People’s Revolutionary Government</td>
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<td>QDS</td>
<td>Quasi-Democratic State</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRV</td>
<td>Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>TDSX</td>
<td><em>Tap doan San xuat</em> (agricultural collective organisation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TTKN</td>
<td><em>Trung tam Khuyen nong</em> (Provincial Agricultural Extension Centre)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T&amp;V</td>
<td>Train and Visit meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United National Development Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAC</td>
<td><em>Vuon, Ao, Chuong</em> (garden, pond, animal enclosure)</td>
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<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td><em>Viet Cong</em> (South Vietnamese Communist)</td>
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Chapter One: - Introduction

Van placed all the paraphernalia for a good Vietnamese coffee in front of me: a small glass partly filled by sweetened milk crowned by a drip percolator standing in a porcelain bowl half-filled with warm water. To complete the ritual of coffee drinking in the Mekong Delta, a pot of bitter green tea is also provided to balance the sweetness of the coffee. Van sat down and poured herself a cup of green tea. We were now ready to discuss the events of the day, “So how is your work with the officials in Tan An going? Have you decided which districts in Long An you will choose to work in? It is never easy to make things happen in Tan An [the provincial capital]. You must go to the districts as soon as possible; it will be better there. But where will you go? You must go to Duc Hoa district; the officials there are friendly and kind and it is the best district in Long An. Can Giuoc district is OK, I worked there for a little while many years ago but the officials are not as helpful as they are in Duc Hoa. Oh you mustn’t go to Vinh Hung district; things are very difficult there...”

Van is originally from Duc Hoa district. She now lives with her husband, three children and mother-in-law in Tan An town, the provincial capital of Long An. The family makes a precarious living by running a small coffee shop in their front room and using the back room as an informal motorbike carpark and crèche for the employees at the local bank and government offices. In 2001, Van’s mother-in-law, Bich, was 85 and only addressed me in French. Van and I spoke Vietnamese to one another. Van’s husband, Minh, delighted us all with the occasional Americanism that he had learnt as a youth when US soldiers were billeted in his home during the American war. In late 2001, Van’s youngest son had just started studying English and I would help him with his travails as the final customers of the day drifted out into the
night. After all the customers had left and the textbooks were closed, Van and I were able to sit down and talk. She was concerned about the difficulties I was encountering in Tan An whilst trying to meet with state agricultural officials and conduct research into agricultural policy in the province. Relating to her own experiences, she strongly advocated that I should bypass the provincial level authorities and work at the district level. She also had very clear ideas about which districts would be more helpful and welcoming to me. At times I would remind Van of the possibility that she was biased towards Duc Hoa since this was her native district. She countered by telling me that as a teacher she had worked in most districts and she based her recommendations on her own experiences. Furthermore, she believed that this wasn’t simply her opinion. Most people in the province considered the Duc Hoa authorities to be the best in Long An.

Inadvertently Van presented her opinions about the districts in Long An as if they were a league of contending teams ranked according to affability and effectiveness. The importance that Van assigned to district authorities and the way “things get done” in Long An raised a number of practical and theoretical questions: How does district government impact and facilitate change in local people’s lives? How does the district level mediate between local people and other levels of authority such as the province and central government? These queries lie at the heart of my thesis.

Knowing Van and her extended family encouraged me to think more deeply about the evolving role of district government over time. I wondered how the different generations of her family related to their district government and to the wider Vietnamese polity? I felt that it was important to examine one province in the Mekong Delta and look for the continuity in people’s lives instead of establishing reunification
in 1975 as an inviolable watershed, which utterly transformed the social, political and cultural life of people in southern Vietnam.

I am seeking to look at politics as an on-going process and examine how past events, such as revolution and regime change, have conditioned the way in which the district government mediates the interests of local people versus the central government. I am following a methodological premise that “the nature of central-local relations can be understood only in relation to history.”1 This in turn has meant undertaking an ambitious study. It analyses the changing role of district government and its relationship with central government through three historical periods: the wartime southern Vietnamese regime, which existed below the seventeenth parallel from 1955 until its defeat by the Communist revolutionaries in 1975, the late 1970s and 1980s when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam centred in Hanoi pursued agricultural collectivisation and district-building campaigns, and finally the 1990s reform era when the same government moved the country into a market economy.2

I borrow the term “organisational adventures” from the insider-turned-critic Bui Tin who used the expression to denote the folly of district reform during the 1970s and 80s.3 The term does not necessarily carry negative connotations in this research. It is used to imply that the various transformations that the district unit has been subject to since 1954 were not unique to any particular ideology or government.

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2 The regime that existed below the 17th parallel from 1955-1975 is referred to as South Vietnam or the Republic of Vietnam. I refer to the government of this regime as the Government of Vietnam (GVN). In 1976 Vietnam was re-unified and re-named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).

Local Government and Centre-Local relations in Communist Party States

Comparative Literature on China and Vietnam
At the start of the 21st century few communist party states are left in the world: Cuba, North Korea, Laos, China and Vietnam. Despite an outward commitment to communist ideology each of these countries have sui generis political-administrative systems. However, comparative research on communist states is still a valuable exercise. It helps to generate a better understanding of the political and administrative reform trajectories of these communist states. It can also shed light on how, or if, this small fraternity of nations can influence one another.

In some respects, Vietnam and China are obvious comparative subjects. Both countries experienced successful agrarian-based revolutions in the 20th century. In addition to their geographic proximity, they also share some common ethnic and cultural roots. The Chinese and Vietnamese administrative organisations are also reasonably similar. The party-state hierarchy descends from the central government to province level, to county (China) or district (Vietnam) level, and then to commune level.4 While the territorial and population sizes in these units are much larger in China, the raison d’être of each government level is similar. Therefore comparative research focusing on Vietnam and China has been an area of interest to scholars for many years. Alexander Woodside’s research has highlighted the similar historical

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4 This is the administrative organisation from central government level down to the administrative organs in the rural areas. To avoid confusion I have not included urban administrative units.
experiences and cultural traditions of these two countries. Brantly Womack developed a comparative model of pre and post revolutionary politics in Vietnam and China. His model of a “quasi-democratic state” sought to explain why the relationship between the government and the masses changed radically after the communist revolutionaries achieved victory. Building upon this comparative research tradition, scholars then sought to compare the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences with collectivisation and land reform. Collectivisation and land reform in northern Vietnam during the 1950s, and later in southern Vietnam, were not as brutal or devastating as they were in China under Mao. These differing outcomes reveal that there were significant differences between the two regimes. In contrast to the isolated leadership style of Mao, the principle of collective leadership in Vietnam helped restrain the excesses of the collectivisation process. The differing circumstances of each country were also significant. Unlike China, Vietnam was facing war and did not have either the political resilience or the resources to expend on wide reaching campaigns similar to those instigated in China. What is also important is that Vietnam watched and learned from the events taking place in China. So the leadership in Hanoi may have been influenced by the successes and mistakes made by their northern neighbour.


The question of whether China is considered as a role model for Vietnam is still pertinent today. The rapid transformation to market reforms in China and Vietnam has provided the stimulus for a new area of comparative research. In the early 1990s, William Turley asked whether it was coincidental that Vietnam and China had entered the 1990s as the only single-party socialist states with reform programs still under way. He proposed that the strong similarity in both countries' reforms indicated the emergence of a distinctive Asian, or at least Sino-Vietnamese, Socialism.\(^8\) One of the first publications to comprehensively follow-up on this question is a collection of studies comparing and contrasting the recent reforms in China and Vietnam.\(^9\) The contributors addressed the question of whether there is an Asian socialist reform model. They also examine whether China and Vietnam are following similar trajectories of reform and modernisation in specific areas. There is a consensus that while there are significant differences between the two regimes, China may well be the implicit role model for Vietnam's current reform process.\(^10\)

This body of comparative work can provide very interesting insights into the past and present *modus operandi* of the Vietnamese polity. However, there are very few accounts that compare lower levels of rural government in these countries. For the Vietnamese scholar examining rural government reform in Vietnam, the most salient literature is still country specific.


\(^10\) Other scholars have also considered whether Vietnam is looking to China as a role model of reform. Peter Wolff has published a recent account analysing Vietnam’s reform process and thinks that Vietnam is indeed using China as a reform model: Wolff, Peter, *Vietnam – The Incomplete Transformation* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999).
Local Government in China and Vietnam Before the Introduction of Market Reforms

During the Mao years, the Chinese polity was considered highly centralised. The central government significantly penetrated the rural areas and perpetuated its control through a series of mobilising campaigns. These were usually inspired and launched by Mao himself. The regularity and intensity of these campaigns has been clearly illustrated by Anita Chan, John Madsen and Jonathan Unger in their documentary history of social-political change in a village in Guangdong Province (c 1964-89). In fact, so intensive were these campaigns for ordinary villagers and local officials that their centralising function has been likened to that of the secret police in Stalin’s USSR.

Vivienne Shue, writing in the late 1980’s, viewed centre-local relations in a different light. She refuted claims that the central government under Mao had managed to achieve a high level of control or penetration into the rural locale. Instead she hypothesised that the “parcelization of the peasant periphery” precluded central government from achieving these ends and central penetration was both uneven and incomplete. In Shue’s model, local accommodations were mediated between local state officials and local people who were trying to find space to live a better life within the regime. She suggested there was continuity between the local gentry community leaders of the past and the cadres of the communist era in their sense of moral obligation to protect the interests of local people. She observed “the point is

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11 These mobilising campaigns had differing objectives. The Great leap Forward in the 1950s aimed to vastly and quickly expand China’s industrial output and enlarge agricultural collectives. Other campaigns tried, \textit{inter alia}, to eradicate the influence of “old culture” and capitalist thinking in China. Chan, Madsen & Unger (eds), Chen Village under Mao and Deng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 2nd Edition).
14 \textit{Ibid}, p.5.
simply that local cadres, like local gentry, could frequently make a difference at the margins for their people and communities... [and] minimise their losses."\(^{16}\) Shue particularly stressed the importance of officials as native to the locale and "because their ties with the native place were permanent ones that engendered a sentimental attachment, the gentry seem to have felt it was their responsibility to guard and promote the welfare of these communities."\(^{17}\)

There is less literature on Vietnam regarding the influence of local officials being native or non-native to an area and how this would condition their interaction with local people. In Long An province during the Republic of Vietnam era, the commune, district and provincial officials were not usually native to their constituencies. This made it difficult for them to implement central government programmes such as the agrovilles and strategic hamlets. In contrast, the revolutionary cadres in Long An were nearly always local to an area and understood the local norms and community needs better. After 1975, the principle of native officials holding office at district level and below was honoured. This fact significantly altered the dynamics of central control versus local initiative at a district level. Many lower level party-state cadres were now both in and of their constituencies and tried to protect and advance local interests, even if these ran contrary to central government policies.

Scholars such as Jonathan Unger disagree with Shue's analysis and suggest China was a highly centralised system under Mao and the rapid decentralisation of recent years has highlighted the significant level to which the Chinese polity was centralised during that time. The chronic socio-economic differentiation emerging between

\(^{16}\) Ibid, p. 111. \\
\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 102.
regions in China today indicates that penetration and control was not only through campaigns and coercion, but also through fiscal redistribution mechanisms. Melanie Beresford and Andrew McFarlane argue that Mao tried to level regional development by using an investment fund for underdeveloped regions and cross deliveries of grain from food surplus areas to food deficit areas. However, the point is not perhaps the means, but rather the result, which was a high degree of centralisation that amongst other things, served to level regional inequality. Although the Vietnamese government aimed to level regional disparities and order the economic and political lives of the population through central planning, those intentions never quite matched up in reality. Hy Van Luong and Adam Fforde suggest that unlike China, Vietnam was far from being a neo-Stalinist system,

Many of the norms of neo-Stalinism did not hold in the Vietnamese economy that grew up under such a decentralised system. The rigid discipline required by central planning was lacking and there was extensive local adaptation in response to local interests.

Research on centre-local relations in China focusing on the pre-reform period has depicted an omnipresent central state that left little scope for local initiatives or autonomy for either local cadres or villagers. However, Edward Friedman, Paul Pickowicz and Mark Selden’s meticulously researched account of a village’s experience under Mao in Raoyang County did uncover frequent acts of minor societal resistance against the state. These subtle acts sought to limit but probably not undermine the excesses of central government policies, particularly agricultural

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collectivisation. Daniel Kelliher argues that the Chinese peasants were able to influence and alter central government policy at a local level.\textsuperscript{21} Kate Zhou develops the concept of "people power" one stage further and suggests that this popular power effectively ended collectivisation in China.\textsuperscript{22} Whether the Chinese peasantry was able to initiate changes from the bottom-up through acts of everyday forms of resistance is still very much under debate.\textsuperscript{23}

Research into resistance against collectivisation in Vietnam conducted by Ben Kerkvliet and Adam Fforde suggests that this form of resistance was far more widespread in Vietnam and may have instigated a bottom-up reform process.\textsuperscript{24} Foreign scholars are not the only people to emphasise the significance of bottom-up reform processes in Vietnam. Vietnamese leaders and academics have been eager to give credit to grassroots initiatives as a positive dynamic driving policy change. Discussing the failings of collectivisation, Le Duc Tho, who was a long-standing member of the Politburo, highlighted the importance of farmer's "sneaky contracts", which led to the Party Secretariat's Directive 100 on household contract farming in Vietnam. Le Duc Tho observed

Directives No. 100 of the Party Secretariat was not something from the sky or devised by the Central Committee; it was the formulation of something the masses

had created and which they had quickly absorbed, since it suited their needs and interests.\textsuperscript{25}

Therefore, although the Chinese and Vietnamese socialist transformations began in a similar time frame and may be following broadly similar trajectories, the driving force for reform may be different. I would suggest that not only did the Chinese central government penetrate and terrorise rural China more fully than was the case in Vietnam but also the structures of socialism became more embedded than in Vietnam. This was especially the case in southern Vietnam after 1975 where the central policies on collectivisation and land reform never really took root.

A study of local government and centre-local relations in Vietnam is complicated by the very different experiences of communist rule in the north and south. Through a comparative study between Son Duong village in Vinh Phu and Khanh Hau village in Long An, Hy Van Luong concludes that the Marxist state’s expansion into the public space was far more moderate or less radical in terms of land reform and collectivisation in Khanh Hau (the South).\textsuperscript{26} This is a significant factor and should be taken into account when analysing centre-local relations in Vietnam. Alexander Woodside believes that foreign students of Vietnam have exaggerated Vietnam’s regional differences.\textsuperscript{27} I would suggest the opposite. The different social and political experiences of the Mekong provinces compared to other parts of Vietnam have a great

\textsuperscript{25} Le Duc Tho, “To Improve Agricultural Management,” Southeast Asia Chronicle, pp. 7-12, No.93, April 1984, p.8.


impact on the dynamic relationship between the centre and local government. In China there are also great regional differences. Fruitful comparisons may therefore be not only country-to-country but also region-to-region, for example, comparing economic developments in coastal China and southeast Vietnam.

Local Government in China and Vietnam During the Reform Period
The integral role of local cadres and their relationship to society and central government has continued to be a strong theme in the China literature into the reform era. One body of scholarship has focused on the impact of fiscal decentralisation and the evolution of cadre responsibility to act as fundraisers and entrepreneurs. Ole Odgaard was one of the first foreign scholars to recognise local officials as a key dynamic in this reform process. In 1992, he observed that, "the emerging powerful stratum of cadres-entrepreneurs may soon be in a position to seriously alter the power structure from below." This assertion fundamentally transformed the notion of local cadres from simply "making a difference at the margins" during the Maoist era to playing an active role in development and policy formulation. Later China research developed upon this premise. Jean Oi and Andrew Walder focused on local government as a distinct entity apart from the central state, driving the rural


29 This region-to-region approach has been taken by William Turley and Brantly Womack who have made a comparative study of the urban areas of Guangzhou and Ho Chi Minh City in "Asian Socialism's Open Doors: Guangzhou and Ho Chi Minh City," pp.73-98 in Chan, Kerkvliet & Unger (eds), Transforming Asian Socialism: China and Vietnam Compared (Canberra: Allen & Unwin in association with RSPAS, ANU, 1999).

industrialisation “miracle” in the Chinese countryside. Vivienne Shue and Marc Blecher’s study in Shulu County similarly focused on local government as a semi-autonomous body driving rural transformation. Whilst Oi, Shue and Blecher have an optimistic view of the role of local (county) cadres, they reached differing conclusions about how they ‘use’ their fiscal power. Blecher and Shue claimed that officials are more oriented towards a developmental role in the community whereas Oi promotes cadres as entrepreneurs almost entirely interested in the generation of profits.

One limitation with Oi, Blecher and Shue’s (1996) accounts was their research was mostly concerned with economic growth areas in China and hid the huge socio-economic differentiation that can exist between regions. Models that focus on the power of local government, either in terms of the agency of cadres with particular entrepreneurial flair or the bureaucratic capacity and coherence in local governments in promoting development, overlook the importance of natural resource endowment, the quality of transportation and the proximity to market centres which are underlying variables in rural development. In what Victor Nee and Su Sijin termed the “composite cadre model of village economic growth”, these variables greatly influence whether a locale has the potential to develop rural industrialisation. If this potential exists, then local cadres can use their skills to develop their locality along entrepreneurial or developmental models. If an area does not have this potential, then

33 The county level government in China approximates to the district level (huyen) in Vietnam.
a predatory state is more likely to develop where the authority of local cadres decreases whilst the "peasant burden" increases.

This pattern may not be applicable to local government development in Vietnam. Annettee Spitzenpfeil conducted research on craft industries in southern Vietnam and determined that local industrialisation has not yet reached a level that impacts significantly upon the operation of local government. 35

Many China researchers view the changing role of local cadres in rural China from reactive to proactive in local affairs as a positive development. Jonathan Unger, Lu Xiaobo, Kevin O’Brien and Li Lianjiang have paid more attention to the negative side effects of reform in China. 36 While the analysis of local government is still the central focus, it has been analysed in relation to rural socio-economic decline and unrest. Lu Xiaobo has questioned whether the centre-local paradigm adequately explains the Chinese polity today. 37 He suggested that decentralisation had reached such a degree that it was essential to distinguish between the state and its agents who were becoming more like "principals" themselves, maximising their interests, which were not necessarily congruent with state policy. Really Lu Xiaobo was stating a similar case to Jean Oi by recognising the autonomy of local officials. However, he further

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suggested that the best theoretical framework for analysis is Max Weber’s anatomy of power relations in a patrimonial system where a three-way struggle takes place between the ruler, staff and masses, he suggested

By adopting this framework, we not only identify and analyse conflicts and confrontations between the state (the ruler) and peasants (the masses), but also competition and contention over resources between the state and cadres (the staff), as well as their impact on each other.38

This framework neatly encompassed the positions taken by Kevin O’Brien and Jonathan Unger. Since the transformation began, both researchers observed an increasing friction between the masses and the local cadres who the villagers felt were “bad monks unfaithfully reciting the scripts and distorting them.”39 Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li couched this friction in terms of ‘rightful resistance’ and have highlighted a segment of the rural population that they called “Diaomin” (policy-based resisters) who used laws and official communications to defy local officials.40 Commenting on the 3,200 incidents of collective protest between January and July in 1998, Jonathan Unger has similarly observed,

By far the greatest numbers of farmer’s protests today are entirely within the letter of the law. Most of the peaceful protests – and also many of the violent ones - involve implicit or explicit appeals to central government against local policies.41

Due to the difficulties in gaining permission to research in rural areas in Vietnam, less is known about the negative or positive interplay between people and their local officials. Lu Xiabo’s model of a three-way struggle and O’Brien and Lianjiang Li’s concept of rightful resistance can be a useful way to think about friction points

38 Ibid. p. 116.
39 Ibid. p. 132.
41 Unger, Jonathan, Power, Patronage and Protest in Rural China (China Briefing 2000), p. 7.
between central and local government whilst still taking into account the impact and consequences that this friction has on society. These models may serve the Vietnam researcher well in provinces such as Thai Binh where unchecked cadre corruption led to violent unrest in 1997. In Long An there has been no violent unrest, so far as I am aware, and most of my interviewees looked upon their district government officials in terms of their efficiency in expediting the tasks people needed in their daily lives, rather than predatory state actors.

In the pre and post reform era in China the study of local dynamics has remained firmly in focus. Scholarship on the pre-reform period in China and Vietnam points to the influential role that peasants can have on central government policy such as collectivisation. Scholarship on Vietnam has paid less attention to how local officials at district level or below interacted with local people and mediated central control with demands from the grassroots. This thesis tries to address this gap in the Vietnamese scholarship.

In the reform era, the decentralisation of fiscal arrangements in China has meant that one of the primary responsibilities of local government is to raise revenues. The Chinese literature suggests that depending on an area’s potential to develop rural industrialisation, local government may develop into an entrepreneurial, developmental or predatory model. There is little evidence in Vietnam to suggest that local government officials at the district or commune level are helping to drive a rural industrialisation miracle in the countryside. The obvious question, therefore, is what are local government officials doing? My study is a start to answering this pertinent question.
Chapter One: Introduction

The District

The district (huyện) in rural Vietnam is an intermediate administrative unit above the commune level (xa) and below the provincial level (tinh). Each district has one central town (thị trấn), which serves as the chief market town and the hub for the district party-state apparatus. The commune, district and province are the three formal tiers of the state administration in rural Vietnam. Below the commune level are the hamlets (ấp), which do not have any formal state machinery.

Most studies of sub-national levels of government in rural Vietnam have examined the commune and provincial level governments. This situation seems to overshadow our knowledge about the role of the district but these studies do provide some insights into how the district relates to other levels of administration in rural Vietnam. I shall therefore sketch an overview of the literature relating to rural government in Vietnam and show how this relates to a better understanding of district government.

Early French accounts on local government were inspired by genuine curiosity and a pragmatic need to understand the rural setting of Vietnam more thoroughly so as to exploit it with efficiency. Some valuable rural and village studies were written by scholars such as Pierre Gourou and Paul Mus that stimulated an academic interest that

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42 The urban counterpart of a rural district is known as a quan and the urban commune is called a phuong.

43 In Vietnam scholarship there is no consensus as to how “xa” should be translated. Some academics refer to the xa as a “sub-district” which accurately denotes its administrative position below the district. I do not use this term to avoid confusion with the canton level of administration that functioned as an administrative level before 1965. Other scholars prefer to use the term “village” and many sources cited in this thesis have chosen this terminology. Where possible I have used the term commune (xa) instead. Village better approximates to the Vietnamese word lang that carries more emotive connotations of a closely bound community. This chapter will later discuss how communities in the Mekong Delta and Long An specifically do not conform to this pattern.
continues to the present day. During the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975), the government of the United States also had a practical need to understand the political make-up of South Vietnam. It sought to pacify the rural areas and win the hearts and minds of the people through various schemes such as the strategic hamlets and new life hamlets. To better implement these programs, the American government commissioned the Michigan State University to conduct research on southern Vietnamese rural institutions. Most of these studies examined the financial and administrative arrangements of the communes and only two focused on district level government. Most of this research erred toward collecting statistical data and brief analyses concerning financial and administrative arrangements. With hindsight it is easier to see that these studies may not have presented a clear picture of rural government throughout southern Vietnam at the time. Most of the research was commissioned in central Vietnam where political and social norms were not quite the same as in the Mekong Delta region. Moreover, the research was mostly conducted in areas that were more peaceful and less disrupted by revolutionary activity. Vietnam was, and is, a very diverse country. What Douglas Pike termed as “geographic

45 From 1955 the Michigan State University also provided technical assistance to the Government of South Vietnam, particularly in the field of public administration.
regionalism” exists between provinces, districts and even communes.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore micro studies such as those conducted by the Michigan State Advisory Board can offer rich insights into the minutiae of local and political processes but it would be unwise to base macro assumptions on such studies.

Rural communes in Vietnam have been a particular source of interest to anthropologists and social scientists. Early scholarship painted Vietnamese villages as relatively autonomous units where central laws and regulation failed to penetrate the village’s bamboo hedge. This idea of an autonomous and self-regulating village unit was emphasised by Neil Jamieson in his study of villages in the Red River Delta in north Vietnam.\textsuperscript{48} In contrast to the village government, the district level of administration was depicted as aloof and having little impact on people’s lives.

Eric Wolf’s model of open and closed (or corporate) communities in Latin America helped bring greater clarity to conceptualising rural communities and Terry Rambo transposed Wolf’s model of closed and open communities to Vietnam.\textsuperscript{49} Working from a cultural ecologist perspective, Rambo proposed that social systems in the Red River Delta had developed into closed corporate communities.\textsuperscript{50} These communities


were characterised by a tight knit community formed over many generations through communal struggle against invasion and natural disaster. The villagers were governed by local notables and had little contact with higher levels of administration. There were also limitations placed on outsiders seeking to gain membership to the community. In contrast, southern social systems were more open to interaction with the outside world and were more receptive to outsiders and external influences. Research conducted in the 1950s by James Hendry in Khanh Hau village, Long An province, highlighted that this village did approximately conform to an open community.\(^\text{51}\) Philip Taylor's more recent research in the Mekong Delta has shown that unlike northern villages, there is often a considerable distance between households. This has meant that people tend to interact beyond their commune boundaries in the regular transaction of their lives. Randy Cummings did research to further explain the complex community social organisation in the Mekong Delta and its interaction with the outside world.\(^\text{52}\) By drawing upon five theories, he developed a syncretic approach to help explain this interaction. He concluded that the peasants' survival in the Mekong Delta relied on constant adaptation and the forging of multi-stranded links to outside patrons. He further suggested that political patrons would be of the highest value. His insights and theoretical orientation have relevance today in Long An province. The habit of using personal connections (\textit{quan he}) is still a complex but nevertheless an important and informal method of gaining employment, resources and authorisation. Various bureaucratic procedures such as the issuing of trading licenses and land titles and the locus of agricultural extension services are all provided at the district level. This means that local people's \textit{quan he} networks with


\(^{52}\) Cummins, Randy, \textit{Vietnamese Villages in the Mekong Delta: Their Articulations with the Wider Society and the Implications for Local Social Organisation} (State University of New York: Ph.D dissertation, 1977).
this level of administration are important. Therefore a study of district government in a Mekong Delta province will provide a clearer picture of local government beyond the commune level. It may also bring in to greater focus the importance of the district in people’s lives.

David Marr has traced the origins of the district as an important interface between the rural areas and the central government as far back to the 15th century. Under the emperor, Le Thanh Ton, district chiefs were authorised to choose commune heads that in turn were expected to check the power of local clans.53 Marr suggests that the centre manipulated the hierarchical administrative structure to concentrate even more power at the centre.54 There are elements of this manipulation in both the Republic of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), which followed in 1976. However, as Marr acknowledges, there was a “certain geographical logic and sense of history to the district.” I suggest that has helped embed the district into Vietnam’s political landscape and generate a degree of resilience against central government control and manipulation.

The extent to which district officials were agents of the central government is a matter of debate among the few studies that examine the district level of government since the 1950s. Some studies on the district have emphasised the highly centralised nature of the Government of Vietnam (GVN), which gave few opportunities for any lower levels of government to resist central control and regulation.55 In particular, Jeffrey

54 Ibid, p.48.
Race’s study of the political-administrative organisation in Long An province during the 1960s characterised the districts as “just a tool of the centre.” By contrast, Eric Bergerud emphasised that “the provincial administrations had far more authority over the local population than did lower political entities, such as the district or village.”

Very little research has been undertaken to resolve this ambiguity. One exception is the study of a district chief made in the 1960s by Luther Allen and Pham Ngoc An. Allen and Pham make a strong case for the moral responsibilities that a district chief has for his community. Their study in Dien Ban district in Quang Nam province in central Vietnam stresses the continuance of the mandarinate philosophy of the district chief as a paternal figure to local people. Their research also asserts that the district was an important intersection between the central authorities and rural people. They proposed that since the district chief was the lowest official appointed directly by the central government, he could symbolise the degree of trust and effectiveness of the central government in the countryside. Allen and Pham recognised that there were elements of continuity in district-centre relations between imperial times and later regimes.

The defeat of the GVN regime in 1975 triggered a new era in academic research on rural government in southern Vietnam. Scholars analysed the political apparatus of the SRV within the framework of communist central planning and administration arrangements. This framework tended to ignore the influence of earlier practices in local government that continued after 1975. Like Vivienne Shue suggests in China

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under Mao, the paternal compact between people and their local officials and the attachment the latter felt to their community influenced local government and societal interaction over the revolutionary divide. Local officials who did not implement central policies, or turned a blind eye to people who resisted these policies, may not have considered themselves to be opposing the communist regime’s program. Instead, they were simply drawing on the traditions of their moral obligation to serve and protect their communities to the best of their abilities. In the reform era of the 1990s in Vietnam, a sense of the moral responsibilities that district officials may have to their communities has appeared in some scholars’ findings. Thomas Sikor, who researched the role of district officials in an ethnic Black Thai village in Son La province, northern Vietnam, observed these officials mediating between local people and the higher authorities over reforestation policy.\(^5^9\) Sikor presents a strong case for what David Koh terms the “moral dynamics” of officials, which involves “officials identifying themselves with the local community rather than the party-state which employs them.”\(^6^0\) Thaveeporn Vasavakul has summarised the on-going importance of officials conforming to traditional moral roles and observes, “in rural Vietnam, successful administrators were those with traditional moral virtues, especially honest and humanist qualities.”\(^6^1\) The moral obligations that district officials may feel towards their local constituency helps to explain why people such as Van have come to regard the district as an important interface in their daily lives.


Literature focusing specifically on district government in rural Vietnam is still minimal. Allen, Pham and Sikor have provided clear snapshots of district government at a certain time and in a certain place. Jayne Werner remains the only scholar to specifically examine the genesis and impact of the SRV’s campaign to re-organise the districts in the 1970s and 1980s. In common with other scholarship of this period, Werner analyses this campaign within communist logic. She described central government efforts to re-organise the districts as a reflection of the “centre’s proclivity for using administrative changes to try to solve fundamental economic and political problems.” She concluded by observing that this policy demonstrated the “bureaucratic dimension of socialist ideology in Vietnam.”

District reorganisation was not unique to the communist government after 1975. As I elaborate in Chapter Two, the GVN had instigated its own district reorganisation to try to better control the rural areas and solve fundamental political problems. Therefore in terms of studying local government in Vietnam, and district government in particular, there is a strong case to analyse the evolution of local government as an extension of a historical process that reaches beyond the boundaries of regime and policy change. This is particularly important when looking at district government in the reform era when central regulation has attenuated and district governments have greater latitude to use their own initiative to implement policy best suited to local needs.

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64 Ibid, p.162.
Conceptualising the Vietnamese State

The central control versus local power debate is not an end in itself. It is related to various efforts to conceptualise the Vietnamese state and its relationship to society. Analyses of the Vietnamese political system as either strong or weak are inadequate. They create a subjective dilemma because "weak" and "strong" are ambiguous labels.\(^65\) Ben Kerkvliet has identified three approaches in the literature: a dominating state, state corporatism and dialogue.\(^66\) I suggest that there are two further approaches to conceptualising the dynamics of the Vietnamese political system. These are Brantly Womack's quasi-democratic state and what Douglas Pike terms as geographic regionalism.\(^67\)

The dominating state model ascribes ascendancy to the party-state apparatus in all state and societal affairs. In Gareth Porter’s model of "bureaucratic socialism", the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) is omnipotent in both state and society. In regard to the state, "the Party’s leadership over the state is maintained by deciding all policies, plans and major methods and all important organisational and cadre problems by controlling all activities of the state organs and by placing party cadres in

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\(^{65}\) For example Raymond Chad has conducted research on the Vietnamese political system using the framework of a weak/strong state: Chad, Raymond, *Rational Resistance to a Weak Authoritarian State: The Political Economy of Vietnamese farmers from Collectivization to Doi Moi* (University of Hawaii: PhD dissertation, 2000).


key positions..."\textsuperscript{68} In society are the mass organisations, which “link major socio-economic sectors and interest groups in society with the party."\textsuperscript{69}

The “quasi democratic state” (QDS) theory shares some commonalities with the dominating state approach.\textsuperscript{70} Its main point is that the rationale of the communist cadres was drastically altered by victory. During the revolution the cadres were attentive to the preferences of the masses. After victory, however, the incentive for mass regarding politics was lost and the authoritarian internal structure of the party dominated. Therefore the replacement of the logic of enticement with the logic of a monopoly of authority gave the new leadership a “unique strength."\textsuperscript{71} Unlike the dominating state approach, the QDS highlights the evolution of the communist political-administrative system across the revolutionary divide, from mass regarding to mass disregarding behaviour on the part of the Vietnamese communist cadres. But like the dominating state approach, the QDS portrays the party as a monolithic entity that acts as a cohesive body adhering to a prescribed set of policies.

Another approach to conceptualising the Vietnamese polity after 1975 is what Ben Kerkvliet broadly termed as “mobilizational corporatism” where “forces in society can influence policy through organisations that the state itself dominates.”\textsuperscript{72} This position is also related to the dominating state approach but diverges in the influence ascribed to the role of state-controlled organisations driving policy reform. In the

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p. 87.
early 1990s, William Turley described the emergence of "corporatist representation" within the Vietnamese polity. He adopted the term "mobilizational authoritarianism" to explain the "Leninist elements if intensive, preferably voluntary citizen participation in state affairs through formal institutions dominated by a single party exercising a constitutional monopoly of power."73 Jonathan Stromseth’s later research on the Chamber of Commerce and the Vietnam General Federation of Labour has further augmented our knowledge of corporatist elements in the Vietnamese political machine.74 His model of "communist corporatism" elevated the role and input of mass organisations in the process of central government policy formulation. Kerkvliet has also identified the farmers’ association (Hoi Nong dan) as being able to channel farmer’s concerns into high level state policy.75 The mobilizational corporatism approach helps to explain central government accommodation to extra-bureaucratic forces. However, it tends to be focused on the interplay between mass organisations and the highest levels of government, rather than corporatist behaviour in lower government units such as the province or district.

Kerkvliet described the dialogue approach as "social groups and processes not under state control....shaping Vietnam’s economy and society as much or more than state policy and administration."76 The most radical example of this approach were instances of mass demonstration in Vietnam, which Kerkvliet suggested show that political struggles were not confined to official channels or mass organisations.77 The

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76 Ibid, p.245.
77 Ibid, p.268.
dialogue approach implies that political change might be driven or significantly influenced from below by the everyday acts of ordinary people. The theoretical origins of this analysis come from James Scott in an article entitled “Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.”\(^{78}\) The leitmotif of Scott’s approach is to move away from concepts of an all-dominating party-state and to focus instead on the actions and intentions of peasant actors and the impact that they may have on the state or other superordinate agencies or individuals. He argued that small and everyday acts of resistance might have a collective impact on a regime. In Scott’s allegorical terms,

> Everyday forms of resistance rarely make headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polys create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, thousands upon thousands of acts of insubordination and evasion create a political and economic barrier of their own. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground in such a reef, attention is typically directed to the shipwreck itself and not the vast aggregation of actions, which make it possible.\(^{79}\)

The final approach to analysing the dynamics of the Vietnamese political system is geographic regionalism. This approach considers how different regions and provinces in Vietnam can act both independently from the central government and influence central policy direction. Carl Thayer has drawn attention to the existence of “big men in little provinces” who operate within Vietnam’s state and administrative structure.\(^{80}\) He proposed that province level units often operated as “independent kingdoms in their relations with Hanoi.”\(^{81}\) Melanie Beresford, Bruce McFarlane and Edmund Malesky have examined how economic strength can liberate provinces from the fetters of the central government purse strings and give them greater latitude to act in


\(^{79}\) Ibid, p.20.


\(^{81}\) Ibid, p.22.
accordance with their own priorities rather than those of the central government. Beresford, McFarlane and Brantly Womack have explored geographic regionalism to its most extreme conclusion. Beresford and McFarlane proposed that balkanisation might be a future outcome as the southeast region of Vietnam increasingly acts as an independent fiefdom. Womack has hypothesised that “regionalist demands from the south might clash with national/northern resistance and result in chaos and civil war.”

Beresford, McFarlane and Womack developed these worst-case hypotheses in the early 1990s. In the intervening years geographic regionalism has not generated these outcomes. Instead, the concept of geographic regionalism is closely related to more positive trends in decentralising power and decision making throughout Vietnam. Foreign development aid has been linked to greater decentralisation of public services and decision-making. In some academic and diplomatic circles, it has become fashionable to portray local government in Vietnam as having space to enact local policy initiatives, or at least re-interpret central government directives, at a local level. This localism is considered particularly pronounced in Saigon and the surrounding provinces where local officials are often characterised as freewheeling and reformist in contrast to the more conservative policy makers in Hanoi. The pendulum is now slowing swinging in the opposite direction with revisionist critiques questioning the

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85 Throughout this thesis I use the name Saigon rather than Ho Chi Minh City. During my fieldwork in Long An province most local residents used the name Saigon so I have followed suit.
degree to which local government is able to act upon its own initiatives. Research by Martin Gainsborough in southern Vietnam has led him to conclude that, “local politicians, of course have local interests but they also belong to a hierarchical unitary state, where central power is not a spent force.”

The findings in my thesis do not sit well within the dominating state approach. The bureaucratic polity depicted by Porter does not match the reality of central government policy failures in Long An. Nor does the corporatist model capture two important dynamics in the Vietnamese political system. The first is the complex interplay between local people and their government officials, which can influence political change at a local level. The second is the impact that this local level interaction can have on higher levels of government.

Womack’s model of a quasi-democratic state poses an interesting counter theory to the one put forward in this thesis. The rationale of communist cadres in the districts I studied was not drastically altered by victory. Instead many southern revolutionaries who assumed local government posts in Long An in 1975 continued to be “mass regarding” in their local communities. As a result, a breach opened between senior provincial and centre party-state cadre and many grassroots officials in the new regime. At times district and commune cadre were complicit with local people in resisting or even criticising official policies emanating from Hanoi after 1975. Therefore Womack’s conclusion that “the masses can be non-cooperative only at their own risk, and not at the party’s risk” is not applicable in Long An. An implicit or

explicit alliance between some local people and their officials to resist the official economic and agricultural policies put the party's right to guide state and societal affairs into serious question.

The notions of evolution and continuity across the revolutionary divide are highlighted in the early chapters of this thesis. I assert that there was some continuity between the Government of the Republic of Vietnam before 1975 and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after 1975 in terms of central government attempts (which were not necessarily successful) to centralise power and dominate rural government and society. Facets of the bureaucratic socialism model can equally be transposed to the central government in Saigon before 1975. After reunification, the top party cadres tried to assert control and implement policy dictates by ensuring that "ideologically correct" VCP members dominated the state apparatus. On the other hand, the Government of the Republic of Vietnam led by presidents such as Ngo Dinh Diem attempted to dominate the state apparatus and force policy implementation by staffing the state administration through patronage and familial networks that were loyal to the president.

By making this case for some continuity between the government of the Republic of Vietnam and the communist government in Hanoi, I am also taking issue with Jayne Werner's perspective on central government policies related to district building in the 1970s and 1980s. Werner portrayed the efforts to reform and enhance district government to solve nationwide problems as "the bureaucratic dimension of socialist
ideology in Vietnam." My findings show, however, that the Government of the Republic of Vietnam in Saigon also tried to use the districts as an "organizational fix" to solve problems in the rural areas and impose the central government's policies on the countryside. Therefore "organizational adventures" in district government are not unique to the socialist ideology in Vietnam. As Martin Ganisborough has suggested, continuity between regimes is particularly noteworthy because it suggests that when we strip away what are essentially ideological positions about how the ancien régime in the former South Vietnam and its successor socialist state supposedly differ from each other, we find that in terms of how power is actually exercised and the problems it confronts, they are remarkably similar.

My findings show that the central governments in Saigon and then Hanoi both had hegemonic features and tried to dominate lower levels of government. But they did not necessarily succeed in penetrating central control down to the district level government. The differing outlook between north and south based on longstanding regional differences and the exigencies of war helped to create a bedrock of rural cadres in Long An who were loyal, first to their local constituents, and second to the party. When push came to shove, they were disinclined to align themselves with the official state policies from Hanoi that ran contrary to local sentiment. In both the hegemonic and anti-hegemonic models of the Vietnamese polity, very little attention was paid to the role of intermediate actors such as local cadres at the district and commune level who have often been at the front line of negotiating between central government policies and local community concerns. This is why research on the

Chinese polity focusing on the integral role of rural cadre is so apposite to the approach taken in this thesis.

The conceptualisation of the Vietnamese political system in this thesis is a synthesised model using features of both the dialogue approach and the geographic regionalism approach. I put Kerkvliet’s idea of the significance of non-state channelled societal demands together with the responses and actions of local cadres. In common with David Koh’s work on ward government in Hanoi, I do not draw neat lines between state and societal actors. I follow the theoretical approach of a “state in society” advocated by Joel Migdal and Timothy Mitchell. The germination of this state-in-society approach came from a frustration at statist approaches that conceptualise the state in “fundamentally idealist terms”, when the reality pointed to the fact that “the edges of the state are uncertain [and] societal elements seem to penetrate it at all sides.” Timothy Mitchell’s theory has been further fleshed-out by Joel Migdal who has anchored a state-in-society approach to case studies in the developing world where he suggested, “for those interested in discerning how Third World societies are ruled and the influence of politics on social change, the local level often holds the richest and most instructive hints.” Through all the periods analysed in this thesis there are influences on the political system by a variety of actors who cannot not be definitively classified as either part of the state or society. In the Republic of Vietnam, American advisors in the districts and provinces dictated a host of policies but were

not an official part of the GVN apparatus. In the period 1975-1986, district and commune cadres often aligned themselves more closely to local people than the government they served and mediated between local needs and central regulation. In the reform era, district agricultural extension agents have occupied a blurred boundary between state and society; they have served the interests of local people while at the same time facilitated some objectives of central and local government agricultural policy. I refer to agricultural extension agents as “associates of the state” rather than government cadres or civic agents.

I extend the concept of geographic regionalism beyond regional and provincial levels to the district level. During the Republic of Vietnam, the modus operandi of each district government was different owing to the character of the district chief, American advisors and the level of revolutionary activity in the area. In the mid to late 1960s, district governments in Long An became island fortresses and command centres for the GVN. Essentially they were the last bastions of GVN control in the rural areas. After re-unification in 1975 district administrations exhibited localist tendencies in the face of homogenising central policies on collectivisation and land reform. In the reform era, district identity grew stronger. District government, now influenced by the actions of associates of the state, has developed greater latitude to implement local agricultural policy that might not be congruent with either provincial or central government prescriptions.
Maps 1.1 and 1.2
Long An Province and Vietnam, 2003

Province capital: Tan An
Area km²: 4,355
Population: 1,347,731
Ethnic data: Viet/Kinh, Hoa, Khmer, Thai.
Districts: Ben Luc, Can Duoc, Can Giuoc, Chau Thanh, Duc Hoa, Duc Hue, Moc Hoa, Tan Hung, Tan Thanh, Tan Tru, Thanh Hoa, Thu Thua, Vinh Hung


Description

Long An is divided into three district regions:
1. Dong Thap Muoi is in the east of the province bordering Cambodia. The low-lying land is highly acidic and prone to flooding during the monsoon months. It is characterised by larger than average land holding patterns and engaged primarily in rice cultivation. During the American war parts of Dong Thap Muoi were known as the Plain of Reeds which was a strong hold for revolutionary cadres. The region is comprised of Moc Hoa, Vinh Hung, Tan Hung, Tan Thanh, Thanh Hoa and Duc Hue districts.
2. The central districts are the most prosperous of all the districts in Long An and are characterised by agricultural diversification (vegetable and fruit cash crops, dairy produce, large-scale animal husbandry). The region is comprised of Ben Luc, Duc Hoa and Thu Thua districts.
3. The eastern districts are primarily engaged in aquaculture and Can Giuoc district is re-developing its traditional boat building crafts. This is the most densely populated of all regions in Long An. The region is comprised of Can Giuoc, Can Duoc, Chau Thanh and Tan Tru districts.

Map source: Womroc mapping
Chapter One: Introduction

Natalie Hicks

Research Process

Duration and Permission Procedures

Even prior to commencing fieldwork in Vietnam in 2000 I had intended to do research in Long An province. Like many students of Vietnamese politics and history, I had been influenced by Jeffrey Race's detailed account of the revolution in Long An during the American war.94 Anthropological research conducted by Gerald Hickey and James Hendry in the 1950s was also a valuable source of information that could serve as a benchmark for further contemporary research.95 Generally speaking, Long An is a high profile province due to the intense revolutionary activity that took place during the American war and also its bold economic experimentation during the 1980s. In practical research terms, the close proximity of Long An to Saigon and the absence of upheaval seen in other provinces such as Thai Binh and Dong Nai in the late 1990s boded well for official research approval in Vietnam.

I did fieldwork in Vietnam from April 2000 to May 2002. From April 2000 to February 2001, I did further intensive study of the Vietnamese language at the Ho Chi Minh National University and made informal trips to the Mekong Delta. I also began the process of acquiring permission to stay in Long An province. Acquiring permission to do research in rural areas of Vietnam is still a lengthy and complex process and carries no guarantees of a successful outcome. Usually the process is contingent on personal connections and luck.


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Gaining an official permission letter (giay phep) is the first step. Letters of introduction, recommendation and a research project outline from a sponsor organisation (co quan), which in my case was the Ho Chi Minh National University, must be submitted to the provincial Culture and Information Department (So Van Hoa Thong Tin). The documentation is then forwarded to the Provincial People’s Committee (Uy Ban Nhan Dan) and the Foreign Relations Department within the People’s Committee. The provincial police must also sanction the researcher to stay within the province. After scores of meetings and many cups of green tea, I received a giay phep from all of these departments. These allowed me to do general research such as archive work in the library and museum in the provincial capital, Tan An. To do research in the Provincial Agriculture and Rural Development Department (So Nong Nghiep va Phat Trien Nong Thon) and the Provincial Agricultural Extension Centre, the whole process had to be repeated.

Throughout my fieldwork in Long An, I conducted extensive interviews without an interpreter or field assistant that is normally a pre-requisite for foreign researchers. The critical decision that I made early on was how to present my research objectives so as to maximise the collection of relevant material but at the same time avoid sensitive topics that might intimidate or alarm people. I declared that I was conducting research for a PhD dissertation in the field of rural development looking specifically at agricultural policy and administration. Long An province has hosted many visiting foreign researchers but few have stayed and lived in Long An for extended periods of time. My extended stay provoked interest on the part of many Long An residents and raised suspicion with some elements of the state and security apparatus.

96 In Vietnamese, “nghien cuu ve phat trien nong thon va chinh sach, hanh chinh nong nghiep.”
My formal research sponsor at the province level was the director of the Long An museum. I was required to submit fortnightly progress reports and he was expected to facilitate further research permission at the local state offices and library. In practice I used both formal and informal relationships for organising interviews and research relations with the state agricultural offices and agricultural extension services at the province and district level. As I became more familiar with life in Long An, I increasingly relied on a growing network of personal connections to facilitate my fieldwork. The precarious circuit of acquiring permission to work with any organisations in rural Long An be it through personal connections or more formal channels is a fatiguing process. Often I would arrive at a pre-arranged meeting to find that it had been cancelled or forgotten.

Any one of the agencies involved in granting permission may withdraw their approval at any time. This did happen on a number of occasions when either the Cultural and Information Department or the police in Tan An stopped my work. They required me to submit reports and documentation of where I had been, what I had been doing and the people I had been associating with in Long An. After three months, the provincial authorities required me to leave my rented accommodation in Tan An and lodge instead at an approved guest house in the centre of town. At this stage I was eager, to say the least, to take Van’s advice and begin my work in the districts.

Choosing Two Districts in Long An
I wanted to select two districts that had different administrative histories, agricultural production patterns, and geographies. However, this choice was mainly in the hands of the provincial authorities. I expressed my preferences but I soon realised that the
provincial officials would make the decision for me. I pursued a strategy of adhering to the official prescription of the provincial government as to where I could officially conduct my research, which was in Duc Hoa and Ben Luc districts. On a more informal basis, I travelled to many other districts seeking unofficial interviews that I hoped would not attract attention at the higher levels of government.

My first preference was to research in Duc Hoa district and contrast my finding with either Can Giuoc district or one of the districts that comprise the Dong Thap Muoi region (Map 1.1). The provincial authorities approved Duc Hoa but getting approval for a second district was more difficult. Even transitory access to Dong Thap Muoi, let alone four to five months’ fieldwork, was out of the question, the authorities said. They regarded the region as too sensitive because it borders Cambodia. The Director of the Foreign Relations Department at the Provincial People’s Committee politely but firmly said no.\textsuperscript{97}

My other choice was Can Giuoc district. In many ways this would have provided a fascinating contrast to Duc Hoa. Lying on the far eastern, coastal side of Long An province, it is a densely populated area based primarily on an aquaculture economy. Agricultural extension officers in this region had been party to both triumph and disaster in efforts to cash-in on the Mekong Delta bonanza in shrimp farming. Historically Can Giuoc poses contrasts and comparisons to Duc Hoa: Administratively Can Giuoc differs from Duc Hoa, since it remained reasonably unchanged during the district re-organization efforts of the GVN and later under the

\textsuperscript{97} He said I would need official permission from the director of the national police in Hanoi.
Socialist Government. Like Duc Hoa, it also sustained devastating damage during the American war. It would also have been interesting to find out more about a provincial exercise in social engineering in the mid 1980's in Can Gioc when whole hamlets from this district were re-settled in Dong Thap Muoi. However, the authorities in Tan An did not approve my request to study in Can Gioc because it was considered remote and difficult to access from Tan An town. Expediency and compromise led me finally to settle on Ben Luc as my second official research site. I am not suggesting that the government in Tan An maliciously aimed to thwart my research initiatives. In many ways I posed a problem because I was a visiting foreigner and officials undoubtedly were concerned about my safety and well-being. They presumed I would be more secure in Ben Luc, which is closer to Tan An. Officials were also bemused that a foreign researcher would want to carry out research in remote areas like Dong Thap Muoi and Can Gioc. Ben Luc, however, turned out to be an excellent fieldwork site. Ultimately the great contrasts that do exist between these two adjacent districts within the same province bring into stark relief the importance of localism at a district level.

**Duc Hoa District**

Duc Hoa has nineteen communes (xa) and the district capital, Hau Nghia. Unlike any other district in Long An, Duc Hoa also has two further district towns (thi tran). One is Hiep Hoa, which was an administrative town under the French and also the site of a large colonial sugar-refining factory. The other is Bao Trai, which was the provincial capital town of Hau Nghia province under the GVN from 1963 to 1975. Today Hau

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98 In 1957, the province chief of Long An changed the name Can Gioc to Thanh Duc. However, in 1963 a province-level decision allowed for the district to revert back to its original name of Can Gioc. In December 1966, one village (commune) was annexed to the new district of Rach Kien but was returned to Can Gioc when this district was disbanded after the communists took over the government in 1975.
Nghia town is the hub of the district administration. Yet Hiep Hoa and Bao Trai remain a contemporary testimony to district re-organization schemes of the past. In the era of the Republic of Vietnam and the present Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the central government has tried to gain a stronger control over localities through the manipulation of administrative units. Duc Hoa, more than other districts in Long An, was subject to habitual administrative and geographic re-organisation. Despite these reforms, Duc Hoa residents have a strong sense of district identity and often convey this identity in terms of their revolutionary history when many local people fought and died for the revolution.\textsuperscript{99} As Duc Hoa was not part of Long An during most of the American war, people regard their historical identity very much in terms of the district to which they belong rather than the province. Senior officials that I interviewed in the district People’s Committee have also remained strongly attached to the revolutionary precepts of local officials for district government. This theme is explored in greater depth in Chapter Two and Three.

Duc Hoa district conforms most closely to the images of a rustic idyll of the south Vietnamese countryside. Unlike more northerly parts of Vietnam and even Ben Luc, the houses are very dispersed and tend to be in contiguity to the farmer’ fields rather than in clustered hamlets, and many farmers live a long walk from their nearest neighbour. In general, the land itself is lush and verdant. Bullock carts vie with the odd moped on quiet district roads. It seems hard to imagine that Saigon is only a two-hour motorcycle drive away from Hau Nghia, the district’s administrative centre.

\textsuperscript{99} Some people still talk about their districts as “patriotic”, (huyen yeu nuoc), referring back to the large number of martyrs that were sacrificed during the war. Official accounts of Long An’s history pay particular attention to the resistance and revolutionary role of each district. For example, Thach Phuong and Luu Quang Tuyen, \textit{Dia Chi Long An} [Monograph of Long An Province], (Tan An: Long An Publishing House, 1989).
On days during the monsoon season when I had many communes to visit in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa, I would employ the services of a good friend, Mr Nhan from Ben Luc, to drive me on his motorbike. On the countless times we drove from Ben Luc into Duc Hoa I came to expect a familiar routine: A short time after leaving the confines of his native Ben Luc district I would hear Nhan quietly mutter the word "phuc tap." In direct correlation to miles travelled away from his native district, this expression would become a mantra culminating in a stop for lunch in Hau Nghia when he would cast a furtive glance at the locals, look at me with meaning, and announce in a voice rather too loud for comfort, "Natalie, nong dan, phuc tap!" The word phuc tap has several meanings in Vietnamese. It is often used to imply a concern or even fear about a topic that somebody doesn't actually wish to discuss. Nhan was conveying to me his distrust of what he thought were the unfathomable and parochial habits of the people in his neighboring district. In some respects my experiences in Duc Hoa were very different to those in Ben Luc. There were times when I was invited to spend the night at a local farmer's home where I listened to stories about the local ghosts that frequented the area. I learnt to appreciate the value of conversation as the natural light disappeared and there was no electrical substitute. Literally translated phuc tap means complicated. Duc Hoa district, as I have already said, presents many complicated contradictions in the general pattern of rural relations and agrarian development in Long An province as a whole, making it an ideal research site for a topic on localism and district identity.

100 Directly translated nong dan means farmer. It is often used as a general term in rural Vietnam to refer to people who live in the countryside.

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Ben Luc District
Ben Luc has fifteen communes and one district capital, Ben Luc town. Two of its communes were established as recently as 1999-2002. They represent new administrative units based almost exclusively on the production of sugar cane. Ben Luc was subject to administrative re-organisation but always remained within confines of Long An province. In common with many other areas in Long An, Ben Luc was the scene of contest between revolutionary and South Vietnamese and American forces. In 1976, in line with the SRV’s policies to enlarge administrative units and create model districts, the district was re-organized and joined with its neighbour, Thu Thua, to form the district of Ben Thu. In 1983, as the enthusiasm for district building waned, these districts were separated and resumed their original names. This seven year administrative hiatus did not significantly impact upon the sense of local attachment to Ben Luc as a district.

Ben Luc is adjacent to Saigon and intersected by the main Delta highway. The communes closest to Saigon are semi-urban comprising foreign factories and rice fields. It is the first district of a Mekong province that everyone must pass through travelling on their way into the Mekong Delta. For many it is a disappointment since there is an expectation that the landscape should transform almost immediately into the rustic idyll more closely resembling Duc Hoa and other parts of the Delta region. However, just a few minutes drive off the main highway rural agricultural life is taking place and urban Saigon seems far away. The houses are dispersed, although for the most part the hamlets are more concentrated than in Duc Hoa district. There is also a more comprehensive supply of electricity and clean water. The land holding

101 It should be briefly noted that from 1960 these districts were considered as one district by the revolutionary government. However, under the administration of the GVN they remained separate. These administrative complexities are addressed more fully in Chapter Two.
patterns are very scattered which was a frequent point of consternation to the farmers. It would seem that small land ownership may be related to the high prices that land can command in this area and many farmers have chosen now to concentrate exclusively on animal husbandry (poultry and pigs), which requires little land but quite high capital investment. Aside from animal husbandry and a growing interest in VAC schemes, Ben Luc farmers cultivate rice and an increasing amount of sugar cane.\(^{102}\)

Whilst I was unable to get my first choice in fieldwork sites, Duc Hoa and Ben Luc proved to be excellent districts to highlight the similarities and contrasts that can exist between two contiguous districts. In criteria such as war, administrative history, geography and in past and present agricultural development patterns, they have quite separate identities. More subjectively local people such as Mr Nhan do perceive themselves as quite separate from people in other districts in Long An.

**Research Material**
I conducted a wide range of interviews and discussions in Long An province. When formally interviewing government officials in the state agricultural departments, mass organizations and People’s committees, I tried to follow a semi-structured format to allow for direct comparisons to be made between the districts. The official interviews tended to be gilded with a lot of state rhetoric and oblique responses. Often, however, informal interviews conducted outside of the government offices and in a more relaxed environment yielded more openness on the part of the official.

\(^{102}\) VAC is an abbreviation for a combination of agricultural techniques: Vûơn (fruit garden), Ao (fish pond), and Chuông (animal enclosure).
In Ben Luc and Duc Hoa, after the official workshops or meetings were completed, the local farmers and agricultural extension staff, after an initial reticence, were usually happy and eager to exchange ideas and answer my questions. An extended lunch with rice wine would often precipitate a relaxed atmosphere more conducive to informal conversation. In my experience, farmers were more comfortable answering questions when staff from the district extension services rather than the provincial staff or state agricultural officials accompanied me.

At other times, I would simply sit in Van’s coffee shop or at street food stalls and take advantage of people’s natural curiosity to start conversations. As an unmarried female researcher in the provinces, I think I was just as interesting a research subject to many people in Long An as they were to me. As my fieldwork time grew, I became increasingly at home amongst the friends and acquaintances throughout the province. However, in the final weeks of my stay in the province I was passed a note that informed me that if I continued to ask certain questions, the police would come for me and I would go to jail. Both the author and the style of the note were rather melodramatic and alarmist but it served as a reminder that beyond the theories of southern Vietnam’s receptivity to outside forces and the bright lights and vibrant activity of Saigon lies a politically reserved rural hinterland that treats foreign inquisitives with a degree of trepidation.

Summary of the Main Research Findings

This dissertation demonstrates the evolution of district government in terms of centre-local relations from 1955 to the start of the 21st century. It argues that throughout this time the district remained an important interface between rural people and the central
authorities. In common with pre and post reform literature on China, the role of local officials mediating between central government control and local initiatives remains firmly in focus. I analyse three distinct periods from 1955-2003: the Republic of Vietnam (1955-1975), the first eleven years of government under the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1975-1986), and the reform era focusing on the renaissance of agricultural extension services in Long An province (1990 – 2003).103 In each of the first two eras the central government tried various “organisational adventures” to control and penetrate the rural areas – often through the district level of administration. During each of these periods district cadres played a pivotal role in central government’s failures to implement unpopular policies. In the Republic of Vietnam period, district officials were not native to their districts and unwittingly undermined central government control by failing to win support or trust in their local communities. In the first eleven years under the SRV regime, the new district officials were native to their constituencies and tended to be more “mass-regarding” and determined to protect local interests at the expense of central policy implementation.

In the third period, during which the SRV government retreated from central planning and a market economy developed, district governments in Long An gained greater latitude to act upon their own initiatives. However, district officials have not followed in the footsteps of their entrepreneurial or predatory counterparts in China. They interact and are influenced by a variety of other actors in the district, especially the associates of the state, who have a stake in district agricultural policy. This state-in-society interaction has driven two very different outcomes in agricultural development in two contiguous districts in Long An province and demonstrates that geographic

103 The third period analysed (1990 – 2003) begins at 1990 rather than 1986 because the agricultural extension services in Long An were established in the early 1990s.
regionalism, at a district level at least, can be pronounced but not necessarily detrimental to the wider Vietnamese polity.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two analyses the “organisational adventures” of the Republic of Vietnam from 1955 until reunification in 1975. I first explore how the government of that republic tried to gain control of the rural areas by over-centralising the administrative system and re-organising the districts. I stress that placing non-native cadres at all levels of their rural administration was a major reason why many rural local people in Long An became alienated from their local officials and supported local revolutionary cadres. As the revolution gained momentum in the 1960s, the district centres became island fortresses and the last bastion of government authority but they were effectively cut off from most of the communes and hamlets supposedly under their control. Ultimately what crippled the district government was a political system that passed down policy from on high in Saigon rather than taking into account local government initiatives and preferences.

Chapter Three examines the dilemma of central control versus local power in the new regime of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It shows a degree of continuity between the régime ancien in Saigon and the SRV centred in Hanoi. The central government of the SRV, like that of the GVN, tried to centralise power and enact new land and agricultural policies in the rural areas. But the new regime elevated “organisational adventures” of district government to a new plane by aiming to create district units with significantly greater political and economic powers to solve the production crises gripping the country. This chapter stresses the importance of district and commune cadres being native to their constituencies. Unlike their non-native counterparts in the
GVN, some local cadres under the SRV protected and advanced the interests of local residents even if this meant turning their backs on polices such as collectivisation and land reform. Ultimately the complicity between local cadres and local people helped to undermine central party-state ambitions to institute wide-ranging reform in Long An province. The stubborn resistance to democratic central planning in Long An, be it on a pragmatic, cultural or emotional level helped to convince the central party-state of the importance of local initiative in matters of economic and production systems.

Chapter Four and Five closely examine the dynamic role of the district in Long An during the reform era of the 1990s and early 21st century by which time the dilemma of central control versus local power appears to have been resolved more in favour of local control. The districts in Long An display strong local initiatives. However, this has not necessarily been through the efforts of the local state cadre alone but also through the efforts of other semi-state officials such as agricultural extension officers. I conceptualise these officials as associates of the state because they are not government cadres (can bo) or societal actors. Instead they serve as a link between local farmers and the district government. In Chapter Four, I examine how a dialogue between local people and the provincial authorities resulted in the creation of an agricultural extension service in Long An in 1991. The chapter examines the role of agricultural extension officers in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts. Besides helping many farming communities where previous state agricultural services had failed them, these associates of the state are also helping to drive district agricultural policy forward. By doing this, they are filling a vacuum that was created in rural governments after the retreat of central state agricultural planning.
Chapter Five continues to address the role of district agricultural extension agents in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts. It highlights the disparate paths these districts are carving out, especially in terms of establishing new forms of cooperatives and farming associations. In Ben Luc district agricultural extension officers are almost exclusively supporting household farms and the development of informal local associations and cooperative groups. District extension agents in Duc Hoa, on the other hand, channel their support to a large new-style dairy cooperative rather than individual household farmers. The chapter demonstrates that both districts have been able to pursue disparate agrarian strategies that best suit the locale rather than adhering to an agenda set at either the provincial or central government level.

The concluding chapter discusses future trends in center-local relations and the future role of district government. I question whether rural districts can expect further centrally inspired "organisational adventures" in the future. The final part of the concluding chapter synthesizes the main themes from the thesis and reasserts the hypothesis that district administration in rural Long An has been, and continues to be, an important interface between local people and higher authorities and a locus for development.

This chapter will adopt a thematic approach to analyse the political-administrative machinations after the Geneva Accords in 1954 until 1975 in the Republic of Vietnam and specifically Long An province. The main focus is on central governments' efforts to re-engineer district administrations in order to better control and penetrate the rural areas. Less attention will be paid to the developing administrative infrastructure of the revolutionary party in South Vietnam. This is to demonstrate that regardless of divergent ideology, there was a strong basis of continuity between the Republic of Vietnam's government and the Communist government after 1975 in terms of central and rural district government relations. There were many organisational adventures in district government which involved the dilemma of mediating between central control and local power in Long An. This was a remarkable thread of continuity between both regimes.

The first theme follows the efforts of the government in South Vietnam (GVN) to gain control of the rural population by over-centralising the administrative system. It re-enforced this policy by staffing rural administrations with loyal outsiders with little administrative experience and whose careers depended on looking up to the centre rather than down to their local constituents. An adjunct of this theme is the contrasting

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104 The Republic of Vietnam existed from 1955 - 1975. The country will be referred to as South Vietnam and the government of the country will be abbreviated to GVN. I use the terms 'revolutionary administration' and 'shadow government' interchangeably to denote the revolutionary administration in South Vietnam that existed during this time. Depending on the progress of the conflict, in some places and at some times, the revolutionary government ruled openly, at other times it remained underground.
approach of the revolutionary forces to gain control of rural areas through a localist approach to political control at a grassroots level.

The second theme explores the significance of the district level administration and the role of the district chief. Very little has been written about the *modus operandi* of district government during this period. One notable exception is the work of Luther Allen and Pham Ngoc An who observed in 1961 that "It is surprising that both the legal texts referring to the district level of administration and the published material on this subject are less developed than those of any other level."\(^{105}\) I will propose that the GVN considered district level government important because it represented the lowest level of central government authority in the rural areas. Moreover, during the 1960s, district centres in Long An also became island fortresses that served as the bastion of GVN and American control in a countryside dominated by the revolutionaries.

During the period 1955 – 1975, the central government in Saigon tried to manipulate the districts and at times make them little more than tools to execute central policy dictates. This manipulation and re-organisation did not strengthen the GVN’s hold in the countryside and often served to stifle local government initiatives that could have helped re-vitalise rural governance. Of course, there are many factors contributing to the downfall of the government in Saigon, not least the question of land reform, which is a subject too broad for the scope of this research.\(^{106}\) Instead, what this chapter

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\(^{106}\) The question of land reform enacted by the GVN and NLF in Long An province has already been explored by Burr, Jewett Millard, *Land to the Tiller: Land Redistribution in South Viet Nam, 1970-1973* (University of Oregon: PhD dissertation, 1976); Callinso, Stuart Charles, *Land to the Tiller in
focuses on primarily is the unbalanced relationship that developed between the centre and local governments, and particularly the district level of government. Ultimately the irreconcilable dichotomy of central control versus local power helped to undermine the regime itself.

*The Social, Political and Administrative Situation in South Vietnam*

After the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva accords in 1954 provided for a temporary division of Vietnam along the 17th parallel (Maps 2.1 and 2.2). North of this line was the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. To the south lay the Republic of Vietnam led by President Ngo Dinh Diem who had been prime minister before the abdication of the emperor Bao Dai. The debate on the character and qualities of Diem and what has been termed "Diemocracy" will continue for many years and this chapter will not engage with these debates. However, it is fair to say that his personalised leadership style reflected his staunch Catholicism, schooling in Confucian ethics, strong anti-communism and sympathy with the United States where he had spent several years in exile.

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107 The Geneva Accords stipulated that elections for re-unification were to be held in 1956. President Ngo Dinh Diem did not proceed with these elections in South Vietnam.

Map 2.1 French Colonial Vietnam

1. Lai Chau
2. Pho Tho and Ha Noi
3. Ha Giang
4. Can Tho
5. Yen Bay
6. Tuyen Quang
7. Ha Nam
8. Lang Son
9. Son La
10. Phu Tho
11. Vinh Phuc Yen
12. Thai Nguyen
13. Phu Lang Thuong
14. Hai Noi
15. Ha Tay
16. Bac Ninh and Gia Lam
17. Kien An
18. Quang Yen
19. Hung Yen
20. Hai Duong
21. Ha Nam
22. Hai Duong
23. Thai Binh
24. Than Hoa
25. Ninh Binh
26. Nam Dinh and Bui Chu
27. Nghe An
28. Ha Tinh
29. Quang Binh
30. Quang Tri
31. Thua Thien
32. Quang Nam
33. Quang Ngai
34. Kon Tum
35. Bau Dinh
36. Phu Yen
37. Darlac
38. Khanh Hoa
39. Phan Rang
40. Hai Dinh Nai
41. Thua
42. Thu Dau Mot
43. Tay Ninh
44. Binh Duong
45. Ba Ria
46. Gia Dinh
47. Cholon
48. Go Cong
49. Tan An
50. My Tho
51. Sa Dec
52. Long Xuyen
53. Chau Doc
54. Ha Tien
55. Rach Gia
56. Bac Lieu
57. Soc Trang
58. Tram Vinh
59. CanTho
60. Vinh Long
61. Ben Tre
Map 2.2 The Republic of Vietnam, 1965
In 1955, the Republic of Vietnam was beset by a plethora of complex social, political and administrative problems. Socially, the rural areas and importantly the Mekong Delta, which was the ‘rice bowl’ of southern Vietnam, had been shattered by a long war of resistance against the French. The political situation was still volatile. Many revolutionaries who had fought in the resistance against the French had re-grouped (*tap ket*) to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north.\(^\text{109}\) In Long An alone, two thousand revolutionaries (and their families in some cases) departed to the north in 1954.\(^\text{110}\) People in Long An recall bidding farewell to friends and relatives with the parting entreaty, “when you go and meet Ho Chi Minh, tell him in this land there is only one flag and that is the one with the gold star.”\(^\text{111}\) More revolutionaries remained in the south to continue the struggle against the Diem regime. Eric Bergerud identified two types of revolutionary groups operating in Long An province.\(^\text{112}\) The first group consisted of “illegal cadres” who re-grouped in isolated areas such as the Plain of Reeds to re-build their strength in preparation for future struggle. For the main part, these cadres operated in secret and sought to undermine the regime of the GVN. The second group consisted of “legal cadres.” They maintained an outward commitment to the GVN but were secretly committed to furthering the revolutionary cause and thus lived in accordance with the Maoist prescription of ‘moving like fish through water’.

\(^{\text{109}}\) The terms “revolutionaries” and “National Liberation Front” (formally established in 1960) will be used throughout the chapter to apply to Vietnamese who were committed to undermining and overthrowing the regime of South Vietnam and who were affiliated with the DRV in the north (but not necessarily party members). Other sources apply different terms to these people such as *Viet Minh* (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh*), which had been a front organisation, establish by the Communist Party in 1941. Some sources cited in this chapter use the term VC (*Viet Cong*), which was a term used by the GVN and US to refer to the revolutionaries.

\(^{\text{110}}\) Khuynh Diep, “Van Hoa cua Dong Bang Song Cua Long.,” (The cultural history of the Mekong Delta). Part of an unpublished manuscript, given to me by the journalist, Mr Khuynh Diep in November 2002.

\(^{\text{111}}\) This anecdote was first recounted by Mr Khuynh Diep and later verified through fieldwork interviews in Long An, 2001 – 2002.

Some accounts of the period of 1954 to 1960 suggest that these were years of relative peace or even a "golden era" for the peasants of the Mekong Delta. However, revolutionary documents captured at the time and later communist histories of Long An reveal that whilst many revolutionaries did cease overt activities during the late 1950s, the Communist Party continued to build its administrative and political infrastructure throughout this period. From 1954 onwards, the shadow government in Long An had a party cell (chi bo) in every village to continue the political struggle and prepare for armed uprising in the province. This represents an early illustration of the revolutionary's strategy to embed a political infrastructure at grassroots level. This policy did not go unnoticed by local GVN officials at the time. As the deputy district chief of Can Giuoc district explained:

After the Geneva accord, no more fighting, very pleasant here. However, Viet Minh maintained their party structure intact at village level. Never was there a time throughout the 50s when they did not have their chi bo with one or two people at village level [sic].

The bureaucratic and administrative situation of South Vietnam, which is the focus of this chapter, was in disarray. The legacy of French bureaucracy was not a positive one. Unlike the British colonial administration in India, the indigenous bureaucracy in

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114 The Party administrative structure had been in place since 1954 in Long An. In 1976, the provincial Long An newspaper published a series of articles recounting a detailed history of the individuals who had run the revolutionary administration in Long An from 1954 to 1975. These accounts correspond closely with documents that were found on captured or dead revolutionaries at the time. See (respectively) Bao Chi Long An, 21 April 1976, pp.2,7; Bao Chi Long An, 15 May 1976, pp.1,7; Captured Party documents, part of Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilm reel 2, (Australia National University Library).

115 Interview conducted by Jeffrey Race with Tran Van Soung, Deputy District Chief of Can Duoc, in November 1967. Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilm reel 1, (Australia National University Library).
Vietnam was inexperienced and unprepared for administering the new state.\footnote{Milton Taylor has suggested that indigenous colonial administrators in Vietnam, unlike their counterparts in India had been given no practical responsibility or experience in administrative matters and were thus "inexperienced and untried." Taylor, Milton C. "South Viet-Nam: Lavish Aid, Limited Progress," Pacific Affairs, Vol.34, #3, 1961, pp.242-256, p.255.} Furthermore, factionalism, regionalism and corruption quickly became symptomatic of a fundamental malaise in the system. Pho Bo Hai conceptualises these failings as inevitable in the South Vietnamese bureaucracy where, "a substantive divorce appears between the law and its implementation and between informal authority and its effective control...power distribution is highly equivocal, or uncertain and ambiguous."\footnote{Pho Ba Hai, Su Quan Ly Cong Cong cua Viet Nam trong Chuyen Tiep. Nen hanh chinh cong cong Nam Viet Nam, 1955 – 1975 [Vietnamese Public Management in Transition. South Vietnam Public Administration, 1955 – 1975], (Hanoi: International Publishing House, 2000), p.266.} In short, informal powers gave wide scope to local abuses. Paradoxically these informal powers also gave rural officials the space to act upon their own initiatives in developing their local communities in accordance with local conditions and needs. For example, there was a village council in a strongly contested area of Can Duoc district that decided to reduce local taxation levels to try to win the favour of local residents away from the revolutionaries. This same council won the favour of local people by instituting small agricultural assistance schemes for the poorest farming families giving them swine to rear.\footnote{A captured revolutionary cited these as reasons why the villagers (and his mother in particular) favoured the GVN village government rather the revolutionary government that took control of the village at the end of 1961. Interview by the Rand Corporation, Interview Series Z-ZH, Interview # 25, October 1964, (Microfilm, Australia National University Library).} As well as these examples, there are many more of local GVN officials who exploited peasants through the collection of spurious levies. Finding an effective power balance between controlling local powers that could lead to either abuse or the enactment of positive local initiatives was a problem that plagued both the GVN and the socialist regime that superseded it in 1975.
During the early years of the Ngo Dinh Diem presidency, administrative reform, in tandem with attempts to further centralise power in Saigon, were the first techniques employed to restore order and control in the countryside. These efforts resulted in a huge bureaucratic expansion. In a few short years the GVN bureaucracy was the second largest employer in the country (after the army) and the cost of personnel alone absorbed 60 percent of the national budget. The informal powers that Pho Ba Hai discusses were partly curbed in the district administration by appointing outsiders to the position of district chiefs and charging them with the dispensation of central policy prescriptions that were not necessarily appropriate or popular in the rural areas in Long An.

The Creation of Long An Province

The creation of Long An province was part of a wide scale reorganisation of the provinces throughout South Vietnam. In 1956, President Diem carved up the thirty-six existing provinces into smaller units (Map 2.2). According to David Marr, President Diem did this for “perceived tactical benefit.” In theory, smaller provinces would be administratively and militarily easier to manage. Long An province officially came to life with Presidential Decision 143 on October 1956. The new province was formed by annexing parts of the pre-existing provinces of Cho Lon and Tan An (Map 2.3). The capital of the province was Tan An, which lay in the south-central area of the province. The name Long An can be translated as Peaceful Dragon but is actually

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121 The districts annexed from Cho Lon were Can Duoc, Can Gioac, Ben Luc and Duc Hoa and the districts from Tan An province, were of Chau Thanh, Thu Thua and Tan Tru.
formed by taking ‘Long’ from the original name of Cho Lon, which was Long Tan Phu, and ‘An’ from the former province of Tan An.

One of the leading American war historians, Jeffrey Race cited the district of Moc Hoa as part of Long An province. This was an inhospitable area and home to the infamous Plain of Reeds mentioned earlier, where many revolutionaries had re-grouped and found sanctuary from the GVN. Technically Race was wrong but his presumption highlights an interesting administrative situation in Long An throughout the period 1956-1975. The provincial and district reorganisations made by Diem after 1956 were not recognised by the revolutionaries. As a result there were effectively two different administrative maps for the region. Therefore Presidential Decision 21 of February 1956, which sanctioned the separation of Moc Hoa district from Long An

122 The Plain of Reeds was a large swamp area that covered the western areas of Kien Tuong province and Long An province.
and the creation of Kien Tuong province, was not acknowledged by the revolutionaries.

Another reason for excluding Moc Hoa was the unique importance of maintaining Long An as a secure province. Long An was the geographical link between the Mekong Delta and the capital in Saigon and therefore of great geo-strategic importance. It is hard to underestimate the significance of Long An in the functioning of the GVN since “whomever dominates Long An, is in a commanding position, to either attack the capital or starve it, or both.” Vietnamese use the allegoric expression *ruot thit* (flesh and blood) to describe this relationship. What also made Long An exceptional was its proximity to Saigon. This meant that it received preferential treatment in terms of funding for development projects and it was the first province in South Vietnam to receive substantial US AID in the 1950s. As a result, Long An was often used as a convenient showcase for VIPs to make short visits from the capital. Arguably more than any other province, it was important for Diem to have loyal and trusted, (although this did not necessarily mean competent), administrators placed in Long An.

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The Administrative Structure of South Vietnam

The administrative structure of South Vietnam shown in Figure 2.1 did not change radically from 1954 to 1975, except for the eradication of the canton level of administration. However, the responsibilities of these different levels of government did change. In the late 1950's, the GVN tried to further centralise power and enhance the personal rule of Ngo Dinh Diem. The President was determined to stamp central authority on the countryside, especially the Mekong Delta, which was still considered an individualistic frontier region. Next were *ad hoc* 'administrative fixes' introduced to combat the growing violence and strength of the revolutionary forces. The final set of changes, which US advisors in the mid to late 1960s promoted, attempted to create rural development through grassroots democracy. Most of these latter policy prescriptions remained in the theoretical realm as the focus increasingly shifted towards subduing the growing revolution in the countryside through military means.

First, a description will be given of the hamlets, villages, cantons and provincial levels of government shown in Figure 2.1. This will help to contextualize the position of the district within the administration of the GVN and paint a picture of the evolving political, social and military conflict taking place in South Vietnam. In Figure 2.1 (and Figure 2.2 on page 77), I refer to the ministerial departments at the province level

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125 The United States had been providing assistance in public administrative reform since 1955 through the Michigan State University, which provided technical advisors in the field of public administration and help to develop the curriculum at the newly established National Institute of Administration in Saigon (NIA). From 1955 to 1962, these advisors also produced a collection of research reports and documents on local government throughout South Vietnam that serve as a useful data baseline for this research. The final category of changes talked of here relate to development projects of the mid to late 1960s when the US was more actively involved in supporting the GVN regime. Very useful records and accounts of these projects and prescriptions for administrative reform are found in the Public Administration Bulletin published by the Public Administrative Division of USAID.

126 Throughout the chapter I will use the term village to describe the level of administration between hamlet and district. This level is also referred to as commune (xã) but since most of the sources cited use the term "village" rather than " commune", it has been adopted throughout the chapter to avoid confusion.
as "technical services" in order to distinguish their services from the provincial government departments that were under the direct control of the province Rural Reconstruction Committee. My description in Figure 2.1 only gives a general idea of the administrative functions; there was considerable variation in the country. This research does not closely examine the varying patterns of social development found throughout Vietnam. However, it is informed by the work of Terry Rambo and Keith Taylor,\textsuperscript{127} who have conceptualised different patterns of social and rural life found in different regions in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{128}


\textsuperscript{128} Particularly relevant to ideas of regional differentiation is the concept of traditional and tightly bound corporate village in the Red River Delta and more open type villages in the Mekong Delta. The concept of open and closed communities in Vietnam is explored more fully in the work of Terry Rambo, \textit{A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Vietnam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution} (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Centre for Vietnamese Studies, 1973). Randy Cummins has also conducted research on different community structures that are found in southern Vietnam and the greater receptivity of peasants in the Mekong Delta to form patron-client relationships with patrons outside of their community: Cummins, Randy, \textit{Vietnamese Villages in the Mekong Delta: Their Articulations with the Wider Society and the Implications for Local Social Organisation} (State University of New York, Ph.D dissertation, 1977).
Figure 2.1
ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE OF RURAL SOUTH VIETNAM - 1958

Central Government, Saigon
- 36 Provinces
- Juridical entities
- Budget/revenue raising powers

Province
- 36 Provinces
- Juridical entities
- Budget/revenue raising powers

District Level
- 209 Districts
- Non-juridical entity
- No budgetary or taxation powers

Village Level
- Ave number of villages per province 51
- Juridical entity
- Taxation powers

Hamlet Level
- Non-juridical entity

National Assembly
- Deputies at Province level (no direct relationship between deputies and the districts they represent)

Administrative Bureaus
- Basic unit of administration

Provincial Council
- Directly elects the President

Security/Military Affairs
- Informal Associations (e.g., committee on Agricultural Affairs, Sports Groups)

Informal Linkages/Relationships

Presidential Office
- Appointed by President for indefinite time
- Non-native position
- Chief executive of all administrative affairs in province

Ministries
- Technical Services (e.g.,
  - National Policy
  - Public Works
  - Agriculture
  - Health
  - Education
  - Reconstruction
  - Taxation
  - Post

DistRICT CHIEF
- Appointed by President on advice of Province Chief (indefinite tenure)
- Indefinite Term
- Non-native position

CIVIC ACTION CADRES
- Collection of Village Revenue
- Collection of Information
- Maintain socio-economic development in rural areas
- Control visas

Provincial Office
- Ministries

Village Councils
- Finance Officer
- Village Chief
- Police Chief
- Hamlets
- Appointed by Province Chief / Part Time position
- Native position

Informal Relationships

Finance Officer
- Village Chief
- Police Chief
- Hamlets
- Appointed by Province Chief / Part Time position
- Native position

Village Chief
- Appointed by Provincial Chief
- Native position

Police Chief
- Hamlets
- Appointed by Province Chief / Part Time position
- Native position

Informal Linkages/Relationships

*The Canton Level of administration has been omitted since it was disbanded by 1963
Hamlets
At the end of the 1950's a hamlet (ap) in South Vietnam averaged approximately five hundred people. Long An in 1956 had eight hundred hamlets. Often residents of the same hamlet could live quite a distance from their neighbours owing to lineal settlement patterns along a canal or in sparsely populated areas. The hamlet was the lowest unit of Vietnamese administration and possessed no legal statutory basis or budgetary powers. The district chief, on the recommendation of the village council, appointed the hamlet chief. The appointment was always awarded to a local resident of the hamlet. His job, usually part time and rewarded with a small stipend from the province budget, was to assist and keep the village council informed of life in the hamlet.

In Long An, hamlets usually represented little more than government classified administrative parcels rather than integrated social communities. As population increased in an area, a hamlet would be divided into sub-units. Sub-dividing hamlets happened frequently in the 1950's as the south accommodated recently arrived migrants from Vietnam's north. In Kien Tuong province for example, Vinh Chau hamlet was divided into Vinh Chau ‘A’ and Vinh Chau ‘B’. According to local accounts, this division took on more than administrative significance since Vinh Chau ‘A’ consisted of established settlers, whilst Vinh Chau B was populated by newly arrived northern Catholic families. Revolutionary analyses and some peasants in Long

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129 This was highlighted in a study of Long An conducted by James Hendry in the 1950s: Hendry, James, The Small World of Khanh Hau (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1964). Furthermore, unlike central or northern parts of Vietnam it is also common practice in Long An to build homes on family owned land plots rather than in clustered communities.
An regarded the influx of outsiders and the multiplication of hamlets units during this period as an attempt by the Diem government to "flood the land" with outsiders.\(^{130}\)

The end to the "relative years of peace" in Long An came in May 1959 when the Communist Party's Central Committee in Hanoi finally sanctioned a shift from political to armed struggle in South Vietnam. After this proclamation, the revolutionaries were able to stage a dramatic comeback.\(^{131}\) The first shots in Long An were fired at the government outpost in Go Xoai in Ben Luc district in January 1960.\(^{132}\) This heralded a "week of terror" during the New Year (Tet) of 1960 in Long An. Thirteen government officials were assassinated in Duc Hoa, Duc Hue and Ben Luc districts. In Can Giuoc district alone, three village council members were assassinated on the first day of the Tet holiday. This violence prompted a wave of resignations of other government officials.\(^{133}\) Consequently, being hamlet chief was no longer a sought after position. The personal risks for government officials were huge as the revolutionaries sought to cripple the administration through the assassination of competent officials under a policy referred to as "extermination of the

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\(^{130}\) Kien Tuong province had originally been Moc Hoa district in Tan An province before Tan An was merged with Cho Lon to create Long An province in 1956. Kien Tuong was re-joined to Long An province after 1975 and resumed its original district name. Local histories of Long An province usually recount the history of this area as if it had always remained a part of Long An, I discovered this during my interviews with farmers in Ben Luc, Thu Thua and Thanh Tru districts in 2001. These sentiments are also echoed in local newspaper accounts, Bao Chi Long An, 11 March 1976, pp.2,7.

\(^{131}\) The Party in the south had been agitating for some time to switch from a political to a military struggle but it was only at the Fifteenth Conference of The Party Central Committee in Hanoi in May 1959 that this approach was finally sanctioned. This did not advocate an all-out uprising in the south but it did accept the necessity of violence in furthering the cause of the revolution.

\(^{132}\) David Elliott has highlighted in his detailed study of revolution in My Tho Province that reaction to this resolution varied greatly between different areas in the South Vietnam. Ben Tre and Kien Phong Provinces were the first to switch to open conflict. The first large scale open conflict against the ARVN took place in Kien Phong in late September 1959, where the revolutionary forces claimed to have killed and captured 100 GVN soldiers. The open conflict in Long An province began four months later. Elliott, David W.P, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930 - 1975, Volume I and II* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003).

For example, by the end of 1960 in Can Duoc, a district of ninety-one hamlets, the Deputy District Chief reported that only five to six of the hamlet chiefs were still active and most of the hamlets were too insecure for higher-level officials to visit more than once a month. Tax was collected from the hamlets by soldiers and at best, dwindled to a collection every one to two months. After the New Year offensive of 1960, the real battle began to win administrative control of the rural areas. Long An, like many other provinces in the Mekong Delta, became a patchwork of hamlets controlled either by the government, shadow government, or “open areas” contested by both.

As the revolution gathered pace, the GVN faced a chronic central-versus-local government dilemma. Somehow the central government had to find a way to counter the revolutionary’s strategy of building support networks at a grassroots level. In 1959 in an attempt to prevent the infiltration of revolutionaries into the hamlets, the central government promoted the re-settlement of peasants into agrovilles (khu tru mat). GVN authorities hoped that a small and concentrated population centre would be easier for the government to control. This programme was superseded one year later with the strategic hamlet programme (ap chien luoc), which operated along similar principles and also had the end objective of enhancing rural livelihoods and pacifying the population. These schemes, including the New Life Hamlet project (ap tan sinh)

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134 This policy had two main objectives. First, to eliminate effective and loyal administrators who could provide credible and effective government in an area that the revolutionaries sought to govern themselves. Second, to create a psychological impact by engendering fears amongst government officials and demonstrating to local people the effective presence of revolutionary power throughout the rural areas. Race, Jeffrey, *War Comes to Long An. Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p.83.

135 Interview conducted by Jeffrey Race with Tran Van Suong, Deputy District Chief of Can Duoc, in November 1967. *Private Papers of Jeffrey Race*, Microfilm reel 1, (Australia National University library).

136 “Open areas” was a term used by the revolutionaries to denote an area that was controlled by the GVN during the day but under control of the revolutionaries at night.

137 The literal translation of Khu tru mat is prosperous area.
that came in the late 1960s are discussed later in the chapter in relation to district
government. This is because whilst these schemes were theoretically based on the
hamlets, the resources and officials involved in implementing these schemes came
from the district level and above. In both the strategic hamlet and New Life Hamlet
programs the “hamlets” were artificial creations of the authorities that gathered people
in from dispersed areas.

**Villages**
The notion of a traditional village run by notables and enjoying a large degree of
autonomy (characterised by the oft quoted saying, ‘the emperors laws stop at the
bamboo hedge’) did not accurately portray a typical village in the Mekong Delta.
Although many peasants’ horizons were usually limited to the surrounding areas
where they were born and lived, their exposure to outside influences under French
rule and a residual frontier mentality meant that they were not bound by strong village
customs or identity.\(^\text{138}\)

Under Ordinance 57a of 1956, which remained in effect until the end of the GVN in
1975, Ngo Dinh Diem sought to further centralise the political administration. This
law was highly significant in terms of curbing village powers because “the force of
Ordinance 57a...tilted the scales against the village as an organ of significant
authority.”\(^\text{139}\) The village council comprised of the village chief, finance officer and
police chief was now appointed by the province chief under recommendation of the

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\(^{138}\) It is important to re-state that the term “village” denotes an administrative level between the hamlet
and district (disregarding the defunct canton level of administration). In Vietnamese it may be
translated by the emotive and ambiguous term of *lang* but it is normally translated as “commune” (*xa*)
and will be referred to as such in later sections. The term “village” is used in this chapter to avoid
confusion with many of the citations that use “village” rather than “commune”.

\(^{139}\) Race, Jeffrey, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley:
According to David Marr, Diem was re-instigating mandarinate precedents dictating that the village council must be appointed by higher levels of government. Whether Diem was more concerned with historical mandarin precedents or simply interested in centralising power at the expense of village autonomy is hard to determine. The outcome of these reforms increased the authority of district level government at the expense of the village administration below. Jeffrey Race said that the reforms reduced the village council to being "just a tool of the district." In practice, the exercise of power at a village level throughout South Vietnam was highly variable owing to local conditions and the play of formal and informal powers. Unlike the district and canton levels of administration, villages still had formal budgetary and taxation powers even if they were subject to control at higher administrative levels. Other tasks included administering justice and settling local disputes, which took up a large proportion of the village chief’s time. Village councils were also responsible for raising a self-defence corps, maintaining health and education services, supervising local farmers, and overseeing sports and political associations. Accounts vary as to how much district authorities monitored and controlled these functions. Possibly that depended on the character of the district officials and, increasingly, the security situation of the village and its hamlets. In My

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140 Interestingly one captured revolutionary cadre from Can Giuoc district claimed that in his village, the villagers elected the village council until 1961. It wasn’t until the implementation of strategic hamlets in this area in 1962 that the district chief appointed the village council. There is no further evidence to support this claim but it may have been possible that the district chief could have used his own initiative to promote some form of local democratic procedure in the selection of the village councils. Interview by Rand Corporation, Interview Series Z-ZH, Interview # 53, October 1964, (Microfilm, Australia National University Library).


Thuan village in Vinh Long province, for example, beyond contributing taxes to the
district and formulating a weekly report on the situation in the village, the village was
largely left to it own devices. The village chief was a local man and respected in his
community and rarely had recourse to involve higher levels of administration in the
day-to-day administering of the village. This situation changed under the agroville
program when the village chief expressed dismay at the district chief forcing local
people to work on the project and controlling the local population through exit visas
issued at the district level.\textsuperscript{143}

Despite local variation, Ordinance 57a affected a vertical shift of governing
responsibilities from the village to the district level. Village councils were more
tightly bound to the district for decisions on personnel matters. Villages were also
more integrated into the wider administrative apparatus through far-reaching central
government policy that was executed by the district government officials.

Under US pressure, administrative reforms were initiated in 1966 and 1967 as a “first
step towards the re-establishment of an effective system of local government.”\textsuperscript{144} The
most notable aspect of these reforms was the holding of village and hamlet elections,
which at least, in outward appearance, promoted local self-government and
democracy.\textsuperscript{145} However, true administrative reform remained elusive owing to
exigency of war and the institutionalisation of central control that began under the

\textsuperscript{143} Truong Ngoc Giau & Woodruff, Lloyd, \textit{The Delta Village of My Thuan. Some Administrative and
Financial Aspects} (Michigan State University: Advisory Group Agency for International Development,

\textsuperscript{144} “The Postwar Development of the Republic of Vietnam: Policies and Programmes,” \textit{Joint
Development Group of Postwar Planning Group and Development and Resources Corporation}, Saigon

\textsuperscript{145} In Long An in April 1967, elections were held for 220 village council seats, contested by 297 candidates.
French and was further solidified under Ngo Dinh Diem, and specifically under Ordinance 57a. A US Government report concluded in 1969,

It cannot be said that these reforms have as yet resulted in a system of effective local government responsive to the needs of local development... The village councils still have very little freedom of action to initiate and carry out government works, and very little power to carry out their own finances. The approval of the government is still required at ministerial level for budgets, constriction projects and equipment purchases exceeding VN $1 million... The village chiefs and councils appear to be answerable more to the Government than their constituents.146

As revolutionary activity heightened, local officials became less inclined to hold positions for fear of assassination.147 Being a village official not only carried the threat of reprisal for the official himself but also his family within the community. To counter this problem, officials in the late 1960s were brought from outside the village or even province to administer the villages. In some cases the new village chiefs were Catholics who had recently arrived from northern Vietnam who "may have been competent, anti-communist, and loyal to the government but they were out of touch with local peasant problems."148 Non-native officials could not be expected to administer a village successfully knowing very little about the area and having little time to engender respect amongst the local inhabitants. This stood in sharp contrast to the revolutionary government officials who were almost always local inhabitants and

147 In the month of January 1965 it was estimated that 258 local government officials across South Vietnam had been assassinated or abducted by revolutionaries. In an attempt to entice fearful senior officials to maintain their posts, salaries were increased by 50% in "dangerous and unwholesome areas," which included Long An province. Public Administration Bulletin, #31, September 1966, p.50.
known to the local community. The revolutionaries recognised that this worked to their advantage. One captured revolutionary told American intelligence officers “only natives of the village understand everything that is going on in the area and they were the only ones trusted by the people.”

**Revolutionary Organisation: The Interplay of Central Control and Local Initiative**

The key differences in the strategy for controlling and governing the rural areas between the GVN and the revolutionary government are highlighted starkly at the village level. Jeffrey Race proposes that the revolutionaries always understood that the rural areas were strategically decisive. This did not mean decisive in terms of military build-up; the revolutionaries were clearly out-manned and outgunned by South Vietnamese and US troops. For the revolutionaries, institutionalising an effective grassroots administration system in the rural areas was the key to success or failure in the battle for South Vietnam.

Under Diem, the role of the village administration was attenuated. In contrast, the Communist village government was an important organisational echelon in the

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149 Stuart Herrington has cited an exception to this rule in Tan My Village, Duc Hoa District, (then in Hau Nghia province). In 1971 the revolutionary authorities hastily introduced a non-native village secretary, coupled with a squad of northern soldiers who were responsible for village security rather than local guerrillas. Herrington believed this was a mistake since introducing outsiders was “bound to alienate the people.” This is an early illustration of Hanoi overriding the local revolutionary principles of employing local government cadre in the rural administration: Herrington, Stuart, *Silence was a Weapon. The Vietnam War in the Villages. A Personal Perspective* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982), p.67.


revolutionary movement. By the early 1960s it was reasonably clear that the leading village party cadres dominated the revolutionary government structure at the village level and that the party machinery subsumed the National Liberation Front in the villages. According to David Elliott

> The National Liberation Front was just that, a “front” with no real authority in the villages and the small cadre apparatus ruled and administered the countryside in their Party role. The typical revolutionary-controlled village was ruled by a local Party chapter committee.\(^{152}\)

In order to effectively link the party to the local people, three mass associations were established: The Farmer’s Association, The Women’s Association and the Youth Association.\(^{153}\) In Elliott’s account, “Party decisions were carried out through the popular associations...” So effectively the power at the village level remained firmly in the hands of the party.

The party cadres and non-party cadres in the mass associations in the villages were native to the area and able to identify and relate to the norms and needs of the community. Bergerud explains the significance of recruiting native cadres at village level.

> The emphasis placed by the Party on the village yielded crucial dividends. Because the insurgents, whether Party or not, were locally recruited they were able to identify directly with the rural population and exploit bonds of family and friendship....followers of the revolution rarely had to leave their own provinces and normally operated in or near their home hamlets.\(^{154}\)

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This gave the revolutionary cadres a distinct advantage over their counterparts in the GVN system who were mostly outsiders and expected to implement unpopular central government policies such as the strategic hamlets. Revolutionary village cadres were also in an advantageous position to pass on valuable local knowledge higher up the command chain to keep senior policy makers well informed of local conditions.

The revolutionary organisation combined a centralised power structure with the flexibility for local cadres to act on their own initiative. The locus of political and social activity appears to have taken place at the village level with the district playing a more supervisory role and instructing lower level cadres of the directives issued from the levels above.\textsuperscript{155} This combination of central policymaking and local adaptation was a significant factor in the revolutionaries' success.

\begin{center}
\textbf{It is impossible to do justice to the role played by the cadres from top to bottom. The Party, of course, was an archetype Leninist organisation. Consequently the top cadres made policy and expected it to be implemented faithfully down each rung of the organisational ladder. Local initiative, however, was expected and encouraged.}\textsuperscript{156}
\end{center}

The interplay of central directives and village initiatives is demonstrated in the communist cadres response to key rural issues such as land distribution and rents. The Central Party Committee and COSVN's policy guidelines were subject to adaptation at a local level. The strategic success of this approach and contrasting weakness of the GVN was recognised by US policy makers.

\begin{center}
\textbf{For the VC, the overriding consideration in the implementation of land reform was its usefulness in seeking to gain the commitment of the rural population to the revolution. In contrast to the GVN land reform polices}
\end{center}


Two: District Government During Revolution

which were highly centralised, the VC adapted its policy to local conditions...This characteristic flexibility allowed the VC to create the essential local political support before having to impose demands on localities for the massive resources required to bring the revolution to a successful conclusion. 157

According to Nancy Wiegarsma, communist rent policies also varied in accordance with local conditions. 158 Local revolutionary cadres were aware of official policies in regard to land distribution and rents but able to adapt them to suit local conditions. This pattern of adaptation of central policies to local needs continued in many places even after the revolution ended in 1975 when it proved, as Chapter Three will explain, to be a significant factor in undermining the central government policies of the new regime.


Cantons
Prior to being completely eliminated in 1963, the canton (*tong*) level of government existed in only a few provinces. Many cantons existed in name only. According to David Marr, "the canton was less a functioning government echelon than a device to satisfy local elite desires for official titles and favours."159 Like districts, cantons had no budgetary or taxation powers and relied on levies collected at the village level. One study suggested that the cantons served to facilitate communication between the villages and district centre in isolated areas with poor communications.160 This explanation is unlikely in the Mekong Delta. For example, Long An province had seventeen cantons but An Xuyen and Kien Giang provinces, which had greater numbers of isolated communities and a poorer infrastructure system, had no cantons. More probable is that district and village officials called on canton officials to assist with judicial and administrative matters on an *ad hoc* basis. In accordance with Ordinance 57a, the province chief appointed the canton chief, whose office could be located wherever the local canton chief resided. Unlike the district, it had no recognised administrative headquarters.

Provinces
The province chief was at the apex of the provincial administrative apparatus, shown in Figure 2.2. In regard to technical services, the province chief was also thought to maintain the upper hand since he was in charge of political matters of the province, which assumed a greater priority than the technical services. In October 1956, Diem declared that he, as president, would directly appoint province chiefs, who would

serve an indefinite term. In making these appointments, Diem rewarded trusted and loyal friends. Sources disagree about the scope of power at the disposal of a province chief. Some US observers on the ground thought that province chiefs were hamstrung by the dictates of the central government and needed more autonomy to act on their own initiative. Other accounts take a more sanguine position in regard to the role of the province chief. A Michigan State University study suggests that

The province chief holds a position of significant influence in provincial affairs through the exercise of budgetary and fiscal – as well as general administrative – powers. The influence of the province chief also pervades the local units. He exercises broad authority over the selection and removal of personnel in districts, cantons and villages, he formulates local budgetary and fiscal polices....He is, in fact, the chief executive for all administrative affairs in the province.

161 Most notable of these observers was Paul Vann who argued that more power should be given to the province chiefs “at the expense of central government to prevent the corrupt, ponderous and inefficient administration at the ministerial level from stifling any initiative in the countryside.” Cited in Bergerud, Eric M. The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p.109.

2.2: Long An Provincial Organisation, 1963

**Rural Construction Committee**
- Chairman: Chief of Province
- Deputy Chairman: Deputy Chief of Province for Administration
- 2nd Deputy Chairman: Deputy Chief of Province Security
- Members: Chief of Province Finance Services, Chief of Social & Economic Affairs, Chief of Technical Services, District Chiefs, Sector Chiefs of Staff.

**Province Chief**

**Provincial Council**

- Technical Services
  - National Police
  - Youth
  - Post
  - Public Works
  - Labour
  - Taxation
  - Education
  - Health
  - Agriculture, Animal Husbandry
  - Fishery
  - Information & Open Arms
  - Social Welfare
  - Reconstruction
  - Treasury, Loans
  - Refugees

**Deputy for Administration**
- Administration
- Finance
- Socio-Economic
- Secretariat

**Deputy for Security**
- Security and Military Affairs

**Districts**
- Tan Tru
- Thu Thua
- Duc Hue
- Duc Hoa
- Ben Luc
- Can Giuoc
- Can Dao
- Binh Phuoc
Conflicting accounts regarding the power of provincial government revolve around provincial relations to the central government. Analysing this relationship in Long An during the Diem regime, Jeffrey Race proposed that the province was little more than an executive body of the central government.\textsuperscript{163} This perspective was re-emphasised some years later in a US report in 1969, which strongly prescribed greater provincial independence from central control particularly in terms of personnel management and fiscal matters.\textsuperscript{164} The question of province-centre relations can be seen more clearly if we explore the character of the province chiefs themselves and the fiscal responsibilities of Long An province.

Appointed in 1957, Mai Ngoc Duoc was the first soldier to hold the position of province chief of Long An. His tenure marked the beginning of a new role for provincial chiefs. Firstly he was subject to Ordinance 57a of October 1956, which aimed "to expand the powers and responsibilities of the province chief" and ambiguously allowed for "many more responsibilities than before."\textsuperscript{165} Secondly, the province chief now held the post of military sector commander. During Duoc’s tenure, he tried hard to implement anti-corruption schemes and set up a system of complaint boxes in the districts where citizens could openly criticize local officials without fear of reprisal since only provincial administrators opened the petitions. This was a local initiative aimed at curbing the abuse of the informal powers by lower level administrators. However, Duoc was also remembered for establishing the first

agroville project in Duc Hue in 1959, which his close friend, President Ngo Dinh Diem, visited with much fanfare later that year. The most telling comment of his tenure came from one of his colleagues in the provincial government who said that the success that Duoc had achieved was owed largely to his connections in Saigon. Duoc’s rise and fall and the fate of Long An ultimately depended on his relations with Diem and the central government and not with his rapport with the people of Long An. Duoc was an outsider, a fact that did not sit well with Long An residents.

Mai Ngoc Duoc was an honest and industrious person who was able to accomplish much for Long An because of his influence in Saigon. His biggest problem was that, being born in Hue, he just did not know how to deal with southerners. He would drive around the province in his American car, flying the national flag, which the people found very offensive. Southerners just don’t like all that formality and rank.  

In October 1961 Major Viet Thanh replaced Mai Ngoc Duoc as province chief. Thanh was a professional soldier and his appointment reflected the deteriorating security situation in Long An that had been unleashed by the revolutionaries in “the week of terror” in 1960. Race recalls that Thanh was a good military tactician and transparently honest. Furthermore among the residents he was the most respected and fondly remembered of all the province chiefs of Long An. One explanation for his popularity in Long An was that he was a native of the province. Despite the popular support Thanh enjoyed within his province, he was however, hamstrung by having to execute unpopular central government policies. The most ruinous of these policies in local eyes was the strategic hamlet programme. Even Thanh felt the policy was

“crippled by the desire to go too fast and the lack of sufficient cadres to organise the people.”\textsuperscript{168}

Ultimately, a province chief was first and foremost required to do the bidding of the central government. This was particularly the case at the time of national elections when the province chief instructed the lower levels of administration to pressurise villagers to vote for a specific candidate for the national assembly.\textsuperscript{169} After failing to rig elections to the National Assembly in June 1963, Thanh was removed from office. Thanh’s successor did agree to fix the elections but soon lost his job during the coup in November 1963 when General Duong Van Minh replaced President Diem. The examples of Duoc and Thanh serve to underline both the omnipotent central control of provincial affairs by the Saigon regime and the personalised nature of Diem rule in controlling the life of a province through the appointment of province chiefs.

By the time Lieutenant Colonel Pham Anh was appointed province chief in May 1964 the GVN controlled only the six district towns and their immediate surrounding areas.\textsuperscript{170} Naturally this situation had considerable ramifications for the provincial administration. Since revenue raising through tax collection in the hamlets and villages was impossible, Long An became almost solely dependent on central government subsidies. This served to bind the provincial administration even closer to the strictures of the central government in Saigon. Long An was the most highly subsidised of all the provinces in the Mekong Delta (Table 2.1). US prescriptions for


greater autonomy and fiscal powers at the province level made sense in theory. In practice, however, breaking the stifling degree of centralisation of the GVN was nearly impossible until the districts could re-capture their revenue sources in the villages and hamlets from revolutionary control.

### Table 2.1

**Comparative Provincial Budgets 1967 (VNS Million)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Subsidies (central government)</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Expenditures</th>
<th>Public Works and Reconstruction</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subsidies</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Councils and Administration</td>
<td>Public Works and Reconstruction</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Giang</td>
<td>25.75</td>
<td>6.45</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>17.12</td>
<td>14.58</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Xuyen</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chau Doc</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>18.45</td>
<td>15.52</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go Cong</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kien Giang</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>7.70</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long An</strong></td>
<td><strong>37.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>6.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>18</strong></td>
<td><strong>44</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phuoc Long</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tay Ninh</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Postwar Planning Group, Saigon, 1969.*

**District Administration in South Vietnam**

Districts occupied an important place between villages and the central government. While hamlet and village officials were sometimes native positions, district chiefs were outside appointments controlled by the province and ultimately the central government. On the one hand, district chiefs were expected to look down and maintain close links and control of the villages and hamlets. On the other hand, they were compelled to look upwards to receive and execute central government edicts.

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Even their security of tenure rested on satisfying the central government rather than their local constituents.

Defining the role of the district administration in South Vietnam during this twenty-one year period is a complex task. Scholars such as Jeffrey Race suggest that the central government in Saigon had captured district governments, making them "just a tool of the centre". Other accounts say the district was a "transmission belt" or "letter box" between the province and village. Luther Allen and Pham Ngoc An's research in the late 1950s credits far more significance to this level of administration. Whilst Allen and Pham acknowledge the centralising influence of the GVN, they also stress two factors that enhanced the district's power and importance. The first was its increased significance after Ordinance 57a, which technically replaced the village as the key interface between society and central government authority. The second was the "discrepancy between the limited formal powers of the district chief and the wide practical and informal authority he may exercise."

The ambiguity exposed by these varying observations generates a series of questions. What were the functions and responsibilities of the districts? How important were district administrations to the functioning of the GVN? How were the district chiefs able to use their "informal authority" to negotiate space from central control? One way to begin to gain some insight on the first question is to formulate a general

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account of the administrative tasks and responsibilities of a district chief and his administration, shown in Figure 2.3. (Also refer back to Figure 2.1 and 2.2, which highlight the district's position in the administrative structure of the Republic of Vietnam).
Figure 2.3
Administrative Tasks and Responsibilities of a District Chief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General administration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Application of laws and programmes of the central government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Collection of statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Administration of local security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Public Works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Authorization of family ceremonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supervise tax collection from local villages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Any other tasks designated by the province chief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supervision of hamlet and village affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coordination (but not control) of various technical services such as agricultural extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supervision of 11 bureaus within the district administration (general and personnel administration; political and judicial affairs; economic affairs; finance and taxation; military affairs; identity cards; civil status; youth and physical education; education, social welfare, health labour; agrarian reform and agricultural credit; correspondence and records.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control security situation in the district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Reconciliation procedures and the adjudication minor civil and criminal cases (imprisonment from 1 to 10 days)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judicial powers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Encourage and design socio-economic development initiatives for the district (generate credit sources to fund new projects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Control of local population through issuing of visas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Organization of labour and participation of agrovilles, strategic hamlets, and New Life Hamlets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Spend a significant amount of time in the local villages and hamlets developing trust and demonstrating continual presence in the daily lives of the district people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Keep close supervision of the work of lower level administrators (hamlet and village level)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Receive and act on petitions from local residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Help develop and vitalize local associations and groups such the Association for Agricultural People (kiep hoi nong dan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Compiled from Michigan State University Advisory Group documents
Two: District Revolution

Re-organising the Districts and the Rectification of Names Campaign

The importance of the district administration to the GVN changed over the years. President Ngo Dinh Diem and successive leaders after his death in 1963 tried to use it to fix social, political and then military problems in rural areas. This process began in 1956 with the re-designation of many existing districts and led to an increase from 209 districts in 1956 to 241 by 1965. This re-organisation had both a social and political purpose, which David Elliott describes as

> The vital next step in traditional Confucian statecraft, which was to provide its own designations for... districts to replace the old French designations... The districts were renamed with unfamiliar stiff and didactic terms that were intended to “civilize” this former frontier area and draw it into President Diem’s own Confucian frame of reference. The unpretentious traditional district appellations were replaced in official use by high-sounding new designations... In President Diem’s Confucian world, the renaming of the administrative units not only solidified his claim to rule and showed his power, but the names also carried an intrinsic moral force that would rub off on the inhabitants of the area.  

Elliott attributes these changes primarily to Diem’s Confucian statecraft. However, this district re-organization movement had as much in common with Realpolitik as Confucianism. First, as with the provinces, carving the district units into to more manageable sizes made it easier to control them, politically and then militarily. Second, creating new districts was a way to break up local cliques and create “model districts” imbued with centrally trained officials. Finally these administrative fixes, were also a way of stamping presidential authority on the rural population by stripping them of their local identity forged through established recognition of district names and boundaries.

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When Long An province was founded in October 1956, it had seven districts: Thu Thua, Duc Hoa, Ben Luc, Can Giuoc, Can Duoc, Tan Tru and Chau Thanh (shown in Map 2.3). In the same year, Diem began the rectification of names campaign and the district of Chau Thanh was re-named to Binh Phuoc but remained territorially intact. The likely explanation for this change is that Chau Thanh is a common name for districts in the Mekong Delta. It is an antiquated Vietnamese term for citadel or town and was used by the earliest Vietnamese settlers in the Mekong Delta region. This term may have constituted what Elliott referred to as “an unpretentious traditional district appellation” and ripe therefore for President Diem’s civilizing mission. Binh Phuoc, on the other hand, was a name commonly used in the Nguyen dynasty to bestow (or portend) luck and prosperity on an area. According to Elliott, “Not surprisingly, the people continued to use the old familiar names, and this attempt to turn the individualist South Vietnamese into proper Confucians only underlined the distance between the world of Ngo Dinh Diem and the realities of My Tho.”175 I suggest that these changes, whilst only denoting a name rather than territorial change, were significant. Firstly, people resented outsiders imposing new names for their native districts. In Duc Hoa district in 1963, for example, President Diem ordered Bao Trai village to be renamed Khiem Cuong (meaning “modest but virtuous). According to Eric Bergerud the local peasants were not impressed with the new state of affairs and refused to accept this new name.176 In addition to disgruntling the local population, name changes caused confusion since the district became known by two names, which were used interchangeably. An example was the changing of Can Giuoc

district to Thanh Duc (meaning virtue and prosperity) in 1957. Local people continued to use the original name; and after the coup removing President Diem in November 1963, the new province chief allowed the official name to revert back to Can Giuoc. Confusion regarding the true name of this district continued and documents still referred to it as Thanh Duc long after 1963.

Altering traditional names of established districts served the central government’s objective of imposing influence on rural areas. It could be considered as gesture politics, distinguished from the act of transmuting the geographical boundaries of districts, with the end objective of gaining stronger administrative, social and military hold of strategic territory. The first geographical re-organisation of this kind in Long An was in March 1959. Three communes from Duc Hoa and five communes from Thu Thua district were annexed to create the new district of Duc Hue (Map 2.4).177 This fix was not of a military nature since revolutionary activity was at a low ebb at this time. Instead it was an attempt to engineer a model district, imbued with newly trained administrative staffs that were responsible for implementing the central government’s first agroville project in Long An. It was also a means to carve up two large districts and create a third, making the area more administratively manageable and helping to expedite the collection of village taxes and levies.

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But this re-organisation did not improve the administrative control of the GVN in this area. Despite the influx of specially trained staff into the district, the agroville project was completed in form only and inspired very little interest or enthusiasm from local people. The Vietnamese term for agroville is *khu tru mat*, which literally means prosperous area. In 2001, one farmer who was chosen to join the first agroville in Duc Hue district, Vi Thanh, recalled the irony of this name since it consisted of little more than a shoddily built clinic and school.\(^{178}\) He remembered that all the participating peasants wanted to do was to return to their homes and resume their livelihoods.

In 1960 the GVN started the strategic hamlet programme (*ap chien luoc*) in Long An. This central government initiative worked on broadly similar principles to the failed \(^{178}\) He thought that there were approximately 1,000 peasants in this first agroville. Interview, Thu Thua district, Long An, 2001.
agroville project. It aimed to resolve the central government dilemma of maintaining rural control through pacification and development initiatives. The first stage of this program was the creation of fortified settlements in populated and strategic areas. In theory, these secure settlements would then spread like an "oil stain" throughout the countryside.\(^{179}\) The statistics seem to indicate that the strategic hamlets were a great success for GVN and American pacification efforts.

In 1963 more than ten million South Vietnamese inhabitants were living in about 9,000 strategic hamlets and in urban centres. Given the total number of hamlets (11,864) and the population at that time (14.4 million), GVN control was fairly well established over approximately 70% of the nation...and the Strategic Hamlet program was anything but a failure.\(^{180}\)

In reality, however, the program was largely a failure from the start. One observer later recounted that in Long An the momentum of the strategic hamlet project led to short-sighted mistakes with far-reaching consequences. One such mistake was inadequate training of local officials.\(^{181}\) According to David Elliott, the training did not stop endemic cronyism and corruption that pervaded local government officials charged with running the hamlets. Various studies reported the failure of the strategic hamlets. In 1961, Long An was ranked 39 out of the 42 provinces in the implementation of the strategic hamlet program. This was attributed to the difficulties in organising a scattered (and largely unwilling) rural population into concentrated clusters.\(^{182}\) Revolutionary reports and historical analyses place more emphasis on the role of revolutionary forces in the physical destruction of the hamlets. In 1961 in Long


\(^{181}\) Khuynh Diep, "Peasants and Land in the Mekong Delta." Part of an unpublished manuscript, given to me by the journalist, Mr Khuynh Diep, November 2001.

An, the revolutionaries razed the first strategic hamlet in Ben Luc district.\footnote{Bao Chi Long An, 4 July 1976, pp.2-3.} By October 1963, revolutionary forces claimed to have destroyed all the remaining strategic hamlets.\footnote{Bao Chi Long An, 21 April 1976, pp.2,7.} The veracity of this claim is uncertain but it is likely that most of the strategic hamlets were indefensible or infiltrated by VC by this time anyway.\footnote{Tran Dinh Tho estimated that by 1964, only 10% of the strategic hamlets in South Vietnam were defensible. Tho claims that this fact was hidden in the province chief’s reports: Tran Dinh Tho (Brig. Gen), *Pacification* (US Army Center of Military History, Washington D.C: Indochina Monographs, 1977), p.162.} Accounts from peasants in Long An suggest that many people simply left the hamlets and tried to return to their native lands. The strategic hamlets provided neither a better standard of living nor security against revolutionary activity. American sources at the time suggest that one quarter of the population of Long An province was involved in the strategic hamlets programme.\footnote{Jeffrey Race cites this figure on the authority of Earl Young who was USOM representative in Long An in 1961: Race, Jeffrey, *War Comes to Long An. Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p.132.} Many farmers I interviewed in Long An in 2001 and 2002 were surprised at this figure and thought the proportion was considerably less.

Creating new districts and thus adding to the rural administrative apparatus created an array of possibilities for district government. On the one hand it represented tendencies towards further centralization. Increased numbers of local officials were recruited and trained to directly implement central programmes in the countryside such as strategic hamlets and other pacification initiatives. Furthermore, establishing smaller and more numerous district centres was also a way for the government to penetrate more deeply into the countryside. A survey conducted by Race in Ben Luc, Thu Thua and Can Giuoc districts revealed “those [people] living a greater distance...
from the district headquarters generally were down on local officials. 187 In theory, more district centres, each with a smaller area to administer, could have meant a greater affinity between local people and their officials. This outcome was contingent, however, on whether these local officials used the powers at their disposal for the enactment of positive local agendas. Instances of these positive initiatives emanating for the district level can be found in a number of research studies made in South Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s by the Michigan State Advisory Group. Mr Nguyen Van Hoi, chief of Cai Rang district (My Tho province), established a rice marketing cooperative in order to stop the profit margins of local farmers being reduced when selling to rice merchants. He is reported to have visited every local farmer’s home in the district trying to persuade them of the benefits of the new cooperative. 188 Another example is the district chief of Dien Banh who “constantly sought to raise the hopes of further local economic development.” He held regular meetings for the district Farmers Agricultural Association, attracted agricultural technical assistance and credit to develop new irrigation schemes and pumping stations. 189 These examples probably reflect the more traditional role of the district chief found in the Confucian bureaucracy where district chiefs were expected to “manage the general interests of the population ... just as good parents manage the interest of their children.” 190 Examples of this kind of local initiative or even paternal care from a district chief were less evident in Long An where security concerns seemed to occupy the district chiefs’ time. Easier to find in Long An are the abuses of informal powers of the district chiefs. These abuses became especially prevalent after

187 Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilm 3, (Australia National University Library).
the promulgation of decree 10/59 which gave carte blanche to local officials to pursue local vendettas under the guise of rooting out political opposition to the regime. 191 As a result, the activities of the revolutionaries were curtailed but at the same time large numbers of peasants who had been caught in the whirlwind of this often brutal scourge were alienated.

Officials in Saigon presumed that the district chief, now representing the lowest level of central authority in the countryside, would be able to impose social and administrative order in the hamlets and villages. However, because an outsider usually held the position of district chief, he usually had an inadequate understanding and empathy with local people and their conditions. Moreover, he often had to implement unpopular central government polices. This made his job both difficult and unpopular. Some people in Long An remember their district chiefs during this period were "haughty and aloof".192 Others cite endemic corruption amongst these officials. For these and other reasons people turned away from the GVN to the revolutionary cause. Whilst corruption did undoubtedly exist, it may also have been a manifestation of plain incompetence and bad management. As Race has commented, "corruption was one of the leading false issues of the war."193

District officials were imposed from outside the locale, lacked local understanding, and were chosen for their loyalty and later, their military skills rather than their

191 David Elliott explores the effect that decree 10/59 had on enhancing the powers at the disposal of local government officials and the detrimental effects that these powers could have on local communities. Elliott, David W.P, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930 - 1975* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), Volume I, pp. 195-196.
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So the Saigon government lost an excellent opportunity to staff this important level of administration with effective administrators, who had proven, in some cases that, given a freer reign to act upon local initiatives, they could enhance the livelihoods of people in their districts.195

Agricultural Extension Services

Another missed opportunity for the GVN concerns agricultural assistance, particularly in the sphere of extension services. Providing good agricultural advice and access to credit could have been a way to find favour with local people whilst also stimulating social and economic development. The political dimension of supporting agricultural livelihoods is evident. In 1955 and 1956 peasants demonstrated in Can Duoc district to demand that the local authorities provide them with fertilizer. The GVN dismissed these legitimate demands as simply revolutionary inspired agitation. It was not until the mid 1960s in Long An that the government encouraged the farmers to form associations and discussion groups that could articulate and convey their interests to the local authorities.

194 During the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem it is thought that the position of district chief and even province chief could be bought. These positions could bring the incumbent considerable potential for the accumulation of wealth through bribe taking and graft. At the end of the 1950s, the going rate for a district chief position was VNs10 million (depending on the district) and 5 to 10 million for a province chief position. Pho Ba Hai, Su Quan Ly Cong Cong cua Viet Nam trong Chuyen Tiep. Nen hanh chinh cong cong Nam Viet Nam, 1955 - 1975 [Vietnamese Public Management in Transition. South Vietnam Public Administration, 1955 - 1975], (Hanoi: International Publishing House, 2000), p. 435.

As hamlet and village governments in Long An frequently changed hands between revolutionary and GVN control, there was no effective way to institute a comprehensive agricultural extension service at these levels. Therefore extension services were all based at the district level of administration and the locus of extension work was carried out from here. The service was even further removed from the realities of rural society because it was under the direct control of the Ministry of Agriculture. The district authorities had very little input or control over its activities. Agricultural extension was a highly centralised service, usually staffed by officers from Saigon or other regions who knew little about local agricultural conditions. Stuart Callison scathingly reported that "some of these farmers have a lot they can teach their local agricultural extension agents if only the latter would listen."196

**Civic Action Cadres and Rural Development Cadres**

The previous sections have highlighted that GVN rural administrators and agricultural extension officers were outsiders and had little or no rapport and understanding of the villagers. This led to a chronic dislocation between the government in Saigon and the rural population. As I have previously emphasised, this GVN weakness worked to the advantage of the revolutionaries who were natives in their local constituencies. In response to this problem President Diem created a corps of Civic Action cadres modelled on the communist cadre (can bo) system.197 Diem hoped that that the Civic

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Action cadres would undermine the raison d'etre of the revolutionary cadres in rural South Vietnam.

Civic Action cadres had two tasks. The first was to perform good works in the community, particularly in the sphere of agricultural assistance. The second task was to act as propaganda agents for the GVN. The cadres were supposed to visit rural communities and bring political news to local people. It was hoped that they could bridge the gap between the villages and the districts, compensating for infrequent visitations by provincial or district officials. Elliott's study of Long An's neighbouring province, My Tho, notes they did not fulfil either function adequately.

Once in a while the district sent a civic action team to a village to teach animal husbandry. They also explained the general political situation to the villagers, but as they hadn't studied the local conditions carefully before starting to talk about what should be done, their work turned out to be a failure.198

Diem's vision of a corps of dedicated rural cadres capable of recapturing the political affiliation and goodwill of the southern Vietnamese peasantry never materialised. General Tran Dinh Tho considered that in contrast to the revolutionary cadres, the Civic Action cadres failed because they lacked commitment and belief in their cause.199 This lack of commitment stemmed from the motivation to join the service in the first place. Instead of idealistic motives, it seems that most Civic Action cadres were encouraged to join up in order to avoid military service. The corps was further impeded by a highly centralised and hierarchical structure. Cadres reported directly to the Presidential Office and acted independently from the village, district and

provincial government administrations. Another familiar failing of the corps was that the cadres were outsiders and had very little understanding of the communities they were sent to work in. Eric Bergerud considered that the "outsider" aspect of the Civic Action cadres was their most critical point of failure.

Regardless of their independence, the Civic Action Cadres were yet another projection of state power coming from outside. There was no internal recruitment or organic link with the community, two fundamental characteristics of the Viet Minh, and, later, the Front cadres. The Civic Action Cadres were in rural Vietnam, not of it.200

In 1966, the GVN was still wrestling with the same problems: an over-centralised political system characterised by negligible links between the rural population and the government. In order to rectify this long-standing weakness, the government replaced the Civic Action cadres with Rural Development cadres who were under the command of Colonel Be. This exercise, however, represented little more than the pouring of old wine into new bottles. Despite the best intentions of Colonel Be, it proved impossible to recruit Rural Developments cadres on a local basis. American advisors cited the inability to employ native and rural cadres as the most critical failing of the Rural Development corps.201 During the 1960s, the deteriorating security situation in provinces such as Long An also hindered the work of the Rural Development Cadres. Many cadres' teams, too afraid to spend time in their allocated villages, retreated to the fortified security of the district centres.

It seems that few lessons had been learnt from the failure of the Civic Action cadres. Again the Rural Development corps operated under a centralised and separate


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hierarchy for the Ministry for Rural Development. As a result, General Tho acknowledged that the Rural Development cadres were a deeply unpopular feature of the GVN political landscape.

Rural Development group leaders were authorized, for example, to report directly to the minister in Saigon, bypassing the local government channels. This practice infuriated local officials and other national cadres. Rural Development Cadres considered themselves emissaries of the central government. 202

It is easy to empathise with the frustrating dichotomy of the GVN. Successive leaders, with or without US advice, recognised the need to create a local constituency in the rural areas. Yet the Civic Action Cadres and later, the Rural Development cadres, failed to penetrate the rural communities, let alone win the hearts and minds of villagers. One significant reason for this on-going failure was that rural cadres in the Republic of Vietnam were “in” but not “of” the rural population. This reality became more physically apparent in the 1960s when the district centres evolved into island fortresses in the countryside.

District Centres Become Island Fortresses and Command Centres in the Countryside

By 1963, the failure of the GVN to secure the rural areas of Long An was evident. The revolutionaries were now not only on the military offensive but were estimated to have liberated and installed shadow governments in two-thirds of all villages and hamlets in the province. 203 Consequently, the Saigon government’s next district reorganisation in October 1963 was a military or strategic response reflecting the downward spiral of the war effort. In one of his last decrees before being killed two

weeks later, Ngo Dinh Diem ordered the creation of a new province, Hau Nghia (meaning deepening righteousness) by removing from Long An province the districts of Duc Hoa and Duc Hue, which were hotbeds of revolutionary activity, close to the infamous Plain of Reeds, near the revolutionary Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), and close to the vital supply route of the Ho Chi Minh trail. The government joined these two districts with Trang Bang and Cu Chi to form the new province shown in Map 2.5.\(^{204}\) Interestingly Diem did not select one of the existing district centres to be the new provincial capital. Instead he chose a village in Duc Hoa, Bao Trai, an attempt to shift power away from the established cliques in the four district centres.\(^{205}\) The new province of Hau Nghia existed in the Republic of Vietnam until the end of the conflict in 1975. The NLF never recognised Hau Nghia and Duc Hoa and Duc Hue districts continued to be considered part of Long An province. The decree did little to dampen revolutionary endeavour and heighten security in Long An. Despite Saigon’s best efforts to create a new administrative unit in a strategically important area, the districts of Hau Nghia were some of the most bloodily contested areas in South Vietnam.

\(^{204}\) Sac Lenh so 12 NV 15/10/1963 (Presidential Decree # 12, 15 November 1963).
Less than twelve months later in Long An, the GVN controlled only the province capital and the six district towns. These were island fortresses, administered by soldiers, in a countryside that the shadow government dominated. In barely ten years, the GVN had unintentionally replicated the mistake of the French before them, in trying to run the countryside from the towns.

As the security situation in the countryside deteriorated, the district level of government took on even more importance. I have identified three main functions of the district centre that were integral to the survival of the GVN. The first was to provide a relatively safe haven for both GVN personnel and local people. GVN officials were in a precarious position and increasingly found themselves under attack from the revolutionaries. Furthermore, if any rural official in the GVN administration had worked hard to serve the community and gained a good reputation for doing so,
they stood a strong chance of being assassinated by the revolutionaries under their policy of “extermination of traitors.” They tended to retreat from the villages to the relative security of the fortified district centre. This situation created a self-perpetuating ‘catch-22’ situation for the GVN. Under these circumstances, the officials continued their military and administrative tasks from the district centres but did nothing to project a government presence in the surrounding countryside. Therefore the GVN became even further out of touch with life in the villages. In 1966, this situation reached a nadir in the new province of Hau Nghia when only the district capitals were controlled by the GVN. Even these island fortresses were not entirely safe havens for the GVN authorities. In May 1966, the NLF attacked Hiep Hoa, the district capital of Duc Hoa. Bergerud’s history of Hau Nghia province cites this as a pivotal event in undermining the GVN’s presence in the district centres,

By storming the district capital and the site of Hau Nghia’s only significant industry, the VC were able to effectively demonstrate their mastery over Hau Nghia’s political and economic life.

The GVN did gain control of Hiep Hoa once more but the vulnerability of its position had been proved. The NLF supporter and propagandist, Wilfred Burchett, was able to claim with some veracity that instead of dominating the peasantry through their

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206 This policy had two main objectives: First, to eliminate effective and loyal administrators who could provide credible and effective government in an area that the revolutionaries sought to govern themselves. Second, to create a psychological impact by engendering fears among government officials and demonstrating to local people the effective presence of revolutionary power throughout the rural areas. Race, Jeffrey, War Comes to Long An. Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p.83. By January 1965, the revolutionaries had assassinated or abducted an estimated 258 local government officials across South Vietnam. Public Administration Bulletin, #31, September 1966, p. 50.


system of forts, the GVN was now surrounded by an armed and determined peasantry.\textsuperscript{209}

Local people, especially women, children, and the elderly also gravitated towards the district centres as a refuge from the violent conflict. They did this in response to US bombing campaigns and also to escape NLF government in their hamlets and villages. For example, in 1965, about half of the population of Trang Bang district in Hau Nghia relocated to the district town to escape intense fighting and bombing.\textsuperscript{210} This may have been a temporary move for some people but others set up shantytowns around the district centres and sought a livelihood by servicing these growing GVN control centres.

The second function of the district centre was to be the hub of the GVN rural administration. As most villages by the mid and late 1960s were either controlled or contested by the NLF, the district administration was now the lowest level of functioning government in Long An. At the same time, the district administration had never been so enfeebled. Local GVN revenue sources dried up because tax collection in the villages was negligible. In the neighbouring province of My Tho, government tax collectors never ventured outside the district centre between 1965-1967. Instead they remained "barricaded" in the district centres waiting for the peasants to come to them with their tax payments.\textsuperscript{211} During this time in Long An, district chiefs increasingly began to serve two masters - the central government and American

advisors stationed in the district towns. There were no certain means and fewer available opportunities for the district chief to negotiate space from either of these masters.

The third function of the district centres was to act as a launch pad for any military or social programmes in the surrounding areas. This function was linked to the increased presence of US personnel in the district centres who were supporting military and pacification schemes. The introduction of US advisors who were based either at provincial or district level represented one of the final adventures in the life of district government in the Republic of Vietnam. Accompanying US military support was a host of developmental projects, which US administrators deemed would win the hearts and minds of local people. Reflecting the increased activity emanating from the district centres, district advisors now had budgetary power over the disbursements of US aid money.212

US district advisors were particularly involved in the development of New Life Hamlets (NLH), which started in 1967 when US policy makers outlined how the settlements would succeed where the agrovilles and strategic hamlets had failed.

The Government has mapped out the 1967 plan to construct a certain number of new life hamlets...It has been found that most of the farmers are actually living only the old hopeless life full of mourning, hatred, injustice...This old life is also a life of disunion, poverty, disease and illiteracy. Such a hopeless life of the past must be destroyed for the building of a new and brighter life.213

Whilst perhaps noble in spirit, the New Life Hamlets appear as little more than a footnote in the fight for survival of the GVN. In 1968, nearly half of all hamlets in Long An were classed as NLH but few met the objectives summarised in Figure 2.4.214 By the time of the New Life Hamlet program, most local officials were GVN military men and US military advisors at the district level were providing monthly reports on the success of the pacification programme under the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES). The HES, introduced in January 1967, was a computer-based method to assess rural security, pacification programs, and to identify problem areas. All US senior district advisors were required to submit monthly hamlet evaluation reports to their superiors in Saigon. Stuart Herrington, who was the senior district advisor in Duc Hue, recalled, “Rightly or wrongly, the report quickly took on the character of a report card for the performance of district chiefs.”215

Friction between the Vietnamese district chief and US advisors was prevalent. The difficulties arose from poor language communication, the ambiguous authority of the US district chiefs, and Americans’ frustration at perceived corruption amongst GVN officials. Herrington highlights the fractious relationship between Major Nghiem, the district chief of Duc Hue, and the US advisors. Those advisors strongly suspected Nghiem of downplaying the extent of communist activity in his district to protect his position with the powers in Saigon. Paul Vann also considered Nghiem as “perhaps

214 New Life Hamlets were targeted specifically in “priority areas” which in 1966 included: Tactical Area 1: Danang City and part of the surrounding area in Quang Nam Province; Tactical Area 2: Binh Dinh Province; Tactical Area 3: Area of Saigon – Cholon, Gia Dinh, parts of Bien Hoa province, Long An, Hau Nghia, Binh Duong, Phuoc Tuy and Vung Tau City; Tactical Area 4: An Giang and Vinh Long. See “Local Government and Rural Construction: Planning for rural development,” Public Administration Bulletin, October 1966, pp.22 – 23.

the most corrupt district chief in Vietnam."\textsuperscript{216} Similar accounts of discord can be found in other districts in Long An. Major Gerald Winkler, who was senior advisor in Can Duoc district in 1967, had praise for the Can Duoc district chief, Major Trang Trong Nghia, but qualified this approbation by stating "he is one of the very few capable district chiefs I have come across....I mean he is one of the very few."\textsuperscript{217} When asked what he considered to be the biggest problem in the district, Winkler cited a "lack of a competent civil government." His final diagnosis was that "all people want is effective government and they don't care if it's GVN or VC."\textsuperscript{218}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
1. Extirpating the VC underground and destroying the VC infrastructure. \\
2. Getting rid of country lords and putting an end to corruption in rural areas. \\
3. Building a new spirit, a spirit of cohesiveness, emancipation, science, and citizen’s responsibility, and especially a nationalist spirit to safeguard the good of our national culture, and, at the same time, to accept the good from foreign cultures. \\
4. Organizing democratic and administrative civil groups to help farmers manage and reconstruct their hamlets. \\
5. Organizing civil groups to fight against the VC and to assist the people to defend themselves. \\
6. Putting an end to illiteracy. \\
7. Curing and preventing diseases. \\
8. Agrarian reform. \\
9. Developing agriculture and wiping out poverty. \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Objectives of the New Life Hamlets (1967)}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{217} Interview conducted by Jeffrey Race with Major Gerald Winkler, Senior Advisor in Can Duoc district, November 1967. Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilm reel 1, (Australia National University Library).

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Ibid.}

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The veracity of Winkler’s final sentiment is clear. In 1954, President Diem had the chance to build effective district administrations and ones that would provide a crucial linkage between centre and grassroots whilst allowing them enough space to develop their own local initiatives in socio-economic development. Instead the system became over-centralised and staffed by loyal outsiders with little administrative experience and whose careers depended on looking up to the centre rather than down to their local constituents. After 1960 when the revolutionaries shifted to open conflict, the real chance to devolve more autonomy to district administrators had passed because the province was locked into a tight military command system. The final district re-organisation in 1966 to create Rach Kien district in an attempt to maintain control in the east of Long An was futile (Map 2.6). The creation of a new district to act as a buttress in a countryside dominated by revolutionaries was only a reactionary band-aid measure that heightened confusion, but did not fix any fundamental military or political problems for the GVN in Long An.219

219 In mid-1966 the US and ARVN were maintaining a strong presence in the east of the province in an effort to stop the revolutionaries regaining this territory. At the end of 1966, Rach Kien district was created by annexing five villages from Can Duc and one village from Can Giuoc. The US advisors, Vietnamese district chief and security personnel claimed that the area had been pacified but it had not. Arriving in Rach Kien in December 1966, Daniel Ellsberg reported that it was far from being pacified. Demonstrative of the confusion that lay in the wake of another district re-organisation, in Ellsberg’s memoirs he is confused about the status of Rach Kien as he interchangeably refers to it as both a village and district. Ellsberg, Daniel, *Secrets. A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc, 2002), pp.143-166.

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The dramatic events of the Tet offensive launched against the southern Vietnamese regime at the end of January 1968 had significant repercussions for both sides in the conflict. The initial shock of revolutionaries laying siege to major urban centres such as Saigon led to a military retreat from rural areas in order to safeguard the towns and cities. GVN and US attempts to regain the countryside from late 1968 spelt an abandonment of social development schemes such as the New Life Hamlets. Heavy-handed US military involvement also became scaled down with the final combat troops leaving Long An in October 1970. Instead the Phoenix programme was devised in 1968 with the objectives of identifying revolutionaries through intelligence and then attempting to destroy their political and military infrastructure. In common with the military and social schemes that preceded the Phoenix programme, the district
centre remained both the launch pad and operational centre for US and GVN personnel.

By 1970, the district centres in Long An were even more isolated from surrounding villages. Even villages that were considered under GVN control (and therefore in closest geographical orbit to the district centres) had highly dislocated relationships to the district government. Race recounts that

Despite considerable "command emphasis" from Saigon that district officials "pay attention to the wishes" of their village chiefs, the haughty and sometimes contemptuous attitudes of earlier days persisted in Long An in 1970. Complained one village chief in Can Giuoc district in the summer of 1970: "If I suggest [to the district chief] a punishment for a cadre in my village, nothing happens; if I suggest a promotion or a commendation for a particularly hard worker, it is ignored just the same. Though village officials had plenary authority to conduct military operations, "We have to notify the district in advance of an operation; the district chief immediately radios back that we can go on the operation if we want, but if we get into trouble, don't expect re-enforcements, artillery or medical help for the wounded." Thus since control over career incentives and over military resources still rested with the district...paper grants of authority to village officials were in practice hamstrung.

For all intents and purposes, the vital interface between central government and the grassroots had been lost. Central government policies and decisions could penetrate as far down to the district but no further, and the informal working relationships between the district government and village council were dislocated beyond repair. To invert an earlier metaphor, district governments in Long An sat like fish out of water.

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The immediate aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive for the revolutionaries in Long An was also striking. They sustained the highest number of causalities of all provinces during the three phases of Tet. Some revolutionary histories of Long An suggest that this was the darkest period in the province’s revolutionary history. Their very existence was in doubt. Other local histories claim that whilst the revolutionaries suffered severe setbacks, the political and administrative infrastructure that had been in place since 1954, was still intact and continued to be supported by the local people in most villages and hamlets. US intelligence supported the latter case and considered Long An to be largely still under revolutionary control at the close of 1968. The revolutionaries had faced similar dangers at the end of the 1950s and had been able to stage a comeback and this time was no different. Many US and official communist histories credit the role of northern troops (NVA) in sustaining the momentum of the revolution in the Mekong Delta after 1968 but this provides only a military explanation to what was still also a social and political problem. The isolation of the GVN district centres and tenuous relations between their villages and hamlets gave greater latitude than ever for the revolutionaries to move through the countryside to strengthen and re-build their grassroots administrative-political infrastructure. The power structure of the NLF enabled local cadres to respond with initiative and versatility to opportunities in a flexible fashion rather than being encumbered by an inhibiting centralised command structure as the GVN had increasingly become.

The final years of conflict after the Paris Peace Accords in 1972 saw an incremental consolidation of revolutionary control throughout Long An. One local history claims that the revolutionary government in Thu Thua district felt confident enough to begin

221 Bao Chi Long An, 27 April 1976, p.4.
collectivised farming in some areas. Militarily the conflict had shifted to more central and mountainous areas of South Vietnam, which slowly linked up other areas throughout the country. Perhaps justifying the expedience of President Diem’s earlier district re-organisations, Duc Hue and Duc Hoa (in the GVN province of Hau Nghia) were the first liberated districts, these were what the revolutionaries regarded as Long An province. Five days later came the liberation of Moc Hoa district (which had become Kien Tuong province in 1956). Tan An town was officially liberated at 2pm on 30 April 1975. The interim military administration in Tan An was established on 2 May. South Vietnam was at last united into one country. The dilemma of GVN central control of Long An had been resolved in favour of the revolutionary forces.

Conclusion

In 1956 neither the GVN nor the revolutionaries could claim to control Long An province. By 1960, however, the revolutionaries had wrested control of many of the villages and hamlets from the GVN. In those intervening years the GVN government had a real opportunity to create a functioning local government that could serve the interests of villagers and townspeople. But it failed. President Diem had tried to stamp his authority on the Mekong Delta and Long An in particular by re-designating the provinces and districts and then appointing loyal outsiders to run these units. He also curtailed the authority and powers of the village councils through Ordinance 57a, which despite later efforts to reinvigorate villages, remained in effect until 1975. These changes resulted in an enhanced role for the district government, which the

central government tried to use to control the rural areas through imposed programmes, such as the agrovilles and strategic hamlets.

By the mid 1960s, the district governments had become little more than island fortresses in the countryside, staffed by soldiers rather than civilian officials and increasingly remote from lower levels of government. The appointment of outsider's dependent on satisfying higher levels of authority rather than the local constituents also meant remoteness from the rural population, they were in theory, supposed to serve.

Crippling both the district level government and technical services of the GVN was a political system that sought social and political control in the rural areas by passing policy down from on high rather than taking into account the importance of adaptation to local needs. These policies stood in sharp contrast to those of the revolutionaries in Long An. Out of necessity and design, the NLF power structure allowed for the play of local initiative at a grassroots level. Importantly, cadres in the revolutionary village or district administration were always native to the area and known to local people. The village party cell was considered the most important administrative echelon. The district level of administration played a supervisory role for these lower administrative levels and, to borrow an earlier analogy, was the transmission belt between lower and upper levels in the revolutionary administration.

By May 1975, Long An had a new central government that would orchestrate its own organisational adventures in district government. Many of the southern revolutionary strategies, such as the importance attached to grassroots cadre's own initiative in
decision-making were quickly jettisoned. Hanoi would commit some of the same mistakes as the GVN in overbearing centralised control. But local power in Long An, underscored by a bedrock of southern revolutionary experience, would provide a worthy adversary to unpopular central government control.

The Government of the Republic of Vietnam officially ceased to exist on April 30th 1975 when the flag of the Provisional Revolutionary Government was raised over the Presidential Palace in Saigon, although the inhabitants of Long An already had some experience living under revolutionary government prior to this time. With a change of regime came a radical overhaul in the political system in the southern half of the now reunified Vietnam. Despite that change, there was some continuity in district-centre relations between the pre-1975 and post-1975 regimes. Similar to the GVN, the government in Hanoi sought to centralise power and pass policy down to rural cadres. One of the central government's first steps to consolidate power and influence in the rural areas was to re-configure district units. Like his pre-1975 counterparts in South Vietnam, the Communist Party's general-secretary, Le Duan, also saw the district as the crucial interface between the state and its citizens at the grassroots level, and as such the place where the so-called "three revolutions" – in production, technology and culture – would take place. The difference between the two regimes was the greater significance given to district reform. The new regime elevated "organisational adventures" of district government to a new plane, envisioning super districts that

224 The Party administrative structure had been in place since 1954 in Long An. In 1976, the provincial Long An newspaper (Bao Chi Long An) published a series of articles recounting a detailed history of the individuals who had run the revolutionary administration in Long An from 1954 to 1975. These accounts correspond closely with documents that were found on captured or dead revolutionaries at the time. See (respectively) "Que Huong cua moi nguoi Dan danh gia va xay dung," Bao Chi Long An, 21 April 1976; "Ben Luc tu khi co Dang," Bao Chi Long An, 15 May 1976; Captured Party documents, part of Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilm reel 2, (Australia National University Library). In this chapter I have made an exception to the footnote citations found in the rest of the thesis. Since I used the Long An newspaper (Bao Chi Long An) so extensively, I will quote the full title of each article in order to give a clear idea of the terminology being used by journalists and officials at that time.

225 Vietnam was not officially re-unified until the all-Vietnam National Assembly declaration in July 1976 when the country was re-named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV).
would have economic and political powers sufficient to “solve the problems of agricultural productivity, state procurement and accumulation for local development.”

This chapter will address three main themes regarding central regulation versus local initiative in Long An between 1975 - 1986. First, I will look at elements of continuity and change between the two regimes. The most notable point of convergence was the attempt to build a highly centralised polity in Vietnam. The clear divergence between the pre-revolution and post-revolution governments was that local officials at district level and below were now native rather than outsiders. Second, I will analyse the attempts by the new regime to impose land reform and agricultural collectivisation in Long An by passing policy directives down to the province, district and commune for execution. These polices were unpopular and ran contrary to the interests of most local people. In this context I explore what it means to be a “good cadre” after 1975. Did it mean aligning with local people in their preferences to rebuff and dilute new socialist polices on land reform and collectivisation? Or was a “good cadre” a foot-soldier who faithfully implemented orders from above? My research suggests that many district cadres found this a difficult dilemma to resolve but they were often able to find ways to use their initiative to stall or subvert the land reform and agricultural collectivisation programmes in Long An. The final theme that I will explore in this chapter is the district building campaigns that were promoted


227 In Brantly Womack’s theory of a Quasi-Democratic State, a “good cadre” before victory was one who was close to the masses but in the environment of post-revolutionary authoritarianism, the practical meaning of a good cadre was one who fulfilled his assigned tasks. Womack, Brantly, “The Party and the People: Revolutionary and Postrevolutionary Politics in China and Vietnam,” World Politics, Volume 59, No.4, 1987, pp.479-507, p.501.

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Chapter Three: Socialist Organisational Adventures

throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These campaigns present a complex dimension in regard to centre-local relations during this period. Under the guidance of Le Duan, the districts were supposed to evolve into powerful entities that could direct and control the very policies on land and agricultural reform that local people and cadres were trying to forestall.228

**Continuity and Change Between the Republic of Vietnam and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam**

I suggest that practical rather than ideological continuities existed between the two regimes in efforts to centralise power and further penetrate the rural areas. Both the GVN and the SRV, (after July 1976), pursued strategies that would align the Mekong Delta provinces more closely with the policy preferences of the central leadership. Very few scholars have highlighted these points of continuity across the revolutionary divide. Instead the dramatic and enthralling ascendancy of the communists in twentieth century Vietnam captured the imagination of many scholars and resulted in empirical and theoretical research focused on the trajectory of the communists before and after victory. This attention helps to disguise the communist government’s rightful place on the historical political continuum in Vietnam where new rulers have traditionally used the state hierarchy to “concentrate even more power at the centre.”229

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228 District reform had been on the agenda since the late 1960s and some pilot districts had already been established in the Red River Delta at that time. District building represented state strengthening but served two very different purposes in the north of Vietnam and the Mekong Delta. In the north, a stronger district government aimed to check what Christine White termed as a “re-flowering of local autonomy” in the villages: White, Christine, “Vietnam Develops its Road to Socialist Development,” *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, 87, December 1982, pp.2-8, p.4. This research only examines the Mekong Delta and Long An province where district government was intended to strengthen commune government and advance a largely unwilling peasantry towards large-scale collectivisation.

There are a number of theories that seek to conceptualise the evolution of the pre and post-revolutionary state in Vietnam. Whilst they have a different analytical standpoint from my own, they help us to understand the interplay between central regulation and local initiative in the period from 1975 – 1986. In Brantly Womack’s finely crafted theory of a quasi-democratic-system (QDS), he first introduces two popular theories that seek to explain the degeneration of mass-regarding politics after the revolutionary victory. The first is the Organisational Weapon model. He quickly refutes the "diabolism" of this concept which depicts the communist party as an alien manipulator of the masses.\textsuperscript{230} Then Womack introduces the "all too human" capacity for a state to slip into a Bureaucratic Oligarchy. He suggests, however, that this model is flawed because "its very universality limits its specific appropriateness for popular revolutionary regimes."\textsuperscript{231} He suggests instead that the underlying logic of political change between revolutionary and postrevolutionary politics can be best explained by his theory of a QDS. In this model revolutionary victory is the fulcrum of political change where "upon victory, the environmental imperative for mass-regarding politics is lost, and the authoritarian internal structure of the party will tend to assert itself."\textsuperscript{232} Womack says that after the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, the "masses lost clout with the party as a whole and with individual cadres that they had during the revolution."\textsuperscript{233} The vital difference between the pre and post revolutionary contexts was that the revolutionaries needed the masses to ensure a victorious outcome of their cause. After victory, however, the party had the monopoly of power and had

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ibid}, p.483.
  \item \textit{Ibid}, p.486.
  \item \textit{Ibid}, p.481.
\end{itemize}
considerably less incentive to woo or oblige the preferences of the masses. I contend that this model does not accurately depict the relationship between the people and the party-state in Long An after 1975. It also does not help explain the integral role of rural party-state cadres in driving change in the countryside.

The QDS model is also limited by the over-simplistic depiction of the interactive relationship between the masses on the one hand, and the party on the other. In reality, many grassroots party-state cadres in Long An were not conduits or supporters of the new policies on land and agriculture espoused in Hanoi. During the American war, many of these cadres had risked their lives for the revolution. Afterwards, many increasingly felt their ideals of a better life for local people had been betrayed by the policies of the SRV central leadership in Hanoi. Consequently, some local officials remained closer to the masses than to the party-state system to which they also belonged. This resulted in local officials sometimes conspiring with people to adapt or resist central government polices on land reform and collectivisation.

The disjuncture between grassroots cadres in Long An and those at higher echelons of the party-state system was further exacerbated by long standing social and cultural differences between north and south. These regional differences had festered during the American occupation and engendered a sense of resentment on the part of many southerners to the new government in north Vietnam. This theme is explored more fully in the following sections but I have introduced it at the start to demonstrate the fragmented under-belly of the grassroots party-state in Long An which was a far cry from the monopolistic and dominating party painted in Womack’s postrevolutionary state.
From 1975 to 1986, collaboration to keep the central government at arms length was not static in time or place in Long An and impulses to resist or just cope with socialist land reform and collectivisation policies ebbed and flowed. The central-local dilemma explored in this chapter is the central government’s efforts to engineer strong new districts to ensure the effective implementation of central directives. These efforts were blind to the realities of life in the districts in Long An. Throughout the late 1970s and 80s, there is a clear contestation between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Ultimately using districts to implement unpopular central government policies failed in the Republic of Vietnam and would fail again under the Socialist regime. However, a vital difference between these failures was the role of grassroots and district cadres after 1975 who were now from the district, rather than outsiders. In many instances these officials considered the needs and wishes of their local constituents rather than enforcing unpopular mandates from above. Therefore in contrast to GVN local officials, many new cadres were loyal insiders rather than loyal outsiders.
Political Administration in Long An After Reunification

The authority of the revolutionary government, like the GVN government before it, waxed and waned with the dynamics of the conflict. However, despite some experience of revolutionary governance, Long An was not prepared for a smooth transition of power. The fluidity of the political situation in April 1975 was partly created by the speed of Saigon's capitulation, leaving Hanoi unprepared for the task of assimilating southern Vietnam into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

From May 1975 to July 1976, the north of Vietnam remained the DRV and the south was known as the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG). This period was a transitional stage when the communist leadership “displayed a certain amount of groping as it attempted to formulate new policies for the South.”234 In 1975, there was some sensitivity to southern sensibilities and the south's possible opposition to the sudden imposition of a northern socialist development model. William Duiker, amongst others, suggested that the leaders in Hanoi initially planned a separate government in the south.235 There was also some recognition in the north of the social changes and regional distinctions that had evolved in the southern half of Vietnam. In the north, most attention was given to negative influences, such as corruption, prostitution and capitalist excesses spawned by American involvement in the south. In northern discourses during this period, there seems to be a belief that it was the task of the north to conduct a civilising mission in the south.

The greatest contribution to the wiping out of the taints left by the old regime, of course, has been made by the practical

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235 Ibid, p.419.
reforms and social and cultural measures already put into effect by the revolutionary administration. The society of south Vietnam today can be likened to an immense marsh in which lotuses are gradually overcoming the stink of decay with their fresh colours and sweet smell.\(^{236}\)

At the end of 1975, Truong Chinh dispelled any lingering reservations that may have existed amongst the collective leadership in regard to the fate of southern Vietnam. He pronounced that the differences between the north and south were only “conditional and temporary” and that the similarities between the two regions were “basic and decisive”.\(^{237}\) This questionable conclusion cleared the way for the formal re-unification of Vietnam. The first milestone on this path was an election for the new all-Vietnam National Assembly in April 1976. At the close of the first session of the National Assembly in July 1976, Vietnam was officially declared a unified country and re-named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). The assembly also confirmed the following leadership positions: First Party Secretary as Le Duan, National Assembly Chairman as Truong Chinh, and Premier as Pham Van Dong. These candidatures reconfirmed the influential role of the communist party and northern leadership at the highest echelons of power. If there was any doubt left regarding the development of southern Vietnam, this was dispensed by Le Duan. In a political report to the assembly he stressed that “we [the North Vietnamese] will continue to lead this half on the road to socialism.”\(^{238}\)


The question as to who would staff the new party and state apparatus in the south was an early problem for the new regime. The local network of southern cadres had been significantly depleted through the American and GVN Phoenix programme during which many revolutionaries were killed. Furthermore, the modus operandi of secrecy, which had been a pre-requisite of fighting the war, had sown mistrust amongst cadre at different levels of the revolutionary movement's hierarchy. In response to these issues and Hanoi's desire to take an active lead in advancing the south to socialism, senior positions in the provincial administration in 1975-1976 were given to northern cadre or southerners who had recently returned from the north. According to Melanie Beresford, this policy created a "third force" of discontented southerners who had been denied the positions they thought they deserved. In the district governments of Long An, however, the chairmen of the People's Committees and directors of the local state offices were native to the district. The revolutionary principle of local people for local positions was honoured.

The basic administrative structure changed little after reunification. The province (tinh) - district (huyen) - commune (xa) - hamlet (ap) configuration remained. Provincial level government retained the strongest linkages to central government, and centre-provincial relationships were strengthened by the presence of northern cadres in senior provincial positions. Conversely, the provincial leadership was quite...

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239 Douglas Pike used "reliable reports" to estimate that in 1976 there were 500,000 northerners doing administrative, military, and mass organisation work in the south: Pike, Douglas, "Vietnam during 1976: Economics in Command," Asian Survey, Volume 17, #1, January 1977, p.36.
241 The importance of having the district administration staffed with local people and thus staying true to the principles held prior to victory was stressed at an interview with the Vice Chairman of the Peoples Committee of Duc Hoa district: Interview in Duc Hoa district, Long An province, September 2002.
242 The term xa is now used to denote the level of administration between the district and hamlet. The term village will no longer be used.
aloof from the grassroots, especially from far-flung districts in the Dong Thap Muoi region in the west of the province. At the lowest tiers of administration, the communes and hamlets were quite fractured and artificial entities. Many hamlets and communes had been disbanded, reorganised and divided during the war. Other communes had experienced mass migration from outsiders such as Catholic families from the north in the 1950s and people fleeing the escalating violence of the conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. Some hamlets and communes had long experience of revolutionary government and socialist policies prior to 1975. Other areas had very little experience of revolutionary control. This confusion was deepened after victory when the central government instigated a policy of creating New Economic Zones (Vung kinh te moi). In order to alleviate the pressure of bloated cities, particularly Saigon, the SRV government encouraged people to carve out new lives for themselves in the countryside. The government declared inhospitable and war ravaged areas to be virgin land where people could settle and farm. In 1975, Long An received 290,000 city dwellers who joined New Economic Zones (NEZ's) in Duc Hue and Moc Hoa districts.243 These new settlers in Long An created an extra administrative burden for commune leaders.

The district level was a vital link between the province and lower levels. Unlike provincial leaders above, district leaders were native cadres and consequently more embedded in the lives of rural people. These qualities could also help bring order to the communes and hamlets where land reform and agricultural collectivisation would take place. Despite this strategic administrative position, the district still had few formal economic or executive powers at its disposal in the late 1970s.

In the now re-unified Vietnam province, People’s Councils and People’s Committees replaced district and commune chiefs. As directly elected entities, the People’s Councils were in theory “the supreme authority at each level of local government.”

In practice, however, the People’s Committees were more powerful units of government. Symbolising their status were the large edifices built to house the People’s Committee in each district town and in Tan An, Long An’s provincial capital. And at the apex of each committee was the communist party, personified by the committee chairperson, who invariably was a ranking local party member.

Also established quickly in Long An was a network of mass organisations, each with a vertical command structure from Hanoi down to the communes. The organisations’ purpose was to mobilise support for party and government policies and gauge and relay the sentiments of key sectors of society back to the policy makers. Mass organisations represented specific societal groupings such as women (Hoi Phu Nu), youth (Hoi Thanh Nien), and farmers (Hoi Nong Dan). David Elliott has described in detail how cadres and normal members were recruited into these organisations in My Tho province in the early 1960s. Elliott indicates that there was no set policy to recruitment and it was managed in accordance with local need and conditions in each hamlet and village in My Tho. I cannot clearly determine the recruitment process for the mass organisations in Long An during the early 1960s but it is possible that many grassroots cadres of the mass organisations and even the party-state apparatus

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were ill-prepared to administer their constituencies in accordance with the northern model of socialism.

Line ministries in Hanoi such as those for agriculture, health, education, finance and security also operated on a vertical command structure. National offices of the ministries in Hanoi made decisions and passed them down the chain of command in accordance with the principles of democratic centralism. The centralised nature of the SRV’s structure was similar to how the GVN had governed Long An. The salient difference, however, was the role of the communist party which formulated and executed policies emanating from the line ministries.

Party cells and committees existed in all administrative levels of Long An. The party was also prominent in state and mass organisations. Consequently, knowing where the party ended and the state began is difficult. This situation gave rise to observations that the party tended to “devour” the state offices and mass organisations, and the latter were “little more than extension of the Party’s power.” Advocates of the dominating state theory such as Gareth Porter, William Turley and Brantly Womack, suggest that the party decided, led and executed all state affairs in accordance with the policy preferences of senior party members. This left little, if any space, for the influence of external forces. Whilst there is merit in this view, its weakness is that it

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presumes the single party line is adhered to at all levels, from Hanoi downward. Certainly northern-born and northern-trained cadres in Long An would be versed in policy emanating from the party’s Central Committee in Hanoi. Local revolutionaries in Long An who had assumed state and party positions throughout the province were less well informed and not necessarily willing to adhere to directives from above.

In late 1975, there were signs of friction in some commune governments in Long An. The newspapers reported instances where officials were failing to attend meetings or were divided over party policy and did not adhere to organisational principles. 249 This malaise at a grassroots level was met with concerted efforts from the provincial level to reform and to some extent, purge the local party apparatus. It was reported that between October and November 1975, the provincial government was purging bad elements from the commune and district administrations and that self-criticism meetings were taking place throughout the province. 250 Party building increasingly concentrated on retiring veteran party members from office and replacing them with younger candidates. These events taking place in Long An during 1975-1976 mirrored the wider picture in southern Vietnam where the “press abounded with comments about untrained cadres (not understanding the class struggle in the new situation), bureaucratism, isolation from the masses...and various other diseases common in a society in transition to socialism.” 251

The media in Long An portrayed party and state building campaigns in two ways. Firstly, the campaigns attempted to bring better skills into local government by

recruiting and training new cadres rather than relying on unskilled, old revolutionaries. In tandem with rejuvenating the local party and state, the campaigns established political training schools throughout the province. By November 1975, 300 key cadre had received political and government training. News accounts often used the term renovation (doi moi) to impress upon people that a thorough makeover was taking place. Secondly, the campaigns attempted to cleanse local government of “bad elements” (phan tu xau). Although an ambiguous term, it likely encompassed many veteran cadres who simply disagreed with the new realities of life in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, or who had a hard time making the transition from war to peacetime. Possibly this made them bad implementers and conduits of new party policy but it may also have meant that they prioritised local needs over central policies on land and agricultural reform.

Self-criticism campaigns and party purges were only partial solutions to mobilising compliance to the new regime. The government-controlled media in Long An initiated what Womack termed a “revivification of revolutionary behaviour.” Using slogans that had previously spurred people to fight for the revolution, the media implored people to support new policies. Regarding New Economic Zones and agricultural policies, newspapers carried stories telling people to now begin their “fight” and “struggle” against nature. Furthermore, according to the media, people didn’t simply join the collectives; they were “liberated” into the collectives. This campaign had strains of voluntarism and triumphed the belief of sheer will over practicalities.

The party poet, To Huu, was also quoted to inspire farmers to triumph over nature and

use their bare hands to turn rock and gravel into rice.\textsuperscript{255} William Turley interprets this practice as an “attempt to maintain a high level of mobilization in support of non-military objectives.”\textsuperscript{256} I suggest that “revivification” was not only a tactic of the party-state to spur people to re-build the countryside and advance to socialist means of production. Some ex-revolutionary grassroots cadres in south Vietnam also continued to use military jargon to describe the reform process after 1975. This indicates that some revolutionary cadres were still grappling with the transition from war to peacetime. A northern official who was making a tour of the Mekong Delta in 1976 described this situation:

We were met in Binh Chanh Village by a woman of about forty who introduced herself as secretary of the Party committee...Mrs Thanh had for some years led this village which was one of the first to rise in 1960. Still a girl at the time she joined a guerrilla unit when Binh Chanh was occupied by puppet troops who set up a dozen posts in the various hamlets of the village, Mrs Thanh’s guerrilla unit had to take upon themselves perilous and manifold tasks...Mrs Thanh sprinkled her phrases with military terms: attack, counter-attack, front, tactics, etc, even when she spoke of problems of production she was responsible for. When I told her of my notice she smiled “Habit, you know,” she said, “We’ve fought for so long. But, now, the production battle is indeed tougher.”\textsuperscript{257}

These mass mobilising campaigns, which continued well into the late 1980s, also constantly encouraged people to fight for the victory of fulfilling production quotas. Targets and quotas were set for each district and there was a strong element of competition (\textit{thi dua}) among communes and districts to meet these goals. To inspire higher levels of production, campaign leaders promoted district rivalry and played on

\textsuperscript{255} “\textit{Ban tay ta lam nen tai ca co suc ngoi soi da cung thanh com}.” Cited in “Day manh cung co xa xay dung duoc cac vung kinh te moi,” Bao Chi Long An, 4 September 1976.
people's local patriotism and revolutionary credentials. The provincial newspaper regularly published tables to highlight where the districts stood in achieving their assigned goals. Pressure was maintained through naming and shaming under-achieving districts. This practise also served to highlight early on the district as a distinct administrative entity under the new regime of the SRV.

Re-Designating the Districts in Long An

District re-organisation began in 1975. The stated aim was to "create a new situation in Long An." In fact it mainly restored the designations and territorial integrity of the province as it existed in 1956. The province of Hau Nghia was dissolved and the districts of Duc Hoa and Duc Hue were returned to Long An. The three communes that had been annexed from Duc Hoa to create Duc Hue in 1959 were also returned to Duc Hoa district. Rach Kien, which had become a district in 1966, was subsumed once more into Can Duoc district. In 1976, Kien Tuong province was dissolved and re-joined to the province under its original district name of Moc Hoa. And Binh Phuoc district was again re-named Chau Thanh. These changes suggest a respect for local traditions that the re-organising efforts of the GVN regime had undermined.

The Fourth National Party Congress in December 1976 declared that the districts would be reformed into strong agro-industrial units that would link the rural economy to the national one. The most immediate effect of this plan in Long An was the amalgamation of districts into larger units. In 1977 Ben Luc and Thu Thua districts were re-designated as Ben Luc and Thu Thua respectively.

259 These villages were An Ninh, Loc Giang and Hiep Hoa.
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were merged to form Ben Thu district. And Tan Tru and Chau Thanh merged to create Tan Chau district, which was subsequently re-named Vam Co district. The following year, Moc Hoa was divided into two districts, Vinh Hung and Moc Hoa. These changes are illustrated in Map 3.1. Ben Thu, Vam Co and Vinh Hung emerged as ‘model districts’ (huyen trong diem). Henceforth the province was informally divided into three clusters, each with a model district that would act as experimentation site for new directives and policies that other districts could learn from and replicate. This has some parallels with the creation of Duc Hue district in 1959 which was used as the first experimental site for the agroville project in Long An. Having experimental sites also was a way for further changes led by example. As we shall see, the difficulty with this approach was that resources were spread unevenly across the districts. This served to heighten geographic regionalism amongst the eight districts in Long An province.


262 In the case of Ben Thu and Vam Co the decision to formally amalgamate and rename these districts was really just formalising the de facto revolutionary administrative system in place since 1960. Captured revolutionary documents in Long An during the 1960s refer to activities in Ben Thu and Vam Co rather than the districts recognised in the GVN regime. See Jeffrey Race Private Papers, Microfilms 1-3, (Australia National University Library).


Land reform was central to communist and revolutionary discourse. Truong Chinh, one of the party’s prominent ideologues, wrote in the early 1960s “In an agricultural country such as ours, in speaking of people’s happiness, we must speak of improvements of the peasants’ life, particularly when nearly 90% of the people are peasants. But how can the peasant’s living conditions be effectively improved if they have not enough land to till? The question of peasants happiness is basically one of giving land to the peasants.” Truong Chinh, Primer for Revolt (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1963), p.58.
already implemented some land reform prior to 1975. The new leadership, however, intended further land adjustment in the south to serve three purposes.\textsuperscript{267}

The first goal was to eradicate the vestiges of feudalism and bourgeoisie exploitation of the peasants and ensure greater equality in land distribution amongst the rural population. The southern reforms were predicated on the campaigns carried out in northern Vietnam during the 1950s where the remaining land of most landlords was confiscated and re-distributed. These objectives were formalised in July 1976 by resolution #254 which aimed to “eradicate all remaining feudal and colonial legacies in the agrarian structure and satisfactorily solve the agrarian conflict among the peasants by means of confiscation, requisition, readjustment and redistribution of land.”\textsuperscript{268}

In addition to trying to ensure a more equitable distribution, the land readjustment process in Long An included attempts to increase state control over rural land usage. This does not relate directly to organising people into collective means of production but rather dictating to the villagers what purpose local land was going to be used for. As we will see in the following section, farmers in Long An particularly sought to subvert this aspect of the reform. The final goal of land reform was intrinsically linked to the first two objectives. Once land was more equitably distributed and organised, then southern agriculture could advance to a collectivised agricultural system.

\textsuperscript{267} The terms, “land reform”, “land readjustment”, and “land adjustment” will be used interchangeably to refer to the general process of land reform policies in the south.

The desire among many Vietnamese for equality in land distribution during the colonial experience in Cochinchina was plain. French trade and governance policies had reduced a greater part of the population in the Mekong Delta to landless peasants and tenant workers. This condition had helped give momentum to the revolution in the first place. After 1945, however, the Viet Minh and later the NLF, enacted far reaching land reforms in southern Vietnam. Using statistics provided by the NLF, Ngo Vinh Long has estimated that 50% of the total cultivated land in southern Vietnam was redistributed to the peasants from 1960 to 1965.\textsuperscript{269} At the end of 1968, this figure increased to 80%.\textsuperscript{270} In 1970, President Thieu instigated his own land reform campaign known as the Land-to-the-Tiller programme. In order to reduce large scale landlordism, the new policies set a limit of landholding to three hectares per cultivator. But the most significant part of the campaign was giving formal recognition to land that had already been redistributed to the peasants by the revolutionaries. As a result of these reforms, by 1975 there were a large proportion of middle peasants in the Mekong Delta. Melanie Beresford suggested that the land question had been “largely resolved” and “by the mid-1970s, the distribution of land ownership in the leading rice-producing area, the Mekong Delta, was fairly egalitarian.”\textsuperscript{271} In light of the significant transformation in landownership patterns in the Mekong Delta, and a southern “marked preference for private property,”\textsuperscript{272} it seems logical that many peasants had little incentive to participate in further land reform campaigns.


\textsuperscript{270} Ibid, p.284


Despite the impact of land reforms prior to 1975, a provincial account of the process in Long An suggests that unequal land ownership was still a serious problem in the province in April 1975. As the first step in land re-adjustment in Long An, the new government attempted to bring order to the confusing economic status of peasants. Five classes of rural people were identified: The Landlord class (dia chu) held in excess of 25 hectares and, as a general rule, rented their land rather than cultivating it themselves. This group composed 0.5% of the population in Long An in 1975. The second group was upper middle peasants (trung nong lop tren) who comprised 12.6% of the peasantry in the province. This group usually employed hired labour, lent money and rented out tools and animals. The third classification was middle peasants (trung nong) who constituted 51% of the peasantry and were the most populous class in Long An. The fourth group was poor peasants (ban nong) who had either no land, or insufficient land for their subsistence. They either borrowed money or served as hired labour when not working on their own plots. Poor peasants comprised 32% of the peasantry of Long An. The final classification was rural capitalists (tu san nong thon) who accounted for 4%. These people were engaged in non-agricultural activities such as usury, rice trading, and providing various commercial services.

It appears that there was no national survey of land ownership patterns until 1978 so the provincial government was responsible for determining these classifications.

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274 Ibid, p.337.
275 Ibid, p.337.
276 Ibid, p.337.
277 Ibid, p.337.
278 Ibid, p.337.
279 The first comprehensive study of the social structure of southern Vietnam was conducted by the Committee for Agrarian Reform and Transformation of the Southern Region and the General Office of Statistics in mid-1978. This survey used very similar categories to those used in Long An. See, Ngo Vinh Long, "Agrarian Differentiation in the Southern Region of Vietnam," Journal of Contemporary
dilemma for the new government was whether to legitimise the “reactionary policy of the puppet government” that had distributed land, which belonged to other peasants during the war who had now returned, expecting to re-occupy their land. Even in the early 1980s, the Long An Committee on Land Re-adjustment still complained about trying to resolve land disputes between middle peasants caused by the confusion arising from the land reform policies of the GVN.280 People who had transferred land titles to relatives to obscure the size of their actual landholdings further complicated the mélange of competing land claims. Consequently, government and party authorities had great difficulty in classifying people accurately and sort out who had what land. Many mistakes occurred. By 1981, party leaders admitted culpability in wrongly classifying some peasants.281

The process of trying to implement land reform in Long An can be broadly classified into two phases. The first phase began in 1976 and continued to the end of 1978. This period was initially marked by cautious enthusiasm, which slowly ebbed over the following years. The second phase from 1979 to the mid 1980s was a period of greater dislocation between official party policy on land reform and the strategies being pursued by grassroots cadres in Long An. In the early phase of reform, the provincial newspaper was publishing strident stories’ depicting a wave of land reform (cai tao nong nghiep) sweeping the province.282 One article proclaimed that 15,000 hectares of landlord land had been requisitioned and re-distributed by 1976.283 In the

Asia, Volume 14, #3, 1984, pp.283-305, p.289. It is difficult, however, to compare both sets of statistics since land reform campaigns had already been underway for some years by mid-1978.
282 The Vietnamese expression literally means agricultural reform. It is different from the one used in northern Vietnam (cai cach ruong dat) during land reform there in the mid 1950s.
same year it was claimed that the provincial authorities resolved 796 cases of illicit landholdings and were then able to redistribute 12,723 hectares of this land to poor peasants.\textsuperscript{284} It was also touted that by 1976, farmers were cultivating an average of 2.9 hectares and all veterans and people who sacrificed family for the revolution had been given land.\textsuperscript{285} These accounts give a distorted picture of the initial successes of land reform. Undoubtedly some wealthy landlords and rich peasants did yield some of their land to the state, motivated by benevolence, social justice, and persuasion. In order to encourage others to follow suit, their generosity was publicly recognised in the newspaper. Some land, however, was vacant. The owners had fled the country rather than take their chances under the new regime.

Some parts of Long An province in 1975 were vast tracts of barren, war-devastated, and uninhabited land. One such area was the Dong Thap Muoi region (Vinh Hung and Moc Hoa districts). Under mandate from the central government, the new provincial leadership was able to distribute this land to thousands of new settlers who were being pushed out of the cities. The provincial government also initiated its own internal migration programme. It persuaded peasants in the very densely populated districts of Can Giuoc and Can Duoc to migrate to Vinh Hung and Moc Hoa and offered the incentive of considerably larger land plots, averaging 9,000 – 10,000 square metres per person. Whilst many re-settlers had little illusion as to the harshness and difficulties of their new life in Dong Thap Muoi, they may well have been buoyed by the new government’s campaigning and a sense of revolutionary duty that continued even after the war had ended. Other re-settlers, such as former employees of the GVN and urban merchants who had little farming experience, may have had no choice in

the matter and were coerced to move to New Economic Zones in this area.\textsuperscript{286} There were some lucky exceptions where individuals were helped by local people to avoid forced re-settlement in the New Economic Zones. One such case was recorded by Nguyen Long:

> Every time I came I encountered a former lieutenant of the armed forces of the Republic of Vietnam in disreputable dress, carrying a bamboo yoke across his thin shoulders from which hung two baskets loaded with vegetables. This was how he earned money to feed his family. Looking at his bony face, my heart went out to him. After his release from re-education camp, rather than go to the new economic zone leaving his family behind, this man had asked for but was refused a porters license. Despite the government’s denial, some passengers mercifully hired him anyway. Eventually the authorities relented and gave him the licence.\textsuperscript{287}

The re-settlement of people in waste lands such as Dong Thap Muoi and in the New Economic Zones gave an early boost to the process of land reform in Long An. It helped to relieve the problems of over-population in the eastern districts of the province and increased the amount of cultivatable land. It was also an expedient way for the local party-state to penetrate and gain greater control of rural areas.\textsuperscript{288} Re-located persons, particularly those in the New Economic Zones, were in a weaker position to resist the new regime’s land and agricultural policy than well-established communities. New settlers were in an alien environment and were largely dependent

\textsuperscript{286} DTM has always been considered an inhospitable and isolated area. The land is prone to flooding and has a high saline content making cultivation particularly difficult. It was, and is, considered to be an area haunted by ghosts. One interviewee during my fieldwork summed up the superstitious power of this area by stating, “When people (in the south) just hear the three words Dong Thap Muoi, they have goose bumps.” (“Nguoi dan Nam Bo cho moi nghe ba tieng Dong Thap Muoi da thay on thay ngan ro”

\textsuperscript{287} Nguyen Long with Harry H. Kendall, \textit{After Saigon Fell: Daily Life Under the Vietnamese Communists} (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1987), p. 82.

\textsuperscript{288} Attention should be drawn to the fact that the NEZ’s and wasteland in Dong Thap Muoi were on the border with Kampuchea, which was increasingly hostile to Vietnam. It is possible, although I have found no definite evidence to prove the case, that the central authorities strongly encouraged Long An provincial authorities to develop these areas as a buffer zone against cross border threats.
on state inputs. They could not rely on the established networks that they may have had in their native communities. Douglas Pike’s assessment of the NEZ’s in 1976 was that “relocation (always by individual or family, never by familial or social groups) triggers a psychological chain reaction: first rootlessness, then alienation, then the offer of a new social system which, whatever else, is better than nothing.”²⁸⁹ As I will later elaborate in this chapter, for these reasons, these areas were earmarked for rapid development of agricultural collective organisations.

At the close of 1976, the local media began to tone down its assertions concerning the success and inevitability of reform. Land reform was now more commonly referred to as **dieu chinh ruong dat** which translates to the much milder ‘land adjustment’. There was also more candid reporting on the trajectory of reform. In 1980, four years after the promulgation of Resolution #254 on land reform, one provincial newspaper story admitted that huge inequalities still existed and said 28% of the population were landless (or practically landless) and 4% of the population occupied 12% of the land.²⁹⁰ Articles now appealed more to people’s charitable instincts and asked them to donate their land to others in the spirit of **xe com nhuong ao** (to share one’s rice and clothing),²⁹¹ and **la lang dum la rach** (the strong protect the weak).²⁹² Another concern seemed to be the preservation of stability in the countryside. A number of cadres in the provincial administration were quoted as saying that they believed it was wrong to take land away from middle peasants because it caused disunity amongst the

²⁹¹ The printed media in Long An and local people use this expression as I have cited it above but it is more commonly spelt as **se com nhuong ao**.
Community.\textsuperscript{293} By 1982, it was acknowledged that only 37 of 140 communes in Long An had redistributed land. \textsuperscript{294} The failures in Long An were common to the whole Mekong Delta region. By 1981, the process of readjustment was deemed “still unaccomplished”\textsuperscript{295} and 24.5% of peasants were still landless or had insufficient land.\textsuperscript{296}

**Local Resistance to Land Reform**

We know that land readjustment policies of the SRV mainly failed in the Mekong Delta. Vietnamese and foreign researchers have offered a number of explanations for this failure. Melanie Beresford and Ngo Vinh Long suggest that if the state could have provided small, critical resource adjustments such as the provision of technical and capital inputs, then some peasants would not have felt compelled to sell the land that had been given to them.\textsuperscript{297} Nguyen Sinh Cuc proposed that the “even approach” to land adjustment harmed the legitimate interests of rich farmers and caused great waste in the Mekong Delta.\textsuperscript{298} Quang Truong places greater emphasis on the government’s sensitivity to potential opposition to land reform from the southern peasantry. As a result, land readjustment policies were only “half measures” and differences in land holdings persisted.\textsuperscript{299} These are all valid explanations but they tend to distance us

\textsuperscript{293} “Chuyen ruong dat,” Bao Chi Long An, 10 September 1981.
\textsuperscript{294} “Ket qua buoc dau cua cong tac dieu chinh ruong dat,” Bao Chi Long An, 22 September 1982.
\textsuperscript{296} Lam Quang Huyen, Cach Mang Ruong Dat O Mien Nam Viet Nam (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat ban Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 1985), p.182.
from the everyday interaction between local people and local cadres as they sought to best cope with the new campaigns for land readjustment.

One important reason why the reforms quickly lost momentum in Long An was the collaboration between local people and officials to evade, or at times, subvert the process. These acts were not limited to “subtle shades of compliance” in an authoritarian regime. Nor was it a simple case of peasants enacting informal patterns of everyday resistance characterised “in truculence, in irony, in petty acts of non-compliance, in foot dragging...in the steady, grinding efforts to hold ones own against overwhelming odds.” Models depicting a dominating state or the impact of everyday forms of resistance do not fully capture the complex form of resistance in Long An. In particular, they do not pay sufficient attention to local officials who played crucial intermediate roles between national authorities and villagers.

Most cadres were faced with the dilemma of determining what it was to be “a good cadre” after 1975. Did this mean slavishly executing the policy passed down from above? Or did it mean trying to protect villagers’ interests at odds with those policies above? This was a dilemma that few local officials in the GVN had faced. Those earlier district officials, by and large, were outsiders. They were more readily concerned with protecting their position by towing the central government line. In the SRV, however, nearly all district and commune cadres in Long An were locals who had sacrificed a lot to improve the living conditions of villagers in their communities.

It was not easy for them to implement central policy that ran contrary to the

sentiments of their neighbours and friends. It was an unenviable position, particularly in the face of considerable local discontent with land reform.

It was impossible for me as an outside researcher in 2001, to observe or even capture the range of resistance that peasants may have exhibited after 1975. I have had to rely on retrospective accounts from informants and a careful study of the extant documents and newspapers. Peasant acts of resistance against land reform in Long An were sporadically mentioned in the provincial newspaper by 1978 and referred to as “running away from the land policy” (nong dan chay chinh sach ruong dat). After this time, discontent with the new land policies and in particular, land use policies, grew. A few examples of peasants’ resistance indicate that local cadres were also complicit in helping to subvert land reform in Long An.

In the early years of the campaign for land reform, Long An provincial authorities chose Ben Thu to be a model district. Leaders expected other districts to learn from Ben Thu’s successful implementation of land and other agricultural reforms. The district, however, was far from a paradigm of success. In 1981, peasants in one of the district’s communes, Huong Tho Phu, were buying and selling land. This practice was at odds with the official policy of ensuring an equitable distribution of land amongst the people. Also in a show of defiance against the official policy for them to grow paddy in specified areas, peasants were instead constructing ponds, vegetable plots, fruit gardens and houses. I interviewed farmers in this area twenty years later.

\[303\] “Cong tac cai tao nong nghiep o Long An,” Bao Chi Long An, 18 November 1978. This was the first article I found that used this expression to describe farmers’ efforts to circumvent the new policies on reform. Interestingly, a provincial agricultural cadre wrote it.

\[304\] “Viec giai quyet tinh hinh bien dong ruong dat o xa Huong Tho Phu,” Bao Chi Long An, 10 September 1981.

\[305\] In September 1976, Directive 235 CT/TW was issued which declared a freeze on all land transactions.
and they still speak of inappropriate state policies concerning land usage in their locale which is traditionally a fruit and sugar cane growing area. This example indicates that commune cadres may have been unable, or perhaps unwilling, to sanction local farmers who were violating land use policies. Once this situation had come to the attention of the provincial authorities, they sent teams to stamp out the violations. These teams organised public criticisms and classified violators into three categories. The “unintentional violators” were deemed to have transgressed state policy for innocent reasons. “Intentional violators” had purposefully contravened land policy for private gain. “Agitators” had actively encouraged other people to violate the land policy and oppose the regime. Whilst people were shamed and persecuted, none, including the agitators, were prosecuted. Instead the official solution to the problem was to advance more rapidly towards full agricultural collectivisation. Provincial authorities reasoned that once people were fully integrated into the collective system, they would no longer seek security through private household farming. Official rhetoric painted collectives as the panacea to people’s hard lives, similar to how the GVN’s leaders conceived agrovilles and New Life Hamlets one decade before.

Peasants in Can Giuoc district also violated land policies along lines similar to those in Ben Thu. In five of Can Giuoc’s communes, 437 families reportedly violated land usage polices by cultivating fruit gardens, fish farming and building houses on

306 These interviews were conducted in 2001-2002 after agricultural extension meetings in Ben Luc district. Ian Christoplos who was conducting research in Tra Vinh, Can Tho, An Giang and Song Be in 1993 and collected similar stories from farmers in these areas. Farmers he interviewed remembered being coerced by provincial state officials to grow unsuitable crops at that time. Unfortunately Christoplos does not tell us if the farmers tried to resist these policies: Christoplos, Ian, Paradigms, Policy and Privatization in Vietnamese Agricultural Extension (Uppsala: Working paper 275 of Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences 1995), pp. 67-68.

307 Ibid, pp 67-68.

land earmarked for agriculture. In 1981, the district and commune cadres held a meeting to discuss issues in land management in the district. These local officials decided that the best course of action was to preserve community unity at all costs. They agreed that these issues could be amicably worked out within the community according to reason and compassion (*cho co ly, co tinh*).\(^{309}\) Those peasants who were found to be using their land for illegitimate purposes were to be educated by persuasion (*giao due thuyet phuc*). According to the district land committee, 36% of peasants admitted the error of their ways but no further action was taken.\(^{310}\) These local cadres were willing to give semblance, rather than form, to the sanctioning of local people who were trying to subvert the prescribed policies on land usage. This was one way local officials could mediate the clash between official policy and local interests.

The two examples cited above suggest that farmers in these districts opposed the new land usage polices in their areas. They may also indicate that local officials sympathised with villagers' grievances and were reluctant to discipline those who tried to defy or manipulate these policies. These examples do not, however, prove that people opposed the first goal of land reform which was to create an egalitarian land holding pattern in the province. There is logic to the cases forwarded by Melanie Beresford and Nguyen Sinh Cuc that the established classes of middle and rich peasants would have few practical incentives to relinquish any of their land. We know very little about how they opposed this aspect of reform, but one way was to flout official policy on land transactions and increase their land holdings by buying land from newly enfranchised peasants who did not have the resources or know-how to

\(^{309}\) *Ibid.*
\(^{310}\) *Ibid.*
cultivate this land. Another way to circumvent this aspect of reform was to under report their land holdings to the local authorities. An enlightening article published in 1982 regarding taxation policy in Moc Hoa district indicates that this practice was widespread in the district.\footnote{"Chien dich thu thue va no o Moc Hoa," \textit{Bao Chi Long An}, 22 March 1982.} District officials admitted that local peasants had been misrepresenting the size of their landholdings since 1975. This small piece of evidence may hint at complicity between local officials and people to evade comprehensive land redistribution from the very beginning.

Five years after re-unification, little progress had been made in achieving the first two goals of land reform. In 1982, 28\% of peasants in Long An were either landless or did not have enough land for subsistence.\footnote{"Ket qua buoc dau cua cong tac dieu chinh ruong dat," \textit{Bao Chi Long An}, 22 September 1982.} This figure is slightly higher than the Mekong region as a whole which stood at 24.5\%.\footnote{Lam Quang Huyen, \textit{Cach Mang Ruong Dat O Mien Nam Viet Nam} (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat ban Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 1985), p.182.} Furthermore, the provincial land reform committee admitted that there were still wealthy landlords and very rich peasants throughout the province.\footnote{"Chuyen ruong dat," \textit{Bao Chi Long An}, 10 September 1981.} Farmers were also resisting, or at least, creatively manipulating policies on land usage. The best results for both aspects of land reform were in the Dong Thap Muoi districts due to large-scale resettlement programmes. Newspaper articles written by local cadres calling for a 'front mentality' and recognising prevailing inequalities, further encouraged resistance to land reform policies. This presented a clear dilemma for the central party state. How could reforms be enacted when some of the local party state was complicit in undermining them? The answer to this question came to Long An in 1982. Higher authorities removed the settlement of land disputes and violations from the jurisdiction of district government.

District organisations and government officials were allowed to report and advise but
only the provincial authorities were allowed to make rulings on such cases. National authorities considered land issues too important to be resolved below the province level.315

Agricultural Collectivisation

The introduction of agricultural collectivisation in 1976 was a fundamental part of the socialist transformation of southern Vietnam. This process was implemented in two waves. The first wave began in 1976 and ended in 1979 with a collapse of many of the collective organisations established during this period.316 The second stage started in 1979 and lasted until 1985 when “the authorities declared the process largely completed.”317 Official statistics in Long An indicate that 83% of all farming families in the province were involved in a collective organisation by this time.318 This figure contrasts with Ngo Vinh Long’s estimate that less than 25% of farming families in the Mekong Delta had joined a collective organisation by 1985.319 The general consensus, however, amongst scholars and Vietnamese authorities is that the collectivisation campaign failed in the Mekong Delta.

316 To avoid confusion I refer to all the different components of collectivisation as “collective organisations.” A description of the various forms of collective organisations is given later in the chapter.

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We know most about why a number of peasants in the Mekong Delta resisted collectivisation. These reasons, amongst others, were pre-existing patterns of reasonably equitable land ownership and a high level of commercialisation in agriculture, which diminished the economic incentives for farmers to stop private farming and join collective groups.\textsuperscript{320} The individualistic tendencies of southern farmers,\textsuperscript{321} and a general antipathy to the imposition of northern models of development also discouraged many farmers.\textsuperscript{322} Due to limited access to reliable primary data and field sites, less is known about how people were able to resist, or at least cope, with this programme on a daily basis. Ben Kerkvliet highlights a "dialogue or debate" between the national leadership and peasantry regarding the scaling back of the cooperatives in northern Vietnam.\textsuperscript{323} In this light, the incomplete implementation of collectivisation is not viewed as a failure of the central government but rather as a healthy indicator that the peasantry was able to act as "pivotal pressure group" moderating and reforming central government initiatives.\textsuperscript{324} Vietnamese sources have also cited the positive interaction between the grassroots and leadership as "a relatively harmonious combination of spontaneous reforms at grassroots level


\textsuperscript{321} Due to different development patterns and influences on the Mekong Delta, it is suggested that Mekong Delta peasants were more individualistic than northern peasants who had a long tradition of cooperative practises and communal land: Rambo, Terry, A Comparison of Peasant Social Systems of Northern and Southern Vietnam: A Study of Ecological Adaptation, Social Succession, and Cultural Evolution (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Centre for Vietnamese Studies, 1973), p. 285.


and decisive action of the highest political leadership.\textsuperscript{325} This state-societal interaction helped Vietnam avoid the worst excesses of forced collectivisation experienced in neighbouring Kampuchea and served to "thaw out dogmatic theories" and "shape a new system."\textsuperscript{326} This pattern of interaction was also taking place in Long An from 1976. I would suggest, however, that many grassroots cadres played a pivotal role in helping people resist collectivisation. Cadres may have done this unintentionally by failing to understand the new agricultural polices or lacking the necessary resources to implement the reforms in the first place. At other times, they colluded with local people to minimise the impact and implementation of the collectivisation process.

\textbf{The Tenets of Collectivisation}

The final goal of agricultural collectivisation in Long An was supposed to be a system in which people provided their labour and produce to a collective farm. In return, the collective procures agricultural inputs from state agencies and looks after the welfare of the farmers. Through this process, the state is able to control both the means of production and distribution. A well-functioning and mature collective farm was not a simple cooperative that involved groups of farmers collaborating and helping each other for certain purposes whilst maintaining their own land and equipment. Collective farming required much more, including surrendering fields and production decisions to the management committee of the collective organisation.


\textsuperscript{326} \textit{Ibid}, p.24.
According to Quang Truong, agricultural collectivisation in southern Vietnam was supposed to facilitate four basic needs. First was the socialist industrialization of the country. Second was the reorganisation of agriculture to large-scale production. Third was the eradication of any remaining legacy of exploitation in the rural areas. Finally, collectivisation was a means to consolidate the socialist system in order to contain threats from abroad.\footnote{Quang Truong, Agricultural Collectivization and Rural Development in Vietnam: A North/South Study [1955 – 1985] (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteitte Amsterdam, 1987), p.178.} These broad objectives were more finely honed to local circumstances in Long An. The development of collective organisations was portrayed as an integral means to develop war ravaged and waste land, particularly in the Dong Thap Muoi region of the province.\footnote{“Nong Truong o Tan Tru,” Bao Chi Long An, 25 June 1976; Personal interview with two Long An provincial officials in Tan An, January 2002.} The development of two NEZ’s in Moc Hoa and Duc Hue districts became intrinsically linked to establishing large collective organisations and the development of inhospitable areas. The local media also tried to impress upon local farmers that collective organisations were in their best interests because they could help overcome problems that could not be solved on a household level, such as pest control, irrigation and marketing.\footnote{“Ve hop tac va hop tac xa xua ong dan,” written reply to interview questions proposed to Mr Khuynh Diep (Long An journalist) February 2002.} The stress was on the practical benefits that people could enjoy if they joined a collective organisation rather than the ideological basis of the cooperative movement.\footnote{Also Duiker, William J, “Ideology and Nation-Building in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” Asian Survey, Volume 5, #5, May 1977, pp.413-431, p.415.} Underpinning these enticements was a popular slogan found in many newspaper articles in 1976 reminding people that they were now building a new countryside (\textit{xay dung nong thon moi}) and that 1976 was the year of Long An. These messages seemed to convey hopefulness and positive reconstruction after the years of turmoil and destruction.
One difficulty obscuring the analysis of collectivisation in southern Vietnam is the terminology used to describe the different stages of this process. The names of the various organisations vary between areas. As a result, there is no consensus in the secondary literature either.\textsuperscript{331} Quang Truong has brought order to this complexity by grouping the organisations into two types “according to their motives.”\textsuperscript{332} This approach is logical and shares commonalities with the terminology used by the Long An authorities and media in the 1970s and 1980s. In Truong’s classification, the first type of organisations were the Work Exchange Teams and Production Solidarity Teams (\textit{To van cong, doi cong va doan-ket san xuat}). The Long An provincial newspaper usually referred to both groups by the shorthand term of Exchange Groups (\textit{Doi Cong}). These groups were the first and most basic form of collective organisation established in Long An. Local cadres organised farmers from one hamlet to form work exchange teams and collectively purchase inputs from the state. The groups comprised approximately 50 – 60 peasants, 30 – 40 hectares of land, and were run under the management of a hamlet committee.\textsuperscript{333} These teams were essentially mutual aid groups and importantly, the means of production and the agricultural produce still belonged to the farmers. The distinguishing feature of the exchange groups was the role of the management cadres who were responsible for monitoring

\textsuperscript{331} For example, in reference to collectivisation in southern Vietnam (rather than the earlier campaigns in northern Vietnam), Nguyen Sinh Cuc and Chu Van Lam define the most basic collective organisations as “production groups” or “production teams” and the larger and more developed socialist organisations as “cooperatives.” Respectively, Nguyen Sinh Cuc, \textit{Agriculture of Vietnam, 1945-1995} (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House, 1995), p. 81; Chu Van Lam, “Doi Moi in Vietnamese Agriculture,” pp.151-163 in Turley & Seldon (eds), \textit{Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective} (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p.153. Douglas Pike referred to the basic organisations as “marketing and production cooperatives much like those elsewhere” and the most advanced as “true collectives”. He also acknowledged, “In the early stages there are an infinite number of elements, variously termed production solidarity teams, work exchange teams, production cooperatives, joint farm machine brigades etc.” Pike, Douglas, “Vietnam in 1977: More of the Same,” \textit{Asian Survey}, Vol. 18 #1, January 1978, pp. 68-75, p.69.  
and guiding the political, social and cultural activities of the team. These cadres played a vital role in encouraging the political and collective mentality of the farmers so that they could advance to the next stage of collectivisation.

The second type of organisation depicted by Truong is the more advanced Agricultural Collectives. In theory, these groups were defined by “socialist characteristics in their organisations with virtually all means of production being collectivised and income distribution based on the work performed.”334 Small and medium Production Collectives were first established at this stage of collectivisation. The small production collective (Tap doan san xuat, TDSX) encompassed 30-50 hectares and 60-80 farmers. The medium production collective (Lien tap doan san xuat, LTDSX) was comprised of four small production collectives.335 The managers of the LTDSX were responsible for overall production planning and left the execution details resulting from these plans to the TDSX. The culmination of the development of agricultural collectives was the Agricultural Production Cooperative (Hop tac xa nang nghiep, HTXNN). In theory, the collectivisation of all the means of production in this organisation was absolute.336 The average scale of one HTXNN was between 150-300 hectares with up to 520 participating farmers.337 In accordance with the plans laid down at the 4th National Congress in December 1976, at the stage of agricultural collectives, the district administrative unit was to be the primary coordinating body.

335 Quang Truong does not distinguish between small and medium Production Collectives. I have made this distinction to reflect the information given to me during interviews with Long An provincial officials (in 2001 – 2002) and information provided to me in an unpublished manuscript regarding collectivisation in Long An province by a journalist, Khuynh Diep, “Ve hop tac va hop tac xa cua nong dan.”
337 Naturally the figures provided for participating farmers and land in the collective organisations only gives an approximate idea for the scale of the groups. In praxis the numbers differed from one area to another.
The campaign of building the districts in order to coordinate and develop collectivised agriculture is discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

The organisations described above represent approximate models for collective groups in southern Vietnam. In practice, however, cadres in Long An were able to develop models that better suited local circumstances. The latitude for local cadres in Long An to be able to use their initiative in developing collective organisations rather than following a central plan was given three impetus. The first was the confusion at the highest levels of national leadership as to how to proceed with collectivisation in southern Vietnam. In 1976, the year when collectivisation officially began, Douglas Pike observed no concrete plans emanating from the central leadership on the program:

The all important question in the agricultural sector has to do with collectivisation of southern farms...Official statements on the subject during the year back and filled – a *Hop Tac* theoretical journal article one month would suggest collectivisation was imminent, an article the following month would suggest it is not. Quite probably the issue is a high level doctrinal dispute, between ideologues advocating quick collectivisation in the name of doctrinal purity vs. pragmatists favoring a period of time during which time agricultural productivity – not dogma- is the guiding criterion for policy. At the year’s end it appeared the Politburo decision on collectivisation was that for the moment there would be no decision.338

The second impetus was local cadres who consciously let the policy on collectivisation drift by allowing local people to creatively adapt or subvert the process. The final impetus for adaptation was more unintentional than intentional. Some local cadres, particularly ex-revolutionaries, simply did not have sufficient

training or understanding of the new policies to be able to implement them successfully. This seemed to be a significant point of concern for northern officials who came south after 1975. One such cadre, Nguyen Khac Vien, recounted a meeting with the Party secretary of Ap Bac commune in 1976:

All the while we were talking, many people came to see him one to complain about a petrol attribution to his water pump; another to ask for a residential certificate; a third to ask how to share among the villagers the fabrics distributed by the State commerce, or what to do vis-à-vis a certain person who obstinately refused to declare his last crop. The direct and indirect aftermaths if the war were as complicated in a village as they were in the cities: these former militant guerrilla’s, who could not find time to learn and acquaint themselves with economic and administrative management, now assumed particularly heavy tasks [sic].

The following section will highlight that poor cadre management at a district and commune level would become a commonly cited reason for the poor functioning and disintegration of collective organisations in Long An.

Some scholars have observed that the first phase of collectivisation in southern Vietnam was marked by a cautious, gradual and flexible approach. The process was

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to proceed "step by step from bottom to top and from small scale to large scale."³⁴¹

The initial emphasis was building basic collective organisations such as work exchange and production solidarity teams.³⁴² This was to give time for southern farmers to appreciate the benefits of the new principles of collectivisation. Quang Truong observed that the program rested mainly on experimentation and the development of pilot models rather than concrete policy directives emanating from Hanoi.³⁴³ This analysis fits with the early media portrayal of collectivisation in Long An which focused predominantly on local stories featuring the development of basic collective organisations in different hamlets, communes and districts throughout the province. There appears to have been little effort to connect local events to the national collective movement. I found no stories that directly related Long An's collectivisation trajectory to the national target of achieving complete socialist transformation by 1980.³⁴⁴

had also been adopted in the process of collectivisation in northern Vietnam. This probably reflects a general modus operandi of the Vietnamese leadership to introduce reform slowly and on a 'learn-by-doing' approach. See, Moise, Edwin E, "Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam," Pacific Affairs, Vol.49, #1, Spring 1976, pp.70-92, p.88-89.


³⁴² This gradual pattern from basic to more complex was also followed in the north (1958-1959). Benedict Kerkvliet outlined a four-stage process. The first was the creation of labour exchange groups amongst neighbouring households. The second was the development of cooperatives comprised of all families in a village/hamlet (thon). At the third stage, several cooperatives at thon level were joined to form a larger cooperative. At the final stage, all the thon level cooperatives were amalgamated to form a commune (xa) cooperative. At each level of the process more land and draft animals were put under the management of the cooperative leadership: Kerkvliet, Benedict R. Tria, State – Village Relations in Vietnam: Contested Cooperatives and Collectivization (Monash University, Victoria: The Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Working Paper 85, 1993), p.16.


According to local histories of the province, Long An began experimenting with labour exchange teams prior to April 1975. These early efforts foreshadowed a continuing push to build collective organisations in the province before the policy was officially announced in 1976. The first labour exchange organisations were established in Moc Hoa district in late 1975. The district committee was praised for its policy in strengthening and reforming agricultural production in the district. In one commune, local cadres had organised an unspecified number of peasants into labour exchange groups for the purpose of irrigation work. This seems to typify the mutual aid-based nature of the early collective organisations where farmers were supposed to learn and appreciate the value of cooperation in large-scale agricultural initiatives.

By 1976, the campaign to develop labour exchange groups was in full swing; the province had an estimated 1,633 groups. The highest number and the greatest successes were recorded in the model districts of Vam Co and Ben Thu. Vam Co was particularly singled out for praise having created 500 labour exchange groups by 1977.

The work of building basic collective organisations was also in full swing in the New Economic Zone in Duc Hue district. By September 1976, My Thanh Bac commune had established fifteen labour exchange groups averaging 10 – 12 families per group. These groups seem to conform to the typical organisational pattern depicted

347 The mutual aid and cooperative nature of the group was stressed in the following terms, "lam cong tac thuy loi to chuc ba con vao cac to van doi cong tuong tro giup do nhau <<la lanh dum la rach>> de san xuat.”
349 "Xay dung va cung co doi doan ket san xuat;" Bao Chi Long An, 19 February 1977.
for labour exchange teams. The farmers continued to farm and own their own land but
the main agricultural tasks were allocated and supervised by the team management
committee consisting of five to ten cadres. The work was allocated by the
committee according to three classifications: strong workers (mainly able-bodied
men), weaker workers (older men, particularly old revolutionaries), and weak workers
(young and older women). It would seem that the role of the management cadres was
vital to the development of collective organisations in Long An. Officials and the
local party-state apparatus were supposed to be the role models or standard bearers
that local people would look up to and follow in the process of collectivisation. In My
Thanh Bac commune and others throughout the province, the chairman of the local
people’s committee and management cadres were usually praised for their hands-on
approach in undertaking the hard labour such as clearing and preparing waste and
war-ravaged land for cultivation. The management cadres were also responsible for
political education and disciplining of farmers who rejected the political line. It would
appear that the latter responsibility was not often adhered to closely. The labour
exchange teams were first and foremost voluntary organisations that peasants could
enter and leave as they wished. In the case of My Thanh Bac, local cadres could not
persuade the middle farmers to join the groups and could do little beyond imposing
moral sanction on seven families who chose to leave only one week after joining the
organisation. Other families took a more calculated approach to the new
organisations and sent their children to try out the system before they committed

351 One notable difference between the newly established NEZ’s and other areas in Long An was that
most farmers had recently arrived in the area and so most of the land had been distributed evenly by the
state. In this case, each family had received between 1.5 – 2 hectares. “Vung kinh te moi,” Bao Chi Long An,
4 September 1976.
352 The voluntary nature of collectives was stressed at the outset of the campaign by the national
leadership but this is not to say that in some areas cadres may have been rather zealous in their efforts
to build collective organisations. See Quang Truong, Agricultural Collectivization and Rural
353 “Vung kinh te moi,” Bao Chi Long An, 4 September 1976.
themselves.\textsuperscript{354} The entry and exit strategies available to farmers indicate that any efforts on the part of local officials to enforce collectivisation were haphazard or hamstrung.

From 1977 – 1979, Long An established 2,566 labour exchange and production solidarity teams involving 80,000 families in the province.\textsuperscript{355} Ben Thu district had 562 groups which represented almost a quarter of all groups established throughout the province.\textsuperscript{356} During this time, the provincial authorities also tried to move to the next stage of collectivisation. This was the establishment of small production collectives (\textit{tap doan san xuat}). The impetus to move to this level most likely came from the national leadership which issued a series of directives aimed at speeding up the process of collectivisation in the south. The three most significant directives were No. 29 (December 1977), No. 43 (April 1978) and No. 57 (November 1978), which called for extensive implementation of agricultural collectives in the south.\textsuperscript{357} These directives heralded rapid results in Long An. From 1977-1979, 295 TDSX were created throughout the province.\textsuperscript{358} In the southern region as a whole, an estimated 13,246 TDSX were established.\textsuperscript{359} These figures are impossible to verify and, as this chapter will later explain, many of these organisations existed in name only.\textsuperscript{360} The scope and activities of the TDSX varied across Long An. In the vast expanses of

\textsuperscript{354} "Vung kinh te moi," \textit{Bao Chi Long An}, 4 September 1976.
\textsuperscript{356} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{359} Lam Quang Huyen, Cach Mang Ruong Dat O Mien Nam Viet Nam, (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat ban Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 1985), p. 191.
\textsuperscript{360} For example, Melanie Beresford estimated that in 1979 50% of the production collectives existed in name only: Beresford, Melanie, \textit{Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society} (London: Printer Publishers Limited, 1988), p.120.
Dong Thap Muoi, the TDSX encompassed an average of 80 hectares with approximately 30 to 50 participating families. In the more densely concentrated districts, the TDSX were significantly smaller, averaging 25 hectares and 35 families. The TDSX did not just vary in form across the province. There was also differentiation between the districts in their efforts to implement these new agricultural organisations. In the model districts of Vam Co, Ben Thu and Vinh Hung districts, it would appear that more resources were devoted to the development of pilot schemes.\footnote{"Phong tro hop tac hoa nong nghiep o Long An," Bao Chi Long An, 17 September 1981.} This was particularly the case in regard to providing training for cadres in these districts. For example, in Vam Co district in 1979, 81 agricultural cadres were re-trained in the principles of implementing the TDSX and a further 132 cadres from the district party, government and mass organisations received training to help support the new policies on collectivisation.\footnote{"Huyen Vam Co phat trien hop tac hoa," Bao Chi Long An, November 1979.} Taking into account the higher number of agricultural collectives in this district and the levels of resources invested in training here, it may be assumed that the cadres in this model district were more rigorous in executing the policies on collectivisation than in other areas. National authorities later acknowledged that the policy of introducing collectivisation through pilot districts created an uneven distribution of effort and resources throughout the provinces.\footnote{"Tu Duong Xuan Hoi den Vinh Loi," Dai Doan Ket, 1 January 1986.}

By 1979, the process of collectivisation and, in particular, the implementation of TDSX in Long An was unravelling fast; 96 of the groups had collapsed and only 87 were deemed to be working in a satisfactory manner.\footnote{"Ve cong tac cai tao nong nghiep o Long An," Bao Chi Long An, 17 September 1981.} This situation was not unique to Long An. In the southern region, it was estimated that 6,000 TDSX were not
functioning properly and approximately 4,000 had disintegrated.\textsuperscript{365} Accordingly to Nguyen Sing Cue,

The movement was developing rapidly but not sustainable. The mistakes such as simplification, impatience, formality and showing off previously made in the north were then repeated in the south. As a result, many cooperative and production groups were subject to collapse immediately after their development, leading to a climax of collapse at the end of 1979 [sic].\textsuperscript{366}

The media in Long An was quite candid about the collapse of the collective organisations. It openly acknowledged that the development of collectivisation in Long An province had not been smooth sailing (phong trao hop tac hoa nong nghiep o Long An khong phai thuan cheo, xuoi mai).\textsuperscript{367} The list of explanations for this collapse is long. In broad terms, the failure was explained by cadres running before they could walk, that is, they attempted to establish TDSX before land readjustment had been fully implemented.\textsuperscript{368} This reason is commonly cited as one of the key contributors to the collapse of the TDSX in the Mekong Delta 1979.\textsuperscript{369} In Long An we have already seen that local cadres were unable, or perhaps disinclined, to requisition land from upper middle peasants. We have also seen in the examples of supposedly successful areas such as Ben Thu district and Vi Thanh Commune in Duc Hue district middle farmers were choosing to resist, or turn their backs on the new policies of land reform and collectivisation. It is not surprising therefore that the TDSX were more form than substance and could not sustain effective production. Other failings

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Lam Quang Huyen, \textit{Cach Mang Ruong Dat O Mien Nam Viet Nam} (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat ban Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 1985), p. 191.
  \item "Ve cong tac cai tao nong nghiep o Long An," \textit{Bao Chi Long An}, 17 September 1981.
  \item Ibid.
  \item Lam Quang Huyen, \textit{Cach Mang Ruong Dat O Mien Nam Viet Nam} (Ha Noi: Nha Xuat ban Khoa hoc Xa hoi, 1985), p. 191.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
included poor provision of agricultural inputs, failures by both cadres and farmers to fully understand the policy regarding TDSX, and natural disasters.

The disintegration of the agricultural collectives coincided with a dramatic drop in state procurement levels throughout Vietnam in 1979, particularly of grain (Table 3.1). The national leadership first tried to address this problem in 1978 by clamping down on ethnic Chinese merchants that dominated private trading in the rural areas. This did not adequately fix the problem of state procurement and in September 1979, Resolution Six was issued at the Party’s Six Plenum. This was described as an “adequate rectification measure” for the problem in state procurement. It specified

In agriculture, compulsory deliveries to the state were stabilised and the excess could either be sold to the state trading services at agreed prices or freely offered on the parallel market, buying prices of agricultural products were revised so as to stimulate production and increase procurement, and payment in the cooperatives should be given each according to his work.

Resolution Six was symbolically significant because it represented a retreat by the state from direct interference in production decisions. In praxis, it was really a de facto recognition of the vitality of private farming and trade in the local economy. The practical significance of this resolution for Long An province was that the national leadership was giving a “green light” to continue local experimentation in production

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and distribution. As Table 3.1 shows, national state procurement levels did rise again after 1979.

**Table 3.1**
State Grain Procurement, 1975 – 1984

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>State grain procurement (million tonnes)</th>
<th>Percentage of the crop</th>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The collapse of many agricultural collectives in 1979 did not spell the end for the collectivisation program in Long An. Rather than surrendering in the face of defeat collectivisation took on greater impetus and urgency in 1980. The emphasis in Long An was now on the creation of both TDSX and hop tac xa nong nghiep (HTXNN). This period was marked by a spiralling vortex of district tables and production quotas that were published regularly in the Long An newspaper. Competition between the districts was promoted to a point of frenzy as local pride and achievement was measured by the number of collective organisations and the fulfilling of targets and quotas. There was a widening chasm of inconsistency in the reporting of activities throughout the province. Articles that candidly recognised the failure of land reform

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and the process of collectivisation vied for page space with stories that lauded the success and further advancement of reform.

Tables 3.2 and 3.3 show the official statistics for the development of agricultural collectives from 1980 to 1986 in Long An province. The year 1983 saw a dramatic increase in the number of agricultural collective organisations. These statistics, and others, regarding the progress of collective organisations must be treated with caution for two reasons. First, it is possible that the figures were inflated to impress more senior officials and to demonstrate the success of the collectivisation program in Long An. The second and more problematic issue with these statistics is they may disguise the true level of functionality of the organisations. One Vietnamese scholar has put this problem more bluntly, "in the south...the majority of cooperatives and production groups were only formalistic."377

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### Table 3.2
Agricultural Collectivisation in Long An Province, 1980 – 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of farming families</th>
<th>No. of families participating in HTXNN</th>
<th>No. of HTXNN</th>
<th>No. of TDSX</th>
<th>No. of families participating in TDSX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>146,593</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>10,259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>155,423</td>
<td>1,048</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>9,868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>154,341</td>
<td>948</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>15,036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>164,181</td>
<td>2,073</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>24,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>162,772</td>
<td>2,468</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,373</td>
<td>68,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>171,831</td>
<td>6,301</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2,532</td>
<td>137,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>177,315</td>
<td>10,986</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2,523</td>
<td>145,214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 3.3
Agricultural Collectivisation by District, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>No. of farming families</th>
<th>No. of farming families participating in HTXNN</th>
<th>No. of HTXNN</th>
<th>No. of TDSX</th>
<th>No. of farming families participating in TDSX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tan An**</td>
<td>9,228</td>
<td>1,973</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>6,448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinh Hung</td>
<td>5,692</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>4,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moc Hoa</td>
<td>7,385</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>6,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Thanh</td>
<td>10,886</td>
<td>799</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>9,574</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duc Hue</td>
<td>9,531</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>8,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duc Hoa</td>
<td>30,022</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>26,512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Luc*</td>
<td>19,989</td>
<td>2,151</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>14,508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu Thua*</td>
<td>13,066</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>9,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vam Co</td>
<td>25,243</td>
<td>4,222</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>18,973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Duoc</td>
<td>24,301</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>19,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Giuoc</td>
<td>21,967</td>
<td>939</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>19,607</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*From 1977 – 1983 Ben Luc and Thu Thua were merged to form Ben Thu district. The provincial statistics do not take account of this in 1986.

**Tan An was a townlet – not a district unit.
It is difficult to determine how well the agricultural collectives in Long An matched up to the principles outlined for these organisations earlier in the chapter. We know more about the showpiece agricultural collectives than those that were functioning less well. One of the showpiece collectives was in Duong Xuan Hoi commune. This HTXNN received national praise, and the local authorities considered it a suitable field site for a visiting foreign researcher in 1985. The Duong Xuan Hoi collective was considered as a success based on two criteria. The first was in terms of its advance to large scale agriculture. In the context of Long An, this meant a greater concentration on multiple cropping and agricultural diversification rather than simply enlarging the size of the organisation. According to Beresford, the collective was highly productive due to successful multiple cropping techniques. She also noted an especially high level of state inputs such as agricultural technology and machinery. I would suggest that because this was a model collective, it received far better inputs than collective organisations in other areas. This issue was acknowledged at the highest levels of national leadership.

We used to build up “models” by creating the most favourable conditions for a particular unit, but this made it impossible to multiply the unit, as we could not afford to provide the same favourable conditions elsewhere.

The Duong Xuan Hoi collective was also considered to be a successful example of the economic liberalisation initiated by Directive 100 CT/TW, which enabled

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380 This expression was first used in a speech by Le Duan in 1974 and is often used in relation to the development of more advanced agricultural collective organisation (TDSX and HTXNN): Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, Towards a Large-Scale Socialist Agriculture (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975).
382 Le Due Tho, “To Improve Agricultural Management,” Southeast Asia Chronicle, No.93, April 1984, pp.7-12, p.9.
households to directly contract agricultural work and keep surplus produce beyond an agreed quota. According to the vice-director of the agricultural department in Long An, economic incentives for farmers was a way to create successful agricultural collectives and stop the exodus of boat people from the province.  

Elsewhere in Long An during the 1980s, other HTXNN seemed to be just coping and adapting policy to meet local needs. Ben Thu had been chosen to be the site for experimentation into large-scale animal husbandry. This district was often featured in the newspaper because Le Duan and other national leaders favoured HTXNN that focused on animal husbandry. In 1981, the director of the Xuan Cau agricultural collective admitted that there were problems in the organisation. The most serious of these was that the district authorities were not providing the expected agricultural inputs. The collective was reliant on the provision of fertilizer from local traders outside the collective. The collective only had five pigs which were looked after by local families. According to the director, these families worked on an unofficial contract system to the collective. After raising the pig, the collective would pay the farmers per kilogram above the suckling weight of the animal. The problems of animal husbandry and the issue of private trading inhibiting state procurement policies in Long An were also recognised and admonished outside the province,

The provincial economy was beset with difficulties. Industrial crops were erratic. Animal husbandry was seriously declining...Market management was slack and the

384 Animal husbandry was considered to be one of “main branches of production” in a collective: Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, Towards a Large-Scale Socialist Agriculture (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975), p.515.
386 It is noteworthy that this system of contracting agricultural work was adopted in Long An before the national government sanctioned the use of the system in the south in December 1981. Turley, William S & Selden, Mark, Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism. Doi Moi in Comparative Perspective (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), p.24.
larger part of farm products were controlled by private traders in the province and neighbouring provinces. \(^{387}\)

In 1985, the national leadership declared that the program of collectivisation in southern Vietnam was "largely completed."\(^{388}\) In Long An, however, only 6% of farming families had joined a HTXNN. It was possibly the tacit recognition of the failure to successfully implement adequate land reform and collectivisation that prompted further district re-organisations in the mid 1980s. The mighty district of Ben Thu was divided once more into two districts, Ben Luc and Thu Thua. Three communes were also annexed from Vam Co and two communes from Thu Thua to create Tan An township. Like the GVN regime before, it was deemed necessary to carve districts into smaller manageable units to better implement wide scale reform.

**Economic and Political Problems in Long An in the 1980s**

In the early 1980s, other policies of the command economy were also being undermined in Long An. Private speculation was rife and the policy of state agricultural procurement was a shambles across the province. The provincial government in Tan An town was unable to enforce set prices for agricultural produce resulting in wild fluctuation between the districts. In Moc Hoa district, rice sold for 71 dong per kilogram. In Tan Thanh and Vinh Hung the price rose to 79 dong, and in Duc Hue the price was 90 dong. This encouraged dealers to buy cheaply in one district and sell it in another. By 1982, the state subsidiary system (*che do bao cap*) was openly flouted in Long An. In defiance of central government pressure to adhere


to the policy, the Chairman of Long An's People's Committee, Chin Can, famously said, "I did not survive the war to now have to die economically." 389

Chin Can put Long An on the map as a daring and experimental province in the 1980s. The economic fence breaking (xe rao) activities in the province led some Vietnamese and foreign observers to make a strong case that central government reform was primarily a result of pressure from below. 390 Less scholarly light has been shone on how the districts negotiated adapted central government policy and how this in turn may have influenced the stance of their provincial leaders such as Chin Can. One example can be found in Moc Hoa district in the Dong Thap Muoi region of Long An. In 1982, the provincial authorities learned that the Moc Hoa government had a very large outstanding debt because many farmers in the district had not paid their taxes. 391 Provincial officials went to the district to discuss the matter. The chairman of Moc Hoa People’s Committee, Nam Tam, was alarmed since it was very rare for the provincial officials to visit his district. However, the provincial officials could do little more than criticise the district’s leadership, which they deemed was deficient politically, administratively and economically. Nam Tam decided to resolve the problem by devising three categories of farmers who had defaulted on their tax payments. The first group were farmers who were considered to have sufficient funds and were told to pay up. The second group had the potential ability to pay but were

389 Chin Can was a seasoned revolutionary and credited with economic fence breaking policies (xe rao) in Long An province. This put him at odds with Hanoi until the central government instigated these reforms in the renovating era. "Hoi nghi trung uong Lan Thu 8 tu thi diem Long An," Dai Doan Ket, #14, 3 July 1985.


unable to pay right away. Each of them had to write an I.O.U to be honoured in the following season. The final group were categorised as destitute. District authorities would write-off their debts. This system was not enforced by the threat of punitive action but rather by moral sanction since lists was put up in public places naming the individuals who had outstanding debts.\(^{392}\)

Nam Tam's solution was not perfect, but he did appear to have genuine concern for his constituency and did not want to cause people any more hardship than they were already enduring. In this respect, he was mirroring the traditionally conceived role of the district chief (tri phu / tri huyen) in mandarinate times as a man who knows the district and "manages the general interests of the population of his constituency just as good parents manage the interests of their children."\(^{393}\) Nam Tam also defended other local cadres in the district by stating that the state subsidy system was not realistic and called for an end to the bao cap system. Local cadres, he insisted, were simply doing what was best for the people of the district.\(^{394}\) In this case, district government was able to stand up to interference from the province and express disregard for unpopular central policies.

Another problem in Long An was that many commune and district cadres were made scapegoats for the failing economic and agricultural reforms in their constituencies. Older, veteran cadres were particularly identified as failing in their duties and were considered to be too old and lacking sufficient education and commitment to Party policy. Some newspaper articles stressed the need for a change of guard and new


Party blood in local government.\textsuperscript{395} The most strident of these articles was just before and after the 5th Party Congress in March 1982. This timing may suggest that the criticisms in Long An mirrored what was happening at a national level where the “party conducted a bloodless but extensive and still incomplete purge by issuing new Party membership cards.”\textsuperscript{396} It would sit comfortably with the line of argument of this thesis to suggest that provincial party members, committed to national policies on land reform and collectivisation, were eager to get rid of the old revolutionary cadres who were sometimes complicit with their local communities in undermining those changes. This was a contributing factor but it is also likely that many older state and Party officials did lack administrative skills and a rigorous commitment to central policies emanating from the Party Central Committee in Hanoi. One thing that is clear is that a malaise was setting in amongst some communes in Long An. According to William Duiker, this situation was not unique to Long An:

The decision by the regime to move rapidly toward socialist transformation without an extended period of transition resulted not only in an economic crisis in the late 1970s but also in a dangerous level of political and social malaise in the southern provinces.\textsuperscript{397}

A newspaper article in August 1981 highlighted the growing political dissatisfaction and disaffection in Long An.\textsuperscript{398} The story cryptically refers to commune “Q” in district “V” that had a strong revolutionary tradition and commitment to the party.

\textsuperscript{398} “Mot chi bo can duoc cung co,” Bao Chi Long An, 17 August 1981.
From 1980 to 1981, however, the commune had failed to meet any production quotas and the attitudes of the local people and party had become corrupted. The commune party secretary had not attended any meetings for six months and the twenty-nine Communist Party members were bitterly divided and rarely attended party meetings. The local party organisation, according to the article, lacked direction and disregarded party principles. The reason for this malaise was laid at the door of old revolutionary Party members who were considered too old, in poor health and lacked understanding of new Party policies. In mid 1981, a team of district cadres went to the commune to conduct self-criticism meetings and generally strengthen the resolve of the commune Party apparatus. The mission was unsuccessful. The deputy secretary of the commune Party did not attend the meeting claiming that he forgot the time. Other Party members arrived drunk and incoherent. The article concludes with the observation that the only way to solve problems of this nature was to expel conservative and weak cadres and replace them with young and strong ones.

It is unusual for a newspaper article not to mention the exact name of the commune where the described events took place. This suggests that the story was probably a parable used to demonstrate generic problems with grassroots party members in Long An. Certainly this would fit with the growing wave of criticism against old revolutionary cadres in response to economic and agricultural failings. Another interesting facet of this story was that it was published on the same page as one of the first articles relating to the new policy of district building in Long An province. The message of the contiguous articles when viewed together is that stronger districts were

Chapter Three: Socialist Organisational Adventures

Natalie Hicks

needed to re-vamp and control the weak policy implementation and ideological degeneration of the communes.

Central Government Policy on District-Building

Party leaders first introduced the notion of reorganising and strengthening the districts in north Vietnam in 1966. At that time, authorities established a small number of pilot districts in the Red River Delta. These districts received substantial amounts of central government funding and training. However, as the American war took on greater momentum, and north Vietnam was swept up in the war effort, the district reform policy drifted. Not until Le Duan's speech in 1974, entitled "Towards a Large Scale Socialist Agriculture" was the policy for building districts resurrected. This speech was fleshed-out and published as a book one year later. 400 This book outlined what Le Duan, the Party's Secretary General, saw as the fundamental goal of district building:

to create efficient planning units that would manage and control an extensive socialist system of agricultural production in Vietnam.

Like his pre-1975 counterparts in the GVN of South Vietnam, Le Duan also saw the district as the crucial interface between the state and the grassroots. As such, Le Duan said, the district was where the so-called "three revolutions" – in production, technical and cultural relations – would take place. 401 The essence of this policy to strengthen the districts arose from the frustrations of Le Duan and other top party leaders with the "guild-type collective spirit which divorces one small collective from the unified

400 Le Duan and Pham Van Dong, Towards a Large-Scale Socialist Agriculture (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1975).
401 The triple revolution was a revolution in the relations of production, technology and culture, and ideology.
leadership of the proletarian state and pits the interest of one collective against those of another." Placing control for the collectives at a district level was an attempt to check the strong sense of localism that had re-emerged in northern communes during the war and stop acts of resistance that were undermining collectivisation.

According to Le Duan, the progression to large-scale collectivisation could only be achieved with management at a district level.

Re-organisation of production in a cooperative along the line of large-scale production and transformation of the cooperative into truly socialist economic units must necessarily go hand in hand with the organisation of production and management on the district scale.

Therefore the national level of government proposed to re-engineer the district so that it could implement state and party policy. National authorities also hoped that stronger districts would stop the spread of autonomous commune-level government.

The campaign to reform the district was re-asserted shortly after re-unification at the Fourth National Party Congress in December 1976. Party leaders declared the goal to reorganise the district into an "economic agro-industrial unit" which would serve as "one of the basic links of the national economy." By the late 1970s, the problems of implementing collective farming, most pronounced in the Mekong Delta, were creating acute crises in the economy, especially in terms of state procurement and food shortages. This prompted the government to issue decision #33 CT/TW (24

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403 Christine White has written a good account of the "re-flowering of local autonomy" at village level as a response to the formation of cooperatives and the exigency of war time self reliance in north Vietnam. White, Christine, "Vietnam Develops its Road to Socialist Development," Southeast Asia Chronicle, #87, December 1982, pp.2-8.
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January 1978) for “building and strengthening the district levels.” The district was to be the primary unit developing agriculture and also an economic and planning entity that coordinated agriculture with industry and joined the collective economy with the national economy. Its responsibilities included controlling the flow of goods between state and producers and supplying the collectives with agricultural inputs and extension services. Finally, the district was to be given budgetary and taxation powers, a reform very similar to what the Michigan State Advisory Group had recommended to the Republic of Vietnam government in 1958.

At the national level, the impetus for district building once again entered a period of quietude until the 5th Party Congress in March 1982. At this time Prime Minister Pham Van Dong reasserted the need to raise agricultural production levels and stressed the urgent need to “wrest control of the country’s distribution networks from black market traders.” The way to solve these acute problems was to make the district the “key unit,” with the provinces serving as a link to central government agencies. According to Pham Van Dong, “planning and production will remain decentralised,” and “regional self-sufficiency is encouraged.” The question of whether central government polices for district building represented centralising or decentralising tendencies is subject to debate. Jayne Werner suggested that district reform arguably constituted “an inherent centralising tendency.”

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409 Southeast Asia Chronicle, # 84, June 1982, p.31.
410 Southeast Asia Chronicle, # 84, June 1982, p.31.
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This policy had the stated aim to create greater autonomy and self-reliance at the district level in order to solve production and economic crises. The trap for the districts was that they were only given greater powers to implement central policy and ensure greater procurement for the state. In effect, there was little space for local initiatives. This situation paralleled that of the GVN, which also sought to curb localism at the commune level, while simultaneously bolstering the district to carry out central government policies.

In September 1983, the government issued decree #24 CT/TW, which reasserted the need for the districts to continue to control and manage economic and agricultural planning in their locales. During 1983-1984, twelve provinces sent more than 1,500 cadres into the districts, half of whom had received advanced training. Le Duan remained the vocal standard bearer of this campaign and continued to urge for greater and quicker reform. In response, the Party Central Committee initiated its own committee on district building headed by the “Party Poet,” To Huu. Jayne Werner observed during her fieldwork in north Vietnam a “noticeable excitement and activity” regarding district building in the capital and provinces in the fall of 1984. This activity was observed during fieldwork in north Vietnam, a noticeable excitement and activity observed during the districts conference held in Hanoi, one of the effects of which was redefining district building in the capital and provinces in the fall of 1984. This activity included the districts conference held in Hanoi, one of the effects of which was to accelerate the training of cadres for different posts.

In February of 1985, the Council of Ministers issued instruction #63 that outlined the creation of 400 super-districts that would be thepanacea to solve the national problems of state. This policy sought to curb localism at the commune level, while simultaneously bolstering the district to carry out central government policies.

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procurement, curb black marketeering and advance agriculture to large-scale collectivisation.415

Before examining how the district building campaigns played out in Long An province, I should note that the central leadership was not unanimous in its policy to reform the districts. Le Duan was the most extreme advocate of the campaign. Moderates such as Vo Van Kiet, a member of the Politburo and head of the State Planning Commission, tempered his policy goals with less radical suggestions. For example in December 1982, Vo Van Kiet contradicted the notion of districts assuming full control of local enterprises and instead advocated that SOE’s should continue to be operated on a centralised power structure.416 The lack of consensus at the highest levels did not bode well for reform at the grassroots level in the Mekong Delta.

**District Building in Long An Province**

District building was a central policy predicated on the situation of collectivisation in north Vietnam. How could these directives be translated and executed in a province in the Mekong Delta such as Long An, where local district officials were disinclined to force peasants into collective organisations, let alone wish to advance them on to large-scale socialist agricultural production? How would district cadres react to the prospect of increased local autonomy but at the same time be expected to control procurement for the higher levels of state? What I found is an adaptation to some of Le Duan’s ideals, confusion and ultimately, failure to build the mighty agro-industrial

416 Vo Van Kiet’s address to a conference of the Party Committee of Quy Hop District, Nghe Tinh Province, published in the *Nhan Dan* newspaper, 28 December 1982. This was translated and published as “Some Opinions on Development in Quy Hop District,” *Southeast Asian Chronicle*, Issue #93, April 184, pp.15-19, p.18.
units envisaged in 1974. The campaign to reform the districts floundered on four main
issues in Long An. The first was the inability of cadres to advance the collectivisation
program in Long An. The plans for the districts were inextricably linked to large scale
collectives such as the HTXNN and TDSX, which were never fully established
throughout the province. The second issue was the disinclination of the local
authorities to curb the vitality of private trade and business in Long An. The third
problem related to the task of strengthening party and state leadership at a district and
commune level. Cadres were once again faced with the old dichotomy of what it
meant to be a good cadre: enforcing central policy or pursuing local initiatives that
were not necessarily congruent with this policy. It would appear, for the main part,
cadres chose the latter option. Finally, the district building campaign was a national
policy, largely driven by the force of one man, Le Duan. In common with major
national policies, it was driven from a top down approach, which gave very little
latitude for the districts to develop the planning and management initiatives that the
leadership declared were so important.

The momentum to reform the districts in Long An was building well before the
establishment of provincial and ministry reform committees in 1984. In the late
1970s, provincial authorities established pilot districts in Ben Thu, Vam Co and Vinh
Hung. These districts were then used as experimentation sites for the implementation
of collectivisation. The campaign appeared to be most accelerated in 1981. In August
of that year, an article published in the provincial newspaper urged cadres and local
people to “urgently strengthen and build the districts.” It announced that
agricultural productivity was the underlying justification for reform in Long An since

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"agriculture is the foundation and everything comes from this. If you don’t take agriculture as the foundation, you can’t build the districts." The difficulty with taking agriculture as the "foundation" was that reforming agricultural practices in Long An had not met with great success. In 1981, only 7% of farming families in the province were participating in either a HTXNN or TDSX. Private and family farming was an established feature of Long An province that had proved stubbornly resistant to reform after reunification. In fact private agricultural enterprises, rather than state ones, were actively encouraged in the Dong Thap Muoi region. A serious problem with the few collectives that did exist was supplying the requisite inputs. All agricultural inputs, extension services and tractor stations had been theoretically under the control of the district since 1981. However, as the earlier example of the Xuan Hau collective showed, agricultural inputs were not being provided and the director was forced to contract inputs from the local community. The district cadres responsible for the provision of these services explained their failure by a lack of training.

The policy of building the districts in Long An was also presented as a way to strengthen the party leadership at the district level. Powerful districts could then improve the functioning of commune government. This objective did not match Le Duan’s justification for district building which was actually to curb the power of commune government rather than strengthen it. Moreover, strengthening the party

418 "Khan truong tang cuong chi dao xay dung huyen va cung co co so," Bao Chi Long An, 10 August 1981.
leadership at a grassroots level created a dichotomy in Long An. On the one hand, the central party leadership wished to enlarge the party membership to prepare the district administration for its new powers and responsibilities. On the other hand, incumbent district party cadres had to demonstrate their worth to senior party officials at the province level in order to have their party membership cards renewed.423 This was a perplexing situation for both provincial and district officials. If "party worth" was judged on the criteria of enacting successful land re-adjustment and advancing to large-scale agriculture, then few cadres could be considered a success. The solution to this thorny problem seems to have been to send more district cadres on provincial training courses. This way, the provincial authorities could be seen to be addressing the problem without directly facing the dichotomy presented by the party leadership.

Throughout 1981 to 1982, several newspaper articles discussed the question of district building throughout the province. They reflect a wider confusion that existed in regard to strengthening the districts. There was talk of a central government master plan that must be followed, but the district officials alone had to decide all the details, planning and targets. A more hard-hitting commentary impressed on the district officialdom that they must not depend on the province or central government for any investment.424 The districts had to be self reliant and self-sufficient politically, culturally and economically. This was a frightening array of responsibilities for district cadres because few had much training in economic management. And this campaign was not without its victims either. Many district officials were criticised in the local press as bad elements for not understanding or implementing the resolutions,
some for seeing their districts as already developed, when they were not. Other bad elements were accused of being far too concerned with personnel issues such as acquiring more staff and squabbling over the division of authority and forgetting the salient issues of the reforms.

The central government master plan proclaimed that the districts should be independent and self-reliant but it was vague about how this new status for the districts could be achieved. In this ambiguous environment, the provincial level government in Long An was still able to exert significant control over the reform of the district administrations. The provincial People’s Committee in Tan An was responsible for training and enhancing the personnel within the district party and administration. This gave the provincial government a strong foothold to influence party reform and personnel policy at the lower levels. Provincial officials were also required to make a report on the progress of each district and submit this to the central government. Therefore, informally the provincial government was able to influence and direct the process of district building in Long An.

Strong districts were considered to be a way to eliminate the longstanding problem of private traders. The district therefore had to improve ways for the state to buy and sell from the peasants. Each district established a buying-and-selling cooperative. According to one source, these district cooperatives established “direct contacts between the State Trade and the peasants, and even better control by the former of the

425 Ibid.
426 Ibid.
goods produced by the latter [sic].\textsuperscript{428} This development was deemed so successful that one observer declared that private trading of food, grain, pork, and sugarcane had been "abolished" by 1984.\textsuperscript{429} This is unlikely. Rice speculation and trading was still active amongst the districts. In fact, private traders were reportedly travelling all the way from Saigon to buy goods in Long An.\textsuperscript{430} During the early 1980s, the Long An provincial government was far more concerned with its own economic experiments aimed at abolishing the \textit{bao cap} system. They had little time or inclination to devote to building the district administrations into successful state economic management units.

Jayne Werner was one of the very few researchers to closely examine the district building campaigns in the 1980s. Her insights into the campaign in northern Vietnam serve as a valuable comparison to the enactment of the process in the Mekong Delta region. She suggests that district cadre failed because of their dependency attitude on the centre and passivity in regard to financial initiatives. Some of the evidence presented in this chapter suggests otherwise. Many district cadres had worked hard to adjust or even undermine central government policy and few exhibited tendencies of dependence on the centre. Moreover, whilst few district cadres had any serious financial administrative skills, this did not necessarily mean that they were passive in economic initiatives. The earlier example of the chairman of the People's Committee in Moc Hoa, Nam Tam, showed that senior district officials were very capable of showing good local initiative in financial affairs. The problem in the case of Nam Tam was that his local initiative was not necessarily congruent with official economic policies. I propose that one reason for the failure of district building in Long An was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{428} Ibid, p.156.
\item \textsuperscript{429} Ibid, p.156.
\item \textsuperscript{430} "Hoi nghi trung uong lan thu 8 tu thi diem Long An," \textit{Dai Doan Ket}, #14, 3 July 1985.
\end{itemize}
that the policies from Hanoi in this matter were ill-defined and gave district cadres no clear sense of direction as to how to proceed. At the same time, these cadres were understandably fearful of proceeding in the wrong way. Provincial authorities possibly abetted, rather than helped, the districts resolve these problems since it was not in their interests to devolve their own powers to another source.

Werner further argued that one of the major difficulties in establishing a new role for the districts was the unwillingness of the collectives to lose their autonomy to district management. This problem did not apply in Long An. There were few collectives of any strength to put up an opposition to district authorities. It follows therefore that the districts would also have had little chance of advancing towards large-scale socialist production, even if they had been so inclined. The response to this problem represents one of the clearest examples of local adaptation to central policy directives. The provincial government prescribed that large-scale state collectivisation should not be thought about too early and that local conditions should be taken into account. Production, said the provincial authorities, must be divided up sensibly, meaning through mutual cooperation between state owned enterprises, collectives and family farms. Effectively Long An had turned its back on any hope of implementing full-scale collectivisation which rendered defunct the district’s potential role in collectivisation.

Werner concludes that the district was an “untested” level of government. She suggests that district building was an “organisational fix” demonstrating “the

bureaucratic dimension of socialist ideology in Vietnam.”432 Contrary to this analysis, I suggest that the role of the district in Long An during the Republic of Vietnam and after 1975 was significant and, as such, it was not an “untested” level of government. The notion of enacting an "organisational fix" to solve economic and political problems was not just a dimension of socialist ideology. The previous regime had also re-engineered the districts as a way to solve problems in the rural areas, albeit in a less policy directed fashion.

In relation to Long An, Werner was right to suggest that the central government tried to use the district as a tool to solve national problems. To some extent the provincial government also hijacked this policy and tried to use it to purge and reform the Party apparatus at the lower levels of government. Both these efforts represented forcing initiatives on the districts from above and required sustained efforts to enact compliance at the district level. The momentum to build and reform the districts was largely dependent on the will of the centre to continue with this policy, and this will was mainly embodied in one individual, Le Duan. The insider – turned critic, Bui Tin, supports the thesis. He supplies us with an obituary for both the district building campaigns and his political ‘bete noire’, Le Duan,

Many cadres still acknowledge that the worst disaster relating to the amalgamation of the provinces and districts occurred in 1983 when Le Duan excitedly proposed raising the districts to the strategic level, in contrast to the previous system where they had occupied the intermediate level between province and village....As a result, a lot of new staff were required and the cost of salaries kept escalating without producing any obvious results. The expansion lasted for nearly three years, but after Le Duan died in

1986, nobody was interested in the districts any more. So personnel levels at the district level were reduced, this organisational adventure came to an end, and the country became poorer and continues to do so – all because of the sudden whim of a top leader. People still complain that after the ‘old man’ died, it required a lot of time, money and effort to clean up the mess he left behind him.433

Despite the promulgation of Directive #63 in 1985 regarding the creation of 400 super districts, little is mentioned about district building in the Long An newspaper after 1984. In terms of advancing to large-scale collectivisation, the campaign was hamstrung before it began. Open acknowledgement that family farming would continue evinced local practicalities over the ideological zeal of Le Duan’s plans. It is most probable that the policy of creating “self-reliant” districts simply gave district cadre sudden responsibilities that they weren’t prepared for. In many ways this is a metaphor for some of the difficulties in building the districts in Long An. Greater autonomy and local control did not grow organically and as a product of local initiative, but was thrust suddenly upon these officials through directives from above. The paradox of the situation was that central government objectives to enhance district autonomy were not welcomed by the districts because it did not give them the freedom to enact local initiative, only central dictates.

**Conclusion**

The contestation of central control versus local priorities in Long An was played out most dramatically during the first decade after reunification. To paraphrase J.S Mill, the spirit of improvement that the new government in Hanoi envisaged was

“enforcing improvement on an unwilling people.”\(^434\) Following on from the _ancien regime_ of the Republic of Vietnam, the new government set about centralising the administrative system and passing new policy down from on high. When we peel away the ideological skin of both regimes, there are actually some strong similarities in the way the GVN and SRV practised power – through strong centralising tendencies. Both regimes also faced resistance to their policies. In the Republic of Vietnam, resistance lay in the groundswell of revolutionary activity that eventually overwhelmed the government in 1975. In the SRV, resistance was shown by some local people and sub provincial cadres who undermined central mandates on land reform and collectivisation. In contrast to the pre-1975 system, however, local cadres at the district level and below were _loyal insiders_ and had a vested interest in protecting the interests of their communities. This reality runs contrary to Brantly Womack’s assertion that there was a “unique strength” in the Vietnamese quasi-democratic state and that it was “therefore able to implement difficult policies relatively quickly and effectively.”\(^435\) I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter that from the late 1970s central government policies were neither implemented effectively or quickly in Long An province.

Confronted with resistance in the rural areas, Saigon and Hanoi recognised the strategic importance of the district as the interface between the grassroots and higher authorities and tried to use it to address various problems. Saigon’s efforts to re-organise the districts and control district personnel degenerated into last gasp measures to stem revolt and prop up a dying regime. Leaders in Hanoi and Le Duan in particular, tried to re-engineer the districts to be powerful entities that would advance


the countryside to large-scale collectivisation and solve the economic and production crises gripping the country. In contrast to the previous regime, the districts were used to prop up dying policies rather than a dying regime. Nevertheless both governments failed in their endeavours.

Jayne Werner’s finding that the districts in northern Vietnam were a “viable entity” if the central government wanted it to be, is different from what I found in Long An. Districts in Long An had signs of viability without central government prodding. Outside of the straightjacket of centrally planned agriculture and the rivalry promoted between districts to meet assigned targets, the districts maintained the potential to provide good local government – on local terms. District government in Long An was still closely interwoven into the pattern of local society, apparently more so than in northern parts of Vietnam. If there was a chance for local officials to enter into a dialogue with local people, then more positive initiatives could emerge at the district level. By the start of the 1990s, the reform era posed just this opportunity. Therefore the following chapters will explore the positive outcome of this centre-local relationship and highlight two districts in Long An which are proud to be steering their own district course for agricultural development.

Chapter Four: - Bringing Back Local Initiative: The Renaissance of Agricultural Extension in Long An Province

The previous chapter explored central government agricultural and administrative policies aimed at centralizing and controlling the means of production. Ultimately these efforts failed to fully realize land reform, collectivization or ensure state procurement through the re-vamping of district government. The culmination of these failures led to a government retreat from the principles of centralized planning. Thus thus a greater agency for both district government and farmers to determine their own agricultural requirements in what is known as the renovating period (doi moi) began.

This chapter and the next will examine how farmers and district officials have responded to new opportunities as the central government has retreated from the precepts of socialist state management. The first theme addressed in this chapter is the renaissance in the 1990s of a local agricultural extension service. The chapter will then explore the formal and informal functions of agricultural extension both in relation to the local government and the local farmers.

Agricultural extension can be defined as the "transference and adoption of technology." The stated goals of a renovated agricultural service in Vietnam are to supply information and give guidance to farmers, most of whom throughout the country now make their own decisions about what to plant, what animals to raise, and what methods to apply.... Cadres doing extension work generally respect village producers sovereignty. Agricultural extension work includes training courses and seminars, distribution of literature, and demonstration through film, and other media. 437

However, in Long An the formal and informal role of agricultural extension agents was far broader than these objectives. By outlining the activities of the local agents responsible for providing agricultural extension I will suggest, firstly, that extension officers are now succeeding in helping many farming communities where previous extension services had failed them. Secondly, district extension officers are helping to fill a vacuum left after the retreat of central state agricultural planning in terms of guiding their district agricultural development strategies.

Chapter 5 continues to examine the role of district level administration by studying two districts in Long An which are proud to be steering their own course in agricultural development. It will highlight the disparate paths these districts are carving out, especially in terms of establishing new forms of cooperatives and farming associations. I suggest the *modus operandi* towards localism at district level is becoming further embedded in Long An. This will make any future efforts by the central government to re-engineer and reform this level of government far more difficult than in the past.

The leitmotif running through both this and the next chapter is the importance of the district level of administration as the locus of agricultural development and an arena where local concerns are now addressed. This is not the all-powerful district government that Le Duan envisioned. Rather it is a tier of administration that encompasses extension officers and cooperative managers who are playing a vital role in agricultural development but cannot rightfully be considered state cadres since they exist at the edge of the hierarchical party-state in Vietnam. I refer to these agents as
associates of the state’, because they represent a confluence of state and societal objectives.

**Long An Province at the Start of the 21st Century - The Waking Dragon?**

So far this thesis has examined Long An province during two very different epochs. The first was during war and revolution, 1955-1975; the second period was the first decade of communist rule, 1975 until the mid 1980s. In order to contextualise the new role of agricultural extension and the relationship that exists between extensionists, farmers and local officials, I must first paint a general picture of conditions in Long An by the late 1990s and the start of the 21st century.

Long An province has earned the reputation as an industrializing, modernizing and increasingly wealthy province. In 2001, Long An was ranked 16th (out of a total of 61 provinces) on the Human Development Index shown in Figure 4.1. One of the province’s most impressive feats is the considerable diversification of agriculture over the last decade, particularly in regard to industrial cropping and dairy farming. Furthermore, any traveller passing through Long An will notice the plethora of Taiwanese weaving factories and the sprawling edifice of the Indian Nagarjuna sugar processing plant that line the major highway running from Saigon to the Mekong Delta. These industries stand testimony to the provincial government's ability to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and to the effective use of labour and produce

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438 The name Long An can be translated as Peaceful Dragon.

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in supplying the resources for these secondary industries. Both foreign and domestic companies that are attracted to Long An focus their interests on the dynamic new Industrial Zones (IZs) of Duc Hoa 1 and Xuyen A. Their popularity has led the managing director of these zones to propose prime ministerial recognition of another seventeen in the province. Recent research by Edmund Malesky detailing the success of the provincial People's Committee to attract FDI, and research conducted by a joint Japanese - Vietnamese research team in Khanh Hau Village, (Tan An township), has enhanced this picture of rapid development. The Japanese research team established that a high level of mechanization in agriculture and use of rapid germinating rice strains has drastically reduced the labour hours required for rice cultivation. These indicators seem to validate the often heard adage from northern Vietnamese that farmers in the Mekong Delta have an easy-going life and one without worries (khong co lo va vui ve).

439 In 2002 there were 58 Foreign Direct Investment projects in the province with a combined capital of 400 million US dollars: Vietnam News, 20 February 2002, (http://vietnamnews.net).
440 Vietnam Economy, 24 February 2003, p.6. It should be noted that all IZs are in districts close or contiguous to Saigon such as Ben Luc, Duc Hoa and Tan An Town and most are funded by foreign capital.
442 Findings of this Japanese - Vietnamese research team (led by Professor Sakurai Yumio and Dr Nguyen The Nghia) were presented at a provincial government meeting in Tan An town, 28th December, 2002.
## Socio-Economic Indicators of Development in Long An Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-Economic Indicator*</th>
<th>Ranking amongst other 61 provinces and municipalities**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita ($US)</td>
<td>$370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP annual growth rate - %</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995 - 1998, $US</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign investment per capita, $US</td>
<td>$236.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture as % of GDP 1995</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture as % of GDP, 1998</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry as % GDP, 1995</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry as % GDP, 1998</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food per capital (kg), 1995</td>
<td>807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food per capita (kg), 1998</td>
<td>1058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underweight children under age 5</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban population as % of total population</td>
<td>16.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled labour</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult literacy rate</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population % without access to electricity</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population % without access to safe water</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All statistics are for 1998 unless stated otherwise

** There are 4 municipalities which tend to have higher human development indicators; these are Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang and Hai Phong. Long An Province is ranked 16 (out of 61) on the human development index, which is within the band of Medium Human Development

The image of a relatively easy life and considerable economic progress, which people often associate with Long An, can be quite misleading. The province's close proximity to Saigon and the major Highway One running through the heart of Long An have helped to stimulate economic development, but poverty and widening inequalities are still considered serious problems for the local government.\footnote{Nguyen Thu Sa & Le Thi Thien Huong, *Hien Trang Doi Nghieo Tai Tinh Lang An* [The Poverty Situation in Long An Province], (Tan An, Long An: Long An People’s Committee, January 2003).} In 2001, there were significant social-economic differences between the thirteen districts that comprise Long An province. The eastern districts of Can Giuoc and Can Duoc have had some success with aquaculture for export but they remain perilously overcrowded districts and underemployment is a serious and growing concern.\footnote{In 2001 in Can Duoc district there were 803 people per km$^2$. In contrast, in Tan Hung district in Dong Thap Muoi, there were only 76 people per km$^2$. See Nguyen Thu Sa & Le Thi Thien Huong, *Hien Trang Doi Nghieo Tai Tinh Lang An*, [The Poverty situation in Long An Province], (Tan An, Long An: Long An People’s Committee, January 2003), p.4.} Since the 1970s, the provincial government has made a concerted effort to relocate many poor families from this area to Dong Thap Muoi (DTM) but this helped to ease, rather than solve, overpopulation in this area.\footnote{Further research is needed into the repercussions of immigration in the Dong Thap Muoi region, which in many respects should rightfully be considered as a frontier region, similar to the Central Highlands. Dong Thap Muoi is comprised of the districts of Vinh Hung, Tan Hung, Tan Thanh and Moc hoa. As far as I know, much of this research is mainly the remit of trusted Vietnamese journalists owing to security concerns since the districts of Tan Hung, Vinh Hung and Moc Hoa lie on the highly sensitive border with Vietnam's neighbour, Cambodia. A brief, two page paper was written in 2000 by Ono Mikiko entitled, "Co cau Xa hoi trang Xa Kinh te mai va Dinh huong Phat trien Kinh Te o Vung Thap Muoi," based on one month field work in March 2000. This report provides a minimal description of the area only uses the statistical information that is regularly cited in the journalistic accounts. Between 1991 - 1996, 6,720 farming families were relocated from other districts in Long An to Dong Thap Muoi and a further 12,257 migrated from other provinces in Vietnam into the region: Interview with local journalist February 2002.} Despite the large influx of new settlers and local and national government investment, Dong Thap Muoi itself remains one of the least accessible, most mono-crop dependent (rice) and poorest areas in the Mekong region. Table 4.1 indicates that DTM has the highest percentage of what Long An Provincial People’s Committee terms as “poor people.” Nevertheless it is not necessary to travel
to these far-flung districts to realize that statistics and locally specific research can be misleading. To turn off the main highway and travel only forty minutes into Due Hoa District, which is considered a wealthy and modernizing district, the picture is quite different outside the Industrial Zones. A majority of homes still have no electricity and many farmers are fighting to survive on soil still contaminated and damaged by US ordnance during the war. Over a quarter of a century after the end of the American war, Vo Tong Xuan has observed that, "the scars of war are still posing many problems in rural development."\(^{446}\)

### Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions in Long An</th>
<th>% of poor families per total population of the region</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan An townlet</td>
<td>10.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Luc, Thu Thua, Duc Hoa</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 districts in Dong Thap Muoi *</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 districts in the east of Long An **</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Districts in DTM: Tan Hung, Vinh Hung, Moc Hoa, Tan Thanh, Thanh Hoa, Duc Hue
** Districts in the east of Long An: Can Giuoc, Can Duoc, Tan Tru, Chau Thanh


Perhaps one of the greatest problems facing Long An in the 21st century is growing socio-economic differentiation. Despite the positive development indicators shown in Figure 4.1, and a relatively low percentage of people considered very poor, many

more people have precarious livelihoods. They may not be considered as very poor by national or international standards but they are still economically vulnerable. One problem for many Long An farmers is finding capital to invest in production. 45% of households across the province had no resources to invest and this percentage rises to 54% in the DTM region.447 Another small but growing problem is insufficient labour for household production. In 1998, 3% of all households in Long An did not have enough labour for their production needs.448 It is likely that this number has risen in recent years as more people migrate to urban areas for work and study. This problem seems to be most pronounced in female-headed households. Perhaps one of the clearest indicators of growing socio-economic differentiation is the thorny and complex issue of land rights. As mentioned in previous chapters, this thesis does not have the scope to fully explore the complex question of land reform but it is worthy of note that in 1998, 5.6% of all families in Long An had no land while 16.9% were cultivating less than 100 square metres. 449 Table 4.2 indicates that once again, the differences between the Long An’s districts in terms of land holdings is quite significant. The statistics for the Mekong Delta region generally in 1998 were 6% and 9% respectively, which indicates that the stratification in Long An may be more serious than in other delta provinces.450 A contributing factor in Long An is large-scale and on-going land accumulation in DTM. User rights to vast tracts of land are now owned by one farmer or family in these districts, resulting in a new phenomenon known locally as "millionaire farmers" (nong dan trieu phu) whose incomes are

comfortably in the millions of dong. In 2002, there were reported to be 172 millionaire farmers in Long An, earning between two-hundred to five-hundred million dong per year.\(^{451}\)

### Table 4.2
Land Ownership Patterns in Long An Province, 1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of land</th>
<th>Provincial total</th>
<th>Tan An townlet</th>
<th>Ben Luc, Thu Thua, Duc Hoa</th>
<th>6 districts in Dong Thap Muoi *</th>
<th>4 districts in the east of Long An **</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No land</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 m(^2) and under</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-300 m(^2)</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300 – 1,000 m(^2)</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000-10,000 m(^2)</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>41.3%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-30,000m(^2)</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 30,000 m(^2)</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Districts in DTM: Tan Hung, Vinh Hung, Moc Hoa, Tan Thanh, Thanh Hoa, Duc Hue

** Districts in the east of Long An: Can Giuoc, Can Duoc, Tan Tru, Chau Thanh


Many local officials consider the alleviation of problems associated with socio-economic differentiation as one of the toughest tasks for Long An in the 21\(^{st}\) century.\(^{452}\) Several macro policies summarized in Figure 4.2, such as Project 135

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\(^{451}\) Khuynh Diep, “Tinh hinh ‘tich tu’ va ‘chuyen huong’ ruong dat o DBSCL hien nay.” (The current situation of land accumulation and transfer in the Mekong Delta.). Part of the author’s unpublished manuscript, given to me by Mr Khuynh Diep (the author) in November 2002.

(Chuong trinh 135) and Project 120 (Quyet viec lam), are aimed at reducing poverty. The Province People’s Committee says that 60% of Long An residents have benefited from these programs, but local residents are more sceptical and suggest that they have been implemented with varying degrees of success.

Significantly, most international development projects are now focused at the district level of government because the central and provincial levels of administration are recognized as being too far removed from the local conditions of these areas. Internal development polices in Long An are operated at the province and district levels. One such large and expensive program has been the distribution of small plots of land (two hectares) to landless farmers. Officially the problem of vast land accumulation has been under control since 1999 due to the success of local state developmental schemes, which have lessened the need for struggling farmers to pawn their land (cam-co). It was officially thought that the threat of limiting holdings to three hectares and assigning all land above this as short term rented land (vuot han dien) had discouraged land speculation. Unofficially many wealthy farmers and merchants have suggested that this trend was not decreasing but instead plots of land were simply being bought or transferred under the names of relatives in order to hide large-scale land accumulation. Land speculation is likely to continue in Long An. People consider land a superior investment to the practice of hoarding gold. Perhaps this phenomenon represents a return to practices prior to 1975, when, according to a study by James Hendry in Long An in the early 1960's, farmers considered buying land to be the most


secure type of investment. Undoubtedly questions pertaining to land ownership are pertinent and need further research. I have restricted my research, however, to the assistance given to households and cooperative farmers who are engaged in agricultural production on their own land.

## Figures 4.2
Local State Developmental and Poverty Alleviation Schemes in Long An Province, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project title</th>
<th>Project description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project 2308 (Chuông trình 2308)</td>
<td>The provincial Agriculture and Rural Development Department allocates funds to the district offices of the Farmers Association, who can then distribute these funds to farmers in need of financial assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 120 (Quy quốc gia giai quyết việc làm - QQGGQVL)</td>
<td>National and provincial fund to increase rural employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project 135 - National Poverty Alleviation Scheme (Chuông trình 135 - Xôi doi giam ngheo)</td>
<td>National project but largely funded locally to assist the poorest members of rural society. This assistance is wide-ranging and includes free medical services to the very poor and infrastructure projects and also increasing availability of education, health services and clean water to communes, especially those in DTM and in the southern areas of the province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong Thap Moi Development Scheme (Phát triển vùng kinh tế mới - PTVKTM ở DTM)</td>
<td>Provincial scheme to build and improve infrastructure and communications in the Dong Thap Moi region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project to assist people in flood prone areas (Dan sinh vùng lũ - DSVLL)</td>
<td>Provincial scheme to assist farmers to build a better infrastructure for dealing with the regular yearly floods during the monsoon season. Areas that are particularly susceptible to flooding are the DTM region and the districts of Duc Hue and Duc Hoa.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Other Forms of Developmental Assistance Given to Farmers in Long An Province, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of assistance</th>
<th>Description of assistance rendered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Tax (Thue)         | i) Reduction of 50% on agricultural land  
|                    | ii) Emergency tax exemption on land hit by natural disasters (e.g. drought or flood) |
| Transference of information and skills | i) Agricultural Extension service  
|                    | ii) Plant protection service |
| Micro credit       | i) Usually promoted through the Farmers Association and Women’s Association |
| Land Rights        | i) Attempt to introduce stability and transparency in landownership through the issuing of land certificates (Giay chung nhan quyền sử dụng ruong dat – GCNQSDRD) |

Since the decline in the bureaucracy of state management, particularly in the sphere of social welfare, agricultural extensionists and, to some extent, mass organisations, have stepped into the institutional vacuum to help promote the development and well-being of farmers. I will describe in this chapter and the next their strategies of assistance. These strategies are often made on an informal or even daily basis and have spurred on new patterns in agricultural development, most notably to diversify production and to form new associations and cooperatives. However, agricultural extension strategies in Long An are constrained by the conditions I have outlined in the countryside today. The limited resources provided to agricultural extension by the local state has meant that while agricultural extension staff have become integral and trusted agents in the lives of many farmers, they have also helped to heighten the growing socio-economic stratification in rural Long An. This in turn has placed an increasing burden of welfare provision on the local state, which is shrinking in manpower and resources. Mirroring calls made during the revolutionary period and during the land reform campaign of the late 1970s, the government is once again appealing to the philanthropy of wealthier farmers to assist poorer members of the community under the old adage of nhuong com xe ao (literally, sharing rice and clothing or, more broadly, helping those less fortunate)
Chapter Four: Bringing Back Local Initiative

Natalie Hicks

Local Government and Extension: A Partnership for Agriculture in Long An

Agricultural Organisation at Province Level Government

Since the demise of collectivisation and the later reform of the agricultural bureaucracy in 1996, leading to the creation of the Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development, little is known about the exact modus operandi of rural state agricultural departments. In the current environment of socialist transition marked by decentralisation and Public Administration Reform (PAR), it is hard to define clearly the functions of any of the rural state departments. Even the Government Steering Committee for PAR acknowledges that the bureaucracy is plagued by "indiscipline, wrongdoings and violation of roles, [and where] functions in the administration and confusion in the organization structure are relatively common." The official bureaucratic structure for agriculture in Vietnam is represented in figure 4.3. In reality the business and agendas of the state agricultural departments often vary from province to province and even between district to district, depending on their local character and conditions.

456 In an effort to streamline the bureaucracy involved in rural and agricultural matters, in 1996 the central government amalgamated the ministries of irrigation, forestry and agriculture into one ministry, which is now known as the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD). This amalgamation at central level was also mirrored down to the lower administrative levels.

Figure 4.3
Structure of Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development

Minister of MARD

Vice-Minister

Production Unit

Research & Training Units

14 Corporations - on Decision 91

Corporations - on Decision 90

Irrigation College

Forestry College

Skills Management School No 1 and No 2

12 Vocational School

5 National Park: 1) Cat Pheung 2) Ba Vi 3) Ba Be 4) Tam Dao 5) Bach Ma 6) Buon Ma Thuot 7) Can Gio 8) Can Gio

14 Corporations: 1) Department of Forest Protection Technical No 1 2) Department of Forest Protection Technical No 2 3) Department of Forest Protection Technical No 3 4) Rural Water & Environment 5) Mulberry Silk 6) Information 7) Market

State Management Units

Indirect relation of the Ministry

Project's Management

Debate on the Ministry

Source: Office of the Ministry (Mr. Huy) and Mr. Thuy

Page 197 of 315
Theory and practice are often mismatched bedfellows, which is why fieldwork becomes an integral element in any research methodology of local government in Vietnam. If the pattern of socialist transformation in rural China can offer any clues to the Vietnamese experience, then a researcher may expect to find two broad scenarios. The first is a set of cadres acting in an *ad hoc* entrepreneurial fashion to promote rural agro-industrial enterprise. In a study of Hainan county Tao-Chiu Lam discovered that local officials were under considerable pressure to raise their own revenues locally.\(^{458}\)

Jean Oi and Andrew Walder have also proposed that fiscal decentralisation in China has prompted local cadres to act as entrepreneurs.\(^{459}\) In Oi's model of State Corporatism it is local cadres, particularly at county level, who have been driving the rural industrialisation miracle in the Chinese countryside.\(^{460}\) Vivienne Shue and Marc Blecher's study in Shulu County similarly focuses on local government driving rural development.\(^{461}\) While Oi, Shue and Blecher have an optimistic view of the role of local (county) cadres, they reach differing conclusions about how the cadres 'use' their fiscal power. Blecher and Shue believe that officials are more oriented towards a developmental role whereas Oi promotes cadres as entrepreneurs almost exclusively interested in the generation of profits.

The second scenario, regarding local officials in China, foretells a predatory state where cadres have little potential to act in either an entrepreneurial or developmental capacity.\(^{462}\) Instead they prey on local farmers through the collection of a vast array of


\(^{462}\) Models that focus on the power of local government, either in terms of the agency of cadres with particular entrepreneurial flair or the bureaucratic capacity and coherence of local governance in
taxes and levies to fund, (it is hoped), the upkeep of local services and projects. There are reported instances in northern Vietnam where state officials have collected extra-legal levies from local citizens. One contributing factor to the violent unrest in Thai Binh province in 1997 was the collection of illegal taxes that were then being used to fund show piece projects rather than public works that would assist the community.463

During fieldwork in Long An province (2001-2002), I spent July and September of 2001 in Tan An interviewing cadres in the provincial Agriculture and Rural Development Department (So Nong nghiep va Phat trien Nong thon). In addition to speaking to villagers and semi-officials persons in the province, it was important that I gained a better understanding of how senior agricultural officials perceived their role and responsibilities. I tentatively concluded that the agricultural officials in Long An were not closely following either of the scenarios depicted for local cadres in China. Cadres were happy to talk at length about the official functions of their offices. The head of the personnel and administration department (phong to chuc hanh chinh) had ten staff working in his office but had the responsibility for managing one thousand staff province-wide who worked for the state Agricultural and Rural Development Department at all levels of the administration. For example, he was responsible for finding specialists to work in the district office but any final decision had to be

promoting development, fail to take into account the importance of natural resource endowment, the quality of transportation and the proximity to market centres which are the key underlying variables in rural development. In what Victor Nee and Su Sijin term as the 'composite cadre model of village economic growth, it is these variables which determine whether a locale has the potential to develop rural industrialisation. If this potential exists, then local cadres can use their skills to develop the locality along entrepreneurial or developmental models. If an area does not have this potential (judged on Nee and Sijin's three variables) then a predatory state is more likely to develop where the authority of local cadres decreases whilst the 'peasant burden' increases. These areas are referred to in the China literature as 'paralysed' or 'runaway' villages. See Nee, Victor & Sijin, Su, "Institutional Change and Economic Growth in China. The View from the Villages," Journal of Asian Studies, 49, 1, February 1990.

463 Nhan Dan, 9 September 1997. There are also cases in Vietnam where cadres were found guilty of raising money illegally but were putting this money to use for the good of the community, such as in Chu Diem commune in Bac Giang province where the profits of illegal land sales were used to build a commune school: Nhan Dan, 11 May 1998, p.4.
verified by the district People's Committee (Uy ban Nhan dan huyen). He was keen to encourage cadres to attend training courses and receive further education but he expressed concern that salaries were low and enticing good students to work in the state agricultural department was difficult. He also said that people preferred to work in urban areas and private or foreign enterprises. He was hopeful, however, that new government wage-band policies for officials would go a long way to solving these problems.

The leading official in the provincial policy and agricultural development office (phong chinh sach nong nghiep va phat trien nong thon) explained that his primary task was to translate polices issued from above and promulgate them throughout the province. He emphasised that he was keen to fully implement Programme 135, established by the central government in 1999, to help eliminate hunger and alleviate poverty. However, farmers interviewed in districts throughout Long An who were aware of this policy, associated it directly with the central government and saw no role for the provincial government in directing it. In essence, the tasks that the policy officer described presented little more than a conveyor-belt approach for articulating central policy to lower administrative organs.

The eight cadres in the provincial planning office (phong ke hoach) compile and submit reports of recommendation to the director concerning provincial cropping and livestock plans. Their reports are based on statistics received from the district

464 The usual starting rate for a fresh university graduate working in a government department is 517,000 Vietnam Dong ($US 33.50) per month. He/she will earn only 85% of this during the first year apprenticeship. The person can hope that other perks of the job will enhance this base wage. On the other hand a good graduate may earn ten times this basic rate in a foreign enterprise, so it is not difficult to imagine why a drain of young talent is becoming a serious issue in the civil service. See Vietnam Economic Times, 13 February 2003, p.8.
agricultural and cadastral office (phong nong nghiep dia chinh). However, it is the extension officers and not the district state agricultural officials who are responsible for collecting this data from the farmers. Furthermore, due to the careless fashion in which this information was collected and reported, it is unlikely that they are accurate, which therefore undermines the value of any planning based on the data. I will elaborate more on this later. The planning official stressed that his department only issued guidelines as to what crops the state believed would be most advantageous for farmers to grow; he said in no way was the plan like the forced quota systems of the late 1970s - early 1980s. Both the provincial agricultural planning department and the district state agricultural department in Duc Hoa district revealed a huge investment in time and labour in the generation of statistical reports and planning local agricultural growth targets, whilst concurrently emphasising that nobody was forced to follow or meet these planned objectives. It appears that the provincial Agricultural and Rural Development department deals in the art of planning and was somewhat removed from the practical implementation of these plans. Unlike district and commune agricultural extension agents, which are discussed shortly, state agricultural cadres are not in a position to see the situation on the ground and therefore are unable to assist in realising the independent decisions that farmers are making in regard to their own farms.

The office of science and technology (phong ky thuat) overlaps in function with the provincial Extension Centre. The distinction between them is mainly bureaucratic in nature. The state cadres asserted that the Extension Centre was directly linked to the agricultural research centres and universities (cac vien nghien cuu va dai hoc) but the office of science and technology was a state management office (quan ly nha nuoc).
Yet the central agro-forestry extension department is under the state management units and not grouped with the research and training units, (shown in Figure 4.3). The practical significance is that the office of science and technology had no responsibility to transfer skills and technology directly to users; that was the job of extension officers. The reasons for maintaining the office of science and technology seem obscure. An official at the Extension Centre later confirmed that Long An is the only province in the Mekong region continuing to maintain this office within the provincial agricultural and rural development department.\(^{465}\) While this may reflect simple bureaucratic overlap and demonstrate a need for further streamlining of the administration, it also suggests that Long An's provincial agricultural department is unwilling to divest its roles, however superfluous.\(^{466}\)

In general, provincial state agricultural cadres were most comfortable talking retrospectively, dwelling with candour on the failings of past collectivisation policies and the improved functioning capacity since the formation of a single agricultural and rural development department in 1996. They were less forthcoming about their current role in helping agricultural development beyond acting as conduits for information and decisions between different levels of the administration and People's Committees, and formulating five year plans. There was no evidence to suggest that these officials were playing an active role as entrepreneurs driving a rural agro-industrial miracle or that they were trapped in the vicious cycle of a predatory state. Instead there was a pervasive air of passivity in the provincial department, which is

\(^{465}\) It was not possible to verify this statement with other provincial agricultural departments.

\(^{466}\) In light of new-governmental minimum wage stipulations for civil servants, introduced at the start of 2003, the government is now facing a shortfall of $US55 million which it intends to find through decreeing that ministries, agencies and local administrative units must curb 10% of their spending. The office of science and production techniques would seem an ideal place to begin to make savings: *Vietnam Economic Times*, 13 February 2003, p.8.
exactly what the Government Steering Committee for Public Administration Reform is trying to ameliorate. In 2001 Long An was the fourth biggest producer of food per capita of all the provinces in Vietnam. However, it appeared that the action that was making this success possible was taking place elsewhere. The natural place to start to look for this action was with farmers themselves and with the extension service whose literal translation from Vietnamese means to stimulate or encourage (khuyen) agriculture (nong).

Cadres in the provincial office of the Agriculture and Rural Development Department in Tan An claimed that they had no relations with the Extension Centre, located only one kilometre away, and my introductions to that Centre would have to be arranged by someone else, not them. This assertion implied a situation similar to the one described in Chapter Two where the agricultural extension service and local government in the Republic of Vietnam had separate hierarchies and a dislocated relationship. In fact this turned out not to be the case in Long An. Both organizations depended to some extent on each other and at times had overlapping functions. Extensionists collected the statistics that the Agriculture and Rural Development Department needed in order to formulate its five-year plans. On the other hand, the provincial Extension Centre, to get some of it's funding, had to submit an annual budget in November to the provincial Agriculture and Rural Development Department. Perhaps most significant of all was that when Long An People's Committee issued it's decision to establish agricultural extension in September 1991, it did so stating that the Extension Centre would be directly dependent on (truc thuoc)

467 Long An produces 1058 kg of food per capita, which is a significant amount considering that Long An is also a densely populated province: National Human Development Report 2001 (Hanoi: National Centre for Social Sciences, 2001), pp. 112-113. 
the state Agriculture, Forestry and Irrigation Department (the precursor to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development).

Reinventing Agricultural Extension in the Early 1990's
The provincial People's Committee in Long An officially established the Agricultural Extension Centre (Trung tam khuyen nong) in September 1991. The Centre's inaugural task was "to be at the cutting edge of developing the countryside today" (Chain nong la mui nhon trong viec phat trien nong nghiep). The date is significant because it preceded the establishment of a national extension service by one and a half years. Provincial extension officers in Tan An often mentioned with pride that Long An was the first province in Vietnam to create an extension service as a result of some local farmers' requests for an agricultural agency that would help them to develop and diversify their household farms. Both farmers and extension agents view the creation of this service in Long An as a bottom-up approach to policy making. This shared perception has created a bond of trust between participating farmers and extension officers and perhaps even a community stake in the service. The manner in which the extension service was established in Long An, the service's personnel, and the decentralized nature of its funding and activities mark it as a departure from the provision of extension services under the previous Government of South Vietnam and under the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam during the collectivisation era.

468 In Tan An, the Agricultural Extension Centre is officially known as Trung tam Khuyen nong, which translated into English does not include forestry (lam) which is normally included in the title at the national level.
Agricultural Extension - A Local rather than National Concern

Revenue assignments between the central and local governments are a measure, albeit a crude one, of the balance of centre-local influence on local service provision. In the case of the extension service, funding is largely the responsibility of individual provinces and districts. A UNDP Public Expenditure Review indicates that approximately 25 percent of the provincial extension budget comes from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).\textsuperscript{470} In Long An, however, MARD provided only 16 percent of the budget for agricultural extension in Long An during 1997 – 2001 (see Figure 4.4).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Province budget for extension Service (million Dong)* & Centrally allocated funds to Long An extension service (million Dong) \\
\hline
1997 & 1,652,172 & 370,161 \\
1998 & 1,135,143 & 249,247 \\
1999 & 1,204,416 & 179,000 \\
2000 & 1,809,039 & 99,753 \\
2001 & 2,270,000 & 423,345 \\
Total & 8,070,770 & 1,321,506 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Province and Central Government Budget Allocations to the Agricultural Extension Service in Long An province}
\end{table}

\* There is approximately 14,500 Vietnam Dong to US $1


Chapter Four: Bringing Back Local Initiative

Funding for the district extension officers in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa is through two channels. Firstly, the provincial Extension Centre pays the salaries.\(^{471}\) Secondly, the district extension offices are responsible for their own running costs. Charging farmers fees for attending Train and Visit meetings (T&V) covers a proportion of these costs.\(^{472}\) However, additional funds require an entrepreneurial approach to fundraising on the part of the district extension staff. Therefore, how district extension offices raise additional funds and how much, varies greatly among provinces and even among districts within provinces.

The approach that district extension officers choose to raise funds and the latitude they have to drive agricultural policy has resulted in the development of district agricultural initiatives that are not necessarily congruent with either central government or provincial policy objectives. This raises an important question: what is the relationship between agricultural extension and the party-state bureaucracy? The question of Vietnamese agricultural extension agents’ real and perceived relationship with the government is complex. I refer to these agents as associates of the state because in some respects extensionists are part of the state machinery but for the main part, they devise their own objectives and working arrangements tailored to the needs of local farmers. The Extension Centre is linked to the government in respect of the fact that it receives some state funding and officially it is under the direct control of

\(^{471}\) The provincial Extension Centre’s annual budget proposal in November to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development office in Tan An takes into account district extension officer salaries and other costs of the provincial centre. The provincial People’s Committee must then sanction this budget proposal.

\(^{472}\) Train and Visit (T&V) meetings are the most common method of transferring agricultural skills and technology to farmers. They are nearly always conducted by district extension officers in a public building or private house in a hamlet. The extension officer will talk for at least one hour on a chosen topic such as the production of sugar cane, after there is usually a question and answer period. In Ben Luc district where the T&V system was employed more widely, the average meeting size was twenty-five people.
the provincial state Agriculture and Rural Development Department. Furthermore most provincial extension officers at one time worked in Long An’s Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, district level extensionists in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa had never worked in the state agricultural apparatus. They seldom referred to themselves as can bo which is the usual term for state cadres, despite the fact that their salaries, if not their running costs, were funded by the state. In praxis the clearest example of extensionists fulfilling roles extra to their mandate was the collection of data on landholding usage and production statistics that were then relayed to the district state agricultural department (via the district extension office). During the meetings I attended in Ben Luc in 2002, this task was not taken too seriously. Good humour was shown by fellow extensionists who had either "forgotten," "misplaced" or could only vaguely recount in the broadest of terms their constituency's statistics. Less amusement was expressed by the district state agricultural official who was attending the meeting and whose job it was to collect this information. Sitting in marked isolation and aloof from the light-hearted spirit of this meeting, she provided a tableau suggestive of the distance that can exist between extensionists and the local state agricultural department.
Figure 4.5
National Structure of Agricultural Extension in Vietnam

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Bo Nghiep Va Phat Trien Nong Thon

Central Government

Department of Agro-Forestry Extension
Can Khuyen Nong - Khuyen Lam

Provincial Level

Agro-Forestry Extension Centre
Trung Tam Khuyen Nong

District Level

Agricultural Extension Office
Tram Khuyen Nong

*There is one Extension office per every district, located in the district capital town. Ideally there should be 3-5 district extension officers responsible for coordinating extension work through the district and generating running costs for the services.

Commune Extension Officer
Nong Vien

*There is one commune extension officer per commune and they are dependent on the district office for directions and funding.

Supplementary funding and assistance from outside donor organizations such as IRRI.
In theory the national structure of agricultural extension should be as set out in Figure 4.5. The reality is different. As Ian Christoplos concluded, in the 1990s the central government has little influence in the sphere of extension,

Though central government encourages the establishment of extension services, they have few resources to invest. As a result, individual provinces are creating their own extension structures adapted to local resources and priorities. Decisions about how to relate to communities, local organizations and NGO's are being made through pragmatic networking at provincial, district and village levels.\(^{473}\)

Every province and city has an agricultural extension office employing 2,500 officers nationally. However, only 60 percent of the districts have an extension office (totalling 370 offices nationwide). Even seven years after the national establishment of agricultural extension services, 70 percent of the nation’s communes still had no agricultural extension officer (nong vien).\(^ {474}\) The Central Highlands has been particularly noted for its failure to instigate adequate extension services. Alternatively Tran Thi Thu Trang has highlighted the role of veterans, rather than extension officers, in the provision of local agricultural extension services in Hoa Binh province.\(^ {475}\)

By comparison, extension services in Long An are extraordinarily well established. The province has extension offices in all fourteen districts and one extension officer in


\(^ {474}\) Nong Nghiep Viet Nam, # 137, 27 August 2001.

each of its 182 communes.\textsuperscript{476} Partly for this reason, a leading journalist said that since 1986, Long An has built all the necessary conditions for a “new countryside” (xay dung nong thon moi) and should be chosen by national policy makers to be a “model of industrialization and modernization” in Vietnam (mo hinh cong nghiep hoa - hien dai hoa).\textsuperscript{477} Today many people outside the province say that Long An remains a forward-looking and innovative province. Often such observations credit earlier fence breaking policies, outlined in chapter 3, which the provincial government initiated in the early 1980s. My understanding is that much of the credit for agricultural improvement, however, belongs with the many farmers, agricultural officials and extensionists below the province level in Long An.

The General Precepts of Agricultural Extension and Transplanting them to Vietnam

"The Khuyen Nong is a foreign type of system." Vice-Director of the Agricultural Extension Centre, Tan An. November 2001.

Why was the Vice-Director, a young urbanite scientist, so intent to assert the foreign credentials of his agency? Perhaps it is because foreign is associated with modernisation and progress. Maybe he was emphasizing that agricultural extension in Long An is distanced from Vietnamese state agricultural offices, which have had a dubious record in promoting solid agricultural development in the past. Before testing

\textsuperscript{476} In addition to having a nong viec in every commune, the Agricultural Extension Centre information booklet states that all of these commune extension officers have completed their education from class 6 (13 years old) to class 12 (18 years old). See, Bao cao, tong ket cong tac 5 nam 1997 - 2001 & phuong huong hoat dong giai doan 2002 – 2005: [Trung Tam Khuyen Nong, Tinh Long An, Thang 10, 2001], (Information on the achievements for the period 1997 – 2001 and plans for the period 2002 – 2005, Agricultural Extension Centre, 10 October 2001), pp.1-2.

\textsuperscript{477} Interview with Mr Khuyen Diep, Tan An, March 2002. This sentiment echoes the role Long An played in the Republic of Vietnam under President Diem when Saigon policy makers decided that it would be the ideal province to showcase agricultural and social policies. See, Race, Jeffrey, War Comes to Long An. Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), pp. 211-216.
the veracity of the vice-director's claims that Long An has been able to transplant a foreign type of system into its administration, we first need to look briefly at the agricultural extension paradigms elsewhere.

The agronomist J.B Claar, amongst others, has cautioned that all extension systems must be "created uniquely for each country." Success will be contingent on operating within the *sui generis* cultural, social and political norms of a country, or more realistically, a region. Extension, at its most basic level, is technology adoption and diffusion in agriculture. Its adoption and dissemination depends on a bank of social capital, which the World Bank defines as "the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's interactions" in a region. Taking into account the value of social capital, international agricultural agencies and donor organizations such as the World Bank have advocated that extension should operate within *microregions* ("a geographical area with natural, political, economic or social boundaries.") In Long An, a historical and practical importance of the district has led to it being a natural, rather than an outside sponsored, choice for the locus of extension activity. And perhaps because social capital differs from one district to another, each district's choice of agricultural extension techniques may differ, as they do in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts, which I examine in the following chapter.

Despite variation across the country, and even among districts within a single province, there is a generic body of loose functions, goals and problems associated with extension the world over. I will briefly review these so as to understand the basis

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479 Definition supplied by the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropica, (www.ciat.org/).
of the Vice-Director's claim and also to determine if Long An has transplanted and
developed an entirely new type of localised agricultural service that has risen
phoenix-like from the ashes of centralised planning and state sponsored
collectivisation.

The Role of 'Grassroots' Extension Officers
The World Bank, among others, has suggested that extension agents close to the rice-
roots should take on broader roles. Rather than simply transferring information and
functioning as scientific technocrats, they should adopt a humanistic and holistic
approach to helping improve the well-being of farmers' lives. In the case of Vietnam
it is noteworthy that the principles of socialism and indeed the revolutionary
principles that helped create victory in the Mekong Delta assigned this role to the
state. In the era of renovation, it has fallen to other non-government agents such as
extensionists, to help fulfil this role. Ranting and Zainuddin have offered a
comprehensive, if a little idealised, description of the functions and characteristics of
an extensionist:

The role of an extension worker can be broadly classified as
process facilitator, problem solver, resource linker, catalyst
and communicator. In consonance with this, it would be
ideal for the extension worker to have certain characteristics
and outlook, which would help him to dispense with these
roles. He should have a firm belief in the value of extension
to the farming community. He should show enthusiasm in
his job and should be prepared to dirty his hands and
clothes. He should be a good communicator and a good
listener. He should be honest and reliable. He should also be
creative, initiative as well as observant to potential
problems on the ground. He should always remember that
he leads by force of ideas rather than by force of position. 480

Sulaiman, Improving Extension Strategies for Rural Development (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Pertanian
During the year I spent with agricultural extension officers in Long An province, I came to know many of them well. In this environment it is easy to lose objectivity and romanticise about the work that they are doing in the community. By and large they struck me as very much unlike the agricultural extension agents that Stuart Callinson scathingly reported about in the 1970s. Instead, the nine district extensionists and most commune ones in Ben Luc and Doc Hoa districts exhibited several traits outlined by Ranting and Zainuddin. Miss Lang, the lead officer in Ben Luc who lived in the tiny extension office with her cat in a small alcove partitioned by rice sacks, embodied these ideal characteristics. She was invariably eager to listen and offer advice during the frequent visitations from local farmers and her commune staff who came seeking guidance. The energy she expended on meticulous planning of Train and Visit schemes (T&V), workshops, and meetings (between staff, farmers, mass organizations and local government officials) earned her a deep respect from cadres, staff and the local farming community.

My initial contact with the Ben Luc extension service was with the lead officer, Miss Lang who was introduced to me by an extension agent from the provincial extension centre in Tan An. After one of the first of many meetings I attended with Chi Lang in Ben Luc, we decided to walk the short distance to buy lunch. Along the way, the heel on one of her shoes broke off. We both laughed a little awkwardly and continued on to lunch, which she bought, a gesture of kindness that I was embarrassingly never allowed to reciprocate. The following morning I was reminded afresh of the previous

482 In Vietnamese 'chi' is a form of address that denotes an older female (friend).
day's small incident when she greeted me wearing the same pair of shoes of which one was now adorned with brightly coloured masking tape to bind the errant heel in place. For my remaining acquaintance with Chi Lang, which lasted for more than a year, she continued to wear the same shoes in the office, in the fields and at meetings. It seemed plain that were she to have forfeited her repeated generosity at our frequent repasts, she could have comfortably bought herself a new pair many times over or at least, paid for a small repair job at the local cobblers. This does seem an obscure anecdote to recount and seemingly highlights nothing more than the generosity or lack of vanity of a friend. However, in an era when so much is heard about corruption or the garnering of excessive job perks such as mobile phones for local officials, much less is heard of those people who could use their positions for personal gain but instead choose to execute their jobs with efficiency and integrity.

In Vietnam, if status could immediately be gauged with a degree of accuracy, it is often by the motorbike a person drives. It is therefore significant that all of the district extension agents in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa drove the most antiquated of models - a "Cub" that even in rural areas is becoming a rarity. Due to a dearth of equipment and financial resources, extensionists, particularly those in Ben Luc, were forced to act in an entrepreneurial fashion to raise funds to sponsor their activities. Yet there was no evidence to suggest that this revenue went anywhere other than the district office's coffers. On returning to the office after each train and visit scheme, I would see the extensionists account for all the user charges they had collected at the meeting and meticulously lock this money in a small safe in Chi Lang's desk.\footnote{At all of the train and visit schemes held by the district extension officers in Ben Luc, farmers were required to pay a 'user-charge' of 15,000 Dong and write their name on a list recording payment of this money. Sometimes farmers would also take this opportunity to buy more seed from the district extensionists. It was most common for farmers to come to the office to make their purchases but since}
long this transparency will prevail as expediency to raise more revenue pushes district extensionists into further collaboration with private agri-businesses and wealthy farmers. I will return to this question in the next chapter.

A test of an extension agent’s commitment to local farmers is to ask why they have chosen to become, and continue to be, district and commune extensionists. In the case of the district staff, all officers had some form of agricultural diploma from an agricultural research institute such as the Cuu Long Rice Research Institute or the Agriculture and Forestry University in Thu Duc. These qualifications earn them the highly regarded title of agricultural engineer (ky su nong nghiep). All the district officers had worked in their posts since the establishment of the service in 1991 and expressed no desire to leave their jobs to find work in the provincial Extension Centre, government or private sector. Whilst a few of the agents expressed regret at the limited options available to them after completing their tertiary education other than to return to work in their native districts, the consensus was that they were satisfied, considering their positions as “jobs for life”. Factors such as local community trust and respect, a commitment to agricultural development and perhaps altruism towards their constituencies, served as incentives and stimulants in their work. On the other hand, provincial extension agents had little contact with local farmers and could be conceptualized more as the intelligentsia of the agricultural extension service in Long An. In short, district extensionists who were working at the coalface have what Ranting and Zainuddin describe as “a firm belief in the value of extension to the farming community.” On a more suggestive level, Christoplos observed in 1993 “an

seed inputs were in such great demand and frequently ran out, farmers would tend to put in their order early and come and collect at a later date or the commune extensionist would deliver it for them after one of their many visits to the district office.
understated pride in the mischievous nature of the process of agricultural development to which they [agricultural extensionists] were contributing. 484

In an attempt to gauge extension staff motivation, I asked twenty-nine of the thirty-six district and commune officers why they had chosen to work in the local extension service. The answers were remarkably similar across commune and district boundaries, and reflected, above all, a sense of idealism in the developmental capacity of extension work. They discussed their satisfaction in helping farmers to enhance their skills and their belief in the integral role that farmers play in the nation’s growth. Many extension agents also expressed their satisfaction in combining teaching and farming. Most of their answers reflected a strong sense of community spirit on the part of the extensionists. Interestingly, commune officers, rather than district officers, mentioned that their position helped them to increase their own skills. Like the veterans performing extension services that Tran Thi Thu Trang observed in Hoa Binh province,485 these agents who had little formal education may have sought these posts to obtain greater access to information and technology, thus helping their families and increasing their personal prestige within their communities.

The Goals of Agricultural Extension
There are a dizzying array of paradigms and theses relating to the goals of extension which have been adapted, discarded and recycled over the last fifty years. A.T Mosher, acknowledging the need to adjust practices to fit each situation, formulated six broad objectives for extension that remain transcendent today:486

- To give farmers new information and new skills
- To help with rural tasks relevant to agricultural production and marketing
- To take research to the farmers
- To encourage farmers
- To train farmers in decision making
- To support the production of a particular crop

Implementation of this set of principles is, of course, contingent on a qualified, enthusiastic and well-resourced staff. Also important is that the officers charged with these tasks be members of the local community and thus have an affinity with the prevailing network of social norms and relations. In nearly all of the communes I visited, at least one farmer insisted that prior to the establishment of the extension service, nobody assisted them. Whilst these sentiments cannot definitively predicate the technical merits of the officers, they do indicate the respect and esteem that is accorded to extensionists. In nearly all of the interviews conducted with farmers, most were happy to speak with candour in front of the extension agents and even representatives of the mass organizations. However, they would become reticent in the presence of a state agricultural cadre.

A characteristic common to nearly all meetings I saw between district extensionists and farmers was the eagerness of the latter to articulate and discuss wide-ranging problems they encountered in their daily lives. These were not necessarily technical issues but rather concerns such as the need to improve local infrastructure, ensure a stable price for their cash crop and to maximise their livelihoods on tiny and scattered land plots. At times the farmers hoped that the officers could help solve these problems or, at least, mediate these concerns to the authorities who could solve them. Some extensionists in Duc Hoa district told me that their colleagues in other districts had even been called upon to mediate in local land disputes. In this way, the district extensionists are performing traditional functions of the state and perhaps even usurping the position of the mass organizations, most specifically, the Farmers Association (Hoi Nong dan) who, inter alia, are charged with the responsibility of supporting farming interests.

After nearly all of the train and visit meetings there would be a banquet, which could last for hours. These occasions became community meetings and an ideal opportunity for local residents, who in some hamlets and communes lived quite large distances apart, to get together and catch up on news. The topics of conversation touched on numerous matters pertaining to people's daily lives and often afforded the opportunity for villagers to speak to the local chairman of the commune People's Committee in an informal setting and invariably with their tongues a little loosened after a few cups of rice wine. Local residents also used these gatherings as a forum to discuss the mid-term elections of deputies to the district and commune councils that were set for May 2002. At these gatherings, the district extension officer would always be in demand for more specific information and asked about news of developments and progress in
other communes throughout the district. In this way the district extensionists were performing a similar function that had been intended for the Civic Action and Rural Development cadres working for the Government in Saigon, serving to bind each commune and hamlet into a wider district identity by acting as well-informed and credible messengers. After these gatherings, I was left with the impression that they served a very useful community function. However, I also realised that not all members of the local community were able to air their views because richer farmers, more often than poorer ones, were able to attend these gatherings. District extension officers in Long An helped facilitate grassroots meetings and brought together voluntary societal groups, but the gatherings might primarily be said to be serving the interests of farmers who can afford to pay the fees and hold positions of status within the community already.

Skills, Training and Salaries of Agricultural Extension Personnel
If extensionists are to fulfil the six objectives outlined by A.T Mosher, then it stands to reason that they will require good skills and training beyond possessing the admirable characteristics that are described by Ranting and Zainuddin. The provincial extension staff, who rarely engaged with local farmers, were logically the most educated and possessed the highest level of technical skills. These officers are comparable to their counterparts in Burma where Ardeth Maung Thawnghnun has observed that the higher level extensionists are often perceived more as an 'intelligentsia' rather than approachable officers. All the provincial officers, after completing their tertiary education, had been trained as cadres in the state agricultural department before the renaissance of agricultural extension in Long An in 1991.

The district extensionists, as I have noted, all had some tertiary education in agronomy. However, the commune extensionists had very little education and training and some had only completed a primary education, which meant that the great majority of extension meetings were both planned and executed by the district staff. In order to institutionalise a far more wide-reaching extension network, both national and provincial policies are afoot to bolster the role of these commune officers in agricultural extension throughout the rural areas of Vietnam. These polices are expedient since the goal is to reach more farmers, especially in isolated communities, but quantity does not necessarily equate to quality. My research suggests that such policies must go hand in hand with strengthening the skill set of the commune extension officers.

On the rare occasions when T & V’s were led by a commune extensionist, they seldom met with great success. One such meeting was held in Nhut Chanh commune in Ben Luc and was led by a very affable commune officer whom I knew well through his regular visits to the district office and attendance at district extension meetings. After waiting forty minutes, only two people were in attendance, the owner of the house where the meeting was being held and his elderly female relative. Curious as to the reason of the small attendance the convivial ba blamed the local representative of the farmers association for not publicising the meeting, and then suggested that the


489 In Vietnamese “ba” is used to address old women, literally it can be translated as grandmother.
farmers were too busy to attend. As a few more farmers trickled in, it became clear why people were not coming. Nobody had any vested interest in the subject of the meeting, which was the raising of tilapia fish. The villagers had neither ponds nor imminent plans to construct any. They insisted that they wanted to learn more about improving their primary rice crops or, failing that, learn more about maintaining the health of their small-scale pig raising projects that the district extensionists had encouraged them to begin in recent years. This situation mirrors past failings in extension work when officers were uninformed of local conditions or forced to do the bidding of the central government, rendering their assistance as mainly ineffectual. Whilst the subject for this meeting was inappropriately chosen, more alarming was the extension officer’s evident lack of knowledge on the subject. He distributed and referred to a small pamphlet that provided basic information on fish raising (nuoi ca ao), but beyond this, the only information he was able to provide was grand promises of the profits to be had if the farmers were to diversify into such an activity.

Such promises are dangerous if not supported with sufficient information. In the worst-case scenario, the disastrous example of a large group of novice prawn farmers in Can Duoc district could be replicated throughout the province. In 2002, farmers in Can Duoc were encouraged by the large profits to be found in aquaculture and collectively bought young prawn stock to breed in 1650 hectares. Lacking the necessary information and skills, they bought sickly stock and then lacked the means to raise the prawns, resulting in the loss of nearly all of their investment. Whilst in the past, ill-considered state agricultural policies occasionally led to such disasters, the loss ultimately remained the burden of the state. In the renovation era, such mistakes represent devastating personal losses to individual farmers. Therefore, an extensionist,
if not sufficiently trained, can play an unfortunately integral role in the economic disasters of some of their constituents.

With concerns about extensionists' in mind, I conducted a survey of all eighteen grassroots extensionists (district and commune level) in Ben Luc to determine how they regarded their levels of skills, training and salary (figure 4.6). The results show a need for further skill enhancement. In common with the local government departments, greater emphasis on appropriate training is required to equip extension staff for the modern day requirements of agricultural development. One significant difference between the district government and extension offices is that the latter do not seem to have to spend any time at all in the political study meetings that consume a great deal of time for state cadres.

**Figure 4.6**
Survey of District and Commune Extension Agents Regarding Skills, Salary and Training Requirements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Would you like to receive more education and training for your job?</td>
<td>Overwhelmingly the officers agreed that they would like to have more training and education to help them fulfil the functions of their posts. Commune extensionists stressed that they would only like to attend courses that were held in the province (despite the proximity to Saigon and Can Tho).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would be the best method to enhance your education and skills?</td>
<td>The most common response amongst commune extensionists was that some system of paid study leave should be established. District staff were happy to attend courses held throughout the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe that your salary is sufficient?</td>
<td>Commune staff in particular stressed that their salaries should reflect the hours they worked and be sufficient to provide incentives to work harder. Currently salaries insufficient.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another expected problem was discontent at low salary levels. This issue was a matter of concern for the directors of the Extension Centre and Agricultural and Rural Development Department in Tan An. Both directors cited low wages as a key reason for the difficulties in recruiting qualified people into their organizations. The Vice-Director of the Extension Centre admitted that the district and province level offices should have eighty-nine staff members but there were currently only eighty-two employees and filling this shortfall was proving difficult. Circumstances are different today compared to when the current district and province staff started work, since agricultural students have a greater choice of employment with private firms and other opportunities to remain in urban centres. At least for the state agricultural department, positive initiatives are afoot. Central government directives are slowly being implemented to enhance salaries in line with efforts to professionalise the bureaucracy and remove the underlying causes of corruption, staff apathy and recruitment problems. The district extension staff, however, remain reliant for their meagre wages on the provincial funding agreed by Long An's People's Committee in conjunction with the provincial agricultural department, which is then filtered down from the provincial Extension Centre.

Methodology of Agricultural Extension
Extension officers use various methods to encourage farmers to adopt new technology and encourage broader dissemination of new technologies and skills throughout a microregion. Listed below are the most common techniques employed in extension throughout the world.
• Dissemination of information through the mass media (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines).

• Dissemination of information through pamphlets and newsletters.

• Train and Visit schemes (T&V) - Long established and most common method of extension where local extension agents make regular contact with groups of farmers and selected 'contact' farmers' to train and transfer technologies and skills. Not all farmers in one area will be at a training session but it is expected that those present at the meeting will diffuse this information through kin and neighbourhood networks.

• On Farm Trials - Demonstration of new technology and skills on pieces of communal land or on the land belonging to a farmer keen to experiment with the new technology advocated by the extensionists.

• Field trips - Extension officers and contact farmers travel to field sites (outside of the microregion) to see how new practices are being operated.

• Farmer Participatory Method (FPM) - System currently favoured most by development agencies. It is a bottom-up approach to extension where traditional farming practices are taken into account and extension agents act as facilitators, providing input options while the farmers themselves determine their major problems, probable treatments to be tested, conduct and evaluate experimentation and select the best treatment for adoption.

In Ben Luc, extension officers almost exclusively employed the first three strategies with the greatest emphasis on T&V. Such practices are common in many developing countries where the goals of technology transfer (giao ky thuat) are inhibited by poor infrastructure and under-staffing but yet still must reach the maximum amount of
farmers at the minimum financial cost. For Long An province as a whole, the Extension Centre records indicate that extension agents in other districts are employing a wide spectrum of methodologies (Figures 4.7, 4.8, 4.9). It should be recognised that the methodologies, classes and demonstrations must be appropriate for the local farmers. There is a danger that provincial or even district agricultural planning, may lead to pressure being exerted on extensionists to fulfil a certain quota of classes on subjects that simply have no practical value to farmers. This may explain the ineffectual meeting on tilapia fish led by the commune extension officer mentioned previously. District and commune extension agents must continue to remain close to the interests of the constituencies they serve rather than being captured by state or private goals.
### Figure 4.7
Technology and Skill Training Classes Held Throughout the Province, 1997 - 2001.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Number of Classes</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Vegetables</th>
<th>Fruit Trees</th>
<th>VAC model</th>
<th>Pig</th>
<th>Fowl</th>
<th>Bovine</th>
<th>Aquaculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>505</td>
<td>236</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>191</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>299</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>145</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>35</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001**</td>
<td>715</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 4.8
On-Farm Trials and Demonstration Plots, 1997 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of plots</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Vegetables</th>
<th>Fruit trees</th>
<th>VAC model</th>
<th>Pig</th>
<th>Fowl</th>
<th>Bovine</th>
<th>Aquaculture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1205</td>
<td>937</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>180</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>584</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>381</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001**</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 4.9
Use of Media in Transferring Information, 1997 - 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Radio broadcasts issued from Tan An</th>
<th>Radio broadcasts made in villages and communes</th>
<th>Televised information</th>
<th>Billboards</th>
<th>Articles in provincial newspaper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
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<td>46</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Practices that should not be included within the Remit of Agricultural Extension

This thesis has tried to demonstrate that rural cadres and extension officers need community trust and respect to facilitate change. Therefore governments should not use agricultural extension services to promote narrow political agendas. The primary reason for this is that in some areas, the local people have negative perceptions of the state. In the Punjab for instance, Hans Helmrich has stressed that “self-help” organisations, which includes agricultural extension, should not be associated with the government because people are mistrustful of their political regime. He observed that

The behaviour of the rural population towards government institutions in the Punjab deviates considerably from their behaviour towards a private person, or private organizations. Restricting, as far as possible, the government bureaucracy to direct or indirectly influence the promotion of self-help organizations is likely to bring about better incentives to participating members.  

A striking example of a government hijacking extension for its own purposes is in Burma. Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung has demonstrated that the government, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, requires the agricultural extension officers throughout Burmese villages to implement and enforce Rangoon’s policies. Agricultural extension agents are expected to fill quotas set in Rangoon and submit detailed statistical information on the size of farmers’ plots and yields. Aside from distracting officers from their more pertinent functions, using them to enforce unpopular central government policies destroys the trust that must exist between farmers and extensionists and renders agricultural extension work almost useless. As a result, Thawnghmung recounts frequent instances where farmers have quite brazenly lied to the officers and under-reported their yield and land sizes. Thus the local level

Burmese extension officers are trapped in the strict hierarchical vortex associated with rigid central planning of agriculture. If any positivity is to be found in this case, it is perhaps in the old adage that things could always be worse, as Thawnghmung points out, "Agricultural extension workers, all of whom are civilian technocrats are the least powerful and feared government employees in Burmese villages." 492

Agricultural extension in Long An has not experienced the problems illustrated by Thawnghmung in Burma. It is a local service and usually acts in response to local needs rather than being co-opted by the central government and ministry of agriculture to enforce policies and quotas. By emerging after collectivisation at a time when central planning is much less intrusive, the extension system in the districts I have studied are not tarnished by past government programs to shape agriculture. Extension in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts, perhaps reflecting sensitivity to the past, has carved out a path closely mirroring the separation of extension and government found in the Punjab. This is one reason why it is useful to think of extension agents as associates of the state because the service is able to exist, and succeed, at the interface of society and state.

Gender: Are Rural Women Losing Out?

In Vietnam, Jayne Werner argues, women generally have not been beneficiaries of the renovation (doi moi) period. Her research in more northerly parts of Vietnam suggests that the socialist discourse which promoted political, social and economic equality is in rapid decline. Werner’s research and UNDP studies have recognized a “feminization” of agriculture as more men seek off-farm employment and the burden of production has fallen on women, mirroring the situation during the war with America. This feminization has also led to an increase in female-headed households, which Werner observes, tend to be the “poorest of the poor” and therefore most in need of extension services. She fails to consider what role extension agents might play in assisting women in agriculture; she leaves the responsibility to “party leaders and mass organizations.” But other scholars who have looked at extensionist’s work find “throughout the countryside women typically are excluded from extension meetings and train and visit schemes.” Furthermore, the meetings women do attend are “still mainly oriented towards men.”

In Long An, the percentage of female labour is a startlingly high 80%. As women are also primarily responsible for domestic work, their work burden is more onerous than men. The gravity of this situation is recognised by the national Government in Hanoi which has promulgated a National Plan of Action for the Advancement of

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494 It is calculated that 27.7 percent of poor households in Long An, have women serving as the head of the household. Statistics supplied by the Women’s Association, Ben Luc District.
498 Statistics supplied by Ben Luc Women’s Association.
Women, 2001 – 2005. This plan includes nationwide efforts to strengthen the role of the Women’s Union in protecting the interests of rural women and also better enforcing the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of discrimination Against Women. At a district level, my research does not strongly re-enforce the rising inequality that Jayne Werner observed. Nor did I observe the total exclusion of women in agriculture and extension activities. Possibly Long An is unusual. Women are more prominent in government affairs than they are in most other provinces. For instance, Long An was one of only two provinces in Vietnam to have more female than males representatives in the 10th National Assembly; and in the run-up to the 11th National Assembly in 2002, seven of the twelve candidates in Long An were female. A high proportion of female representatives does not necessarily correlate to genuine representation of female farmers’ needs but it is a positive indicator of political gender-mainstreaming in the province.

In agricultural extension the first positive indication of a gender balance in Long An is that the director of the Agricultural Extension Centre in Tan An, Do Thi Ruong, is female. Mrs Ruong also stood for election to the National Assembly in 1992 on a platform of, amongst other issues, enhancing support for women in agriculture. Furthermore, the extension directors in both Ben Luc and Duc Hoa are female and the gender balance at a district level at least reflected the gender equality that is promoted in socialist discourse. At commune level the gender balance went down to five males to two females. Overall, among agricultural extension personnel in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts, there is a reasonably equitable gender representation.

499 It is normal practice for the provincial candidates standing for election to the National Assembly to publish their intended agendas in the local provincial newspaper: Bao Chi Long An, 20 July 1992, pp. 1-2.
International development agencies in Vietnam are concerned that agricultural extension is only reaching and assisting male farmers. These organisations are eager to re-orient extension services so that females are also the targets and recipients of skills that can enhance their livelihoods. The district extension services in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa, however, were not obviously targeting their assistances to men, to the detriment of female farmers. In all the T&V’s held in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts (in 2001 - 2002), approximately 35% of the participants were women. Gender divisions were delineated in the seating arrangements, which is common at any gathering or banquet in rural Vietnam. Certainly the younger females were reticent to voice opinions but quite often the older females were the most vocal in the meetings. This may be explained by a Confucian respect for the opinions of elders. Furthermore, the 'model farmer' (nong dan san xuat - kinh doanh giao) was frequently female, an honour used to bestow status and respect on those farmers considered to have the most productive and innovative farming systems in the area.

This is not to say that most women in the countryside have adequate support from the agricultural extension service. Both the women and the men most likely to be attending the T & V’s, or in other ways benefitting from agricultural extension, were

501 Only once did I attend a training class that was exclusively attended by male farmers and this was in Tan My commune in Duc Hoa district. However, the meeting was led by an officer from the district Plant Protection Office (bao ve thuc vat) on the issue of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and the commune and district extensionists did not participate in this meeting.
502 The title of 'model farmer' is bestowed at commune, district and province level and gives status and recognition to the recipient. Officials expect the model farmer program to stimulate rural production and they hope the model farmers will pass on their experience to others. Model farmers are identified and then selected by a joint decision process involving the mass organisations, Agriculture and Rural Development office, Party committee and the People’s Committee at commune, district and province level. From 1997 - 1999, 11,384 farmers were given this title at commune level, 2,546 at district level and 970 at province level. Statistics were provided by Khuyen Diep, “Tinh hinh ‘tich tu’ va ‘chuyen huong’ ruong dat o DBSCL hien nay.” (The current situation of land accumulation and transfer in the Mekong Delta.). This is part of a manuscript on the situation of agriculture in Long An province that Mr Khuyenh Diep hopes to publish.
farmers who had enough income to invest in their farms and had the time and money to attend these meetings. Therefore my research needed to be tempered by time spent with farmers who fell outside of the agricultural extension net. One example is like Mrs Nguyen Thi Van in Duc Hoa district. Van's husband died in 1988, leaving her to raise a son and daughter. She owned the rights to two hectares of land and a thatched hut with no electricity which was a ten-minute walk to her nearest neighbour and a 35 minute walk to the nearest district road. She told me that her land was capable of producing two harvests of rice per year in a good year but that the yields had always been less than what the land was capable of producing and she could not sustain her family's livelihood. As a result, both of her children had left the hamlet to work in a factory in Saigon. She told me in 2001 that her crops were worse than usual and pointed to the rice plants, which had evidently contracted a disease and were dying before they could be harvested. I asked if she could get support or at least credit from the local government, mass organizations or agricultural extension services to invest in more resistant rice strains, pesticides or even diversify into small scale husbandry to ensure a more stable livelihood. She told me she could not. She depended on the financial assistance from her children and relatives. She did not have enough capital to diversify and she felt too old to learn new ways. Her situation, she claimed, was hopeless.

On the same day that I met Van, I met a distant female relative of hers who was living in a more densely populated and compacted hamlet in the commune of Tan My, Duc Hoa district. In common with Van, Mrs Nguyen Ngoc Ha was also the head of her
household but there the similarities in their situations ended. Ha had recently been
nominated as a model farmer. Although she claimed that she had never received direct
assistance from local agricultural extensionists, she had read newspaper articles and
extension pamphlets that the district and provincial and extension officers had
produced. Ten years ago, she began to raise pigs with what she termed as "help from a
good friend at the district Women's Association." Since this time, she had been able to
incrementally build a very successful VAC project on the small amount of land
adjacent to her home. In fact she had become so successful that she was able to
share her largesse and had "adopted" one of her nieces and taken responsibility for the
child's education and upbringing. She also regularly allowed her property to be
used as a demonstration site for the district and commune Women's Association,
which, in Duc Hoa, appears to be more proactive than the district agricultural
extensionists in regard to promoting the household as a unit of development and
diversification.

Unlike many countries, Vietnam has a far-reaching Women's Association (Hoi Phu
nu) that is charged with helping and promoting women, but this is still a state led
mass organization. However, there are documented instances across rural Vietnam
where this association has, to all intents and purposes, acted like an NGO. It has
actively promoted women in agriculture particularly in regard to animal husbandry
and assisted in micro credit schemes. These tend to be local initiatives and dependent

503 Ha's household included her son, "adopted daughter" and mother-in-law. Apparently Ha's husband
had not lived in the family home for some years and whilst he was not talked of as being dead, the
reasons for his lengthy absence from the family home were obscure.
504 VAC is the common abbreviation for the combination of fruit garden, pond (to raise fish) and fowl
or animal enclosures/coops (Vuon, Ao, Chuong).
505 Wealthy people in Vietnam frequently 'adopt' a child from less prosperous relatives and take full
responsibility for the child's upbringing.
on the character and proactivity of the local association and members. Therefore implementation of such schemes has been patchy across the nation.

Throughout Long An the opportunities available to women in agriculture varies. Many women, like Van, feel trapped in poverty and receive no assistance through agricultural extension or the local Women's Association. Alternatively, I also met wealthy female entrepreneurs in Tan An town who were involved in the processing and export of agricultural produce. On one occasion I was introduced to an unmarried female farmer from Thu Thua district that had joined the ranks of "millionaire farmers" in the province. At some agricultural extension meetings, I met women who had become model farmers. I also met model farmers such as Ha who had benefited from assistance from the Women's Association and was now able to assist others. It is therefore hard to make definitive conclusions regarding gender in agriculture in Long An. Agricultural extension officers' efforts do not exclude women, but they do tend to be more helpful to better off farmers, whether they are female or male.

**Generic Difficulties and Problems Encountered in Agricultural Extension**

Extension in Long An province suffers from many of the difficulties experienced by other services in developing countries. According to district and commune extension agents, the most serious problems hampering agricultural development in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa were in rank order: poor infrastructure and communications, lack of markets for produce, insufficient clean water, inadequate irrigation, and a shortage of farm labour due to young people migrating to work and study in urban areas.
One fundamental problem that the extensionists were experiencing was insufficient funds and personnel to extend education and help to the people most in need of assistance. Figure 4.10 indicates the large number of families and vast area that each district extension office must cover. A poor infrastructure system throughout Long An makes travel difficult and time consuming. Even in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa, where the infrastructure is superior to other districts, the district extensionists occasionally expressed dismay about conducting meetings in the less accessible hamlets. However, whilst commune extensionists lack the necessary skills and training to significantly assist their constituencies, the locus of extension work is likely to remain at the district level. The district offices were under-staffed and this fact, coupled with a need to raise revenue, has contributed to the disparate strategies Ben Luc and Duc Hoa officers have devised for agricultural development in their constituencies which are explored in more detail in the following chapter.
Figure 4.10
Number of Agricultural Extension Officers per District and Province Capital
Territory, 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District (huyen) and province capital area (thi)</th>
<th>No. of district extension officers Per district</th>
<th>Number of farming families per district</th>
<th>Farming land in the district (hectares)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tan An territory</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10,276</td>
<td>5,874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chau Thanh</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18,990</td>
<td>12,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Tru</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12,806</td>
<td>8,970</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ben Luc</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>21,088</strong></td>
<td><strong>22,593</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thu Thua</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14,632</td>
<td>22,851</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Duoc</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23,501</td>
<td>16,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can Giuoc</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23,931</td>
<td>16,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duc Hoa</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>37,137</strong></td>
<td><strong>36,140</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duc Hue</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13,118</td>
<td>26,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanh Hoa</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9,872</td>
<td>30,658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Thanh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12,589</td>
<td>30,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moe Hoa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10,383</td>
<td>38,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinh Hung</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6,874</td>
<td>29,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tan Hung</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8,001</td>
<td>32,790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Conclusion**

Each microregion's extension service is a hybrid system based on generic methodologies that are adapted to local conditions. The Vice-Director of the Extension Centre was right to claim that Vietnam had developed a foreign type of system, in as much as many of the goals, techniques, successes and failures can be found in other systems throughout the world. If the Vice-Director was laying claim to modernity, then he was also right. Agricultural extension in Long An may even be considered to be at the vanguard of international extension trends. The choice of the district for the locus of extension work reflects the practical importance that this level of administration can play in the rural lives of people in the Mekong Delta. Freed
from the shackles of strict central government control and planning, the district became a microregion long before development agencies thought in these terms. Furthermore, agricultural extension in Long An was initiated as a local service to cater for local needs before the central government and development organizations stressed decentralization as an inviolate part of the equation for successful extension practices and local services provision in Vietnam.

Whether the appropriate scientific technologies are being adopted and diffused is rightfully the job of the agronomist to determine. What is significant is that district extension officers in Long An have won the trust of many of their constituents and are engaged in a wide-ranging dialogues with some local farming communities that formerly remained behind closed doors. I suggest that district extensionists are at the confluence of a new matrix of rural relations in regard to agricultural development in Long An because they are neither state nor societal actors. Whilst the local state agricultural bureaucracy continues to formulate agricultural plans and targets and deal in the art of planning, district extension officers have assumed a more practical and dynamic role by directly offering services to farmers in their districts. On the other side of this matrix is an increasingly stratified rural society that can only be partially served by a district extension service that lacks sufficient personnel and financial resources. The next chapter examines agricultural extension strategies in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa in greater depth and explains why two adjacent districts in Long An have pursued two very disparate paths in agricultural development.
Chapter Five: - A Tale of Two Districts: Evolving Separate Identities in Agricultural Development

This chapter will delve more deeply into the strategies that district extension officers have employed in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa to assist certain farmers within their constituencies. The serious constraints of revenue raising and the large land and population mass that these agents must cover has contributed significantly to the varying agricultural development patterns that are exhibited by these two districts. Extension officers in Ben Luc have almost exclusively focused on the household farming unit. In Duc Hoa, extension agents have chosen to channel their assistance to a new-style dairy cooperative. District extension officers have been able to develop these strategies through creating informal alliances with partners within the district, which I refer to as internal alliances. District extension agents have also forged partnerships outside of the district or even province, which I term external alliances.

The primary focus of the chapter will be on the two districts of Ben Luc and Duc Hoa. As highlighted in Chapter Three, Ben Luc had been lauded in the late 70s and early 1980s as a model district with the highest number of production groups and collective farms in Long An.\textsuperscript{506} By the late 1990s, however, district extension officers were vigorously promoting and supporting household farming units. They were also assisting in the development and strengthening of small and informal cooperative groups. In 2002, informal groups within rural society were a sensitive, and perhaps even worrisome issue, for the central government and the VCP, but were favoured by authorities in the provincial capital, Tan An. Duc Hoa in the late 1970s and early

\textsuperscript{506} At that time Ben Luc was joined to Thu Thua and was called Ben Thu. The districts reverted to their original status in 1984.
1980s, according to the local media, was a laggard district; it came last in official
tables that charted the establishment of production groups and collective farms. By the
late 1990s, however, district extension officers had helped stimulate the growth of a
highly successful and nationally acclaimed new style dairy cooperative. This
development illustrates stronger linkages to central government policy, which favours
and supports the new-style cooperatives. 507 Long An provincial authorities remain
unconvinced of the merits of new-style cooperatives and, like many people
throughout the province, still hold residual fears of large-scale cooperative
enterprises, despite the great differences that exist between old collectives and new-
style cooperatives. 508 I will suggest that the historical experiences of a district can
help to underline people's attachment to their native district but I caution against a
priori judgments based on these area’s past experiences with collectives to explain
current attitudes to the role of cooperatives in agrarian development today.

Therefore the reform era, that is the 1990s to the early 21st century, has the most
complex situation of all periods examined in this thesis in regard to central regulation

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507 The National Assembly issued the new Cooperative law in April 1996. In February 1997 a state
decree (15-CP, 02/97) was issued to stimulate the new-style cooperatives. Both the decree and the law
were subject to the Communist Party’s Decree #68, issued in May 1996. New-style cooperatives were
stressed at the Fifth Plenum of the Party Central Committee (March 2002) as being an essential part of
the national economy. These cooperatives receive preferential treatment in terms of training schools for
the cooperative management and tax incentives: *Vietnam News*, 16 April, 2002, (http://vietnamnews.net/);
*Vietnam News*, 22 March 2002, (http://vietnamnews.net/). Adam Fforde distinguishes between new-style cooperative groups that are public entities (new-style cooperatives) and other types of “cooperative groups” that are private entities. For more detailed
discussion of this law and new cooperatives groups in general: Fforde, Adam & Nguyen Dinh Huan,
*Vietnamese Rural Society and its Institutions: Results of a Study of Cooperative Groups and

508 Interviews conducted at the Long An Provincial State Agricultural Department in 2001. Farmer’s
negative attitudes towards old collectives and new-style cooperatives were repeatedly stressed
versus local initiative expressed at a district level. Districts have become revitalised and display strong local initiatives. This has not necessarily been through the efforts of local state cadre alone but also through the effort of associates of the state, especially the extension agents.

New Types of Cooperatives in Long An Province

The failure of collective organisations to take root in Long An did not mean that farmers or the local authorities rejected cooperative organisations. In the transitional stage from centralized planning and the introduction of market reforms farmers in many places saw a need to cooperate for a variety of tasks ranging from irrigation to marketing. The attenuated role of central government in guiding agriculture has given greater latitude for farmers, agricultural extension officers and district officials to decide what types of organisations best suit local needs. As a result there is an array of cooperative groups in Long An today (2002). These groups vary in function and purpose but collectively they mark a radical departure from the characteristics of the collective economy of earlier years.

There are two main types of cooperative organisations in Long An. The first is new-style cooperatives. These are legal entities and are operated in accordance with the New Cooperative Law issued by the National Assembly in 1996. In 2002, Long An province had only two of these, one of which was in Duc Hoa district. This chapter will later examine the integral role that agricultural extension officers have played in promoting the new-style dairy cooperative in this district.

509 The reform (doi moi) era in Vietnam is considered by most people to have begun in the mid-1980s with the Central Party Committee’s declaration to initiate market reforms. I only examine the period from the early 1990s to 2003.
The second type of organisation is the more informal cooperative group sometimes known as a self-help organisation. In 2000, the estimated number of this type of organization was 11,409. These groups vary significantly in function, which Adam Fforde and Nguyen Dinh Huan suggest is demonstrative of the "ways in which farmers are testing various different horses for courses." The internal regulations and even the terminology used to describe these groups vary (depending on who is speaking about them and which part of the province they are in). In Ben Luc district agricultural extension officers and district officials have directed their expertise to developing these types of cooperative groups.

New-Style Cooperatives
It is common today to glibly refer to an end of the collectivization period in Vietnam but much harder to define when exactly it did end. Some scholars such as Chu Van Lam determine that the watershed year was 1986 when the doi moi reforms were inaugurated. As chapter three highlighted, there have certainly been milestones along the incremental road to disbanding collectivization. In Long An, collectives by and large rarely operated; usually they only existed ‘officially’. Often with the complicity of some local cadres, farmers undermined the precepts of collectivized farming through acts of everyday resistance and turning a blind eye to the strictures of official state policy for collectives. The edifice of the collective system is most commonly seen to have crumbled with the introduction of Contract #10 in 1988, and the New Land Law in 1993. I suggest that the official death knell for the collectives

came with the issuing of Party Decree 68 in 1996, which provided the legal basis for voluntary new-style cooperatives.

While these new-style cooperatives cannot be called state cooperatives, they are greatly favoured by the government in Hanoi and receive financial incentives, management training and technological and research inputs. The Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee in March 2002 further re-enforced the Party’s commitment to a latter day cooperative movement. This has led to some speculation that the Party considers the current new-style cooperatives as a temporary foundation to build larger units of mass production.\textsuperscript{512} New-style cooperatives continue to be called \textit{hop tac xa} (cooperative) with only the suffix of \textit{moi} (new) added to denote their new status. Linguistically, despite the very great differences that exist between past collectives and modern day new-style cooperatives, they retain a strong link between past and present, which can sometimes re-kindle emotive reactions in Long An farmers.

During many interviews with farmers in Long An, I asked their opinions about the new-style cooperatives and whether they would consider joining one. On some occasions, they gave me no time to explain that I was talking about new cooperatives rather than old collectives; they immediately expressed disgruntlement and displeasure at the old collective system. When farmers reflected on my question more fully, and understood that I was asking about new-style cooperatives, it made very little difference; they did not want to participate in such an enterprise. These answers were expected, conditioned as I had been to believe that everyone had considered collectivization an utter failure in south Vietnam. What was surprising were the

interviews in Ben Luc where there was an element of nostalgia for the old collective system. The introduction of economic liberalization in Vietnam has created fluctuating commodity prices and uncertainty regarding finding stable markets for produce. These problems, highlighted in Chapter Four, were often discussed with the district extension officers during meetings and banquets. It was in relation to these problems that the collective system was remembered fondly for providing more certainty and stability. Collectives were also viewed favourably for providing a security net for farmers when disaster hit and crops failed, although perhaps solace was found in a shared poverty. Mostly those who expressed positive memories for the old collective system were the elderly female farmers, perhaps akin to those 'babushka's' in Russia today who reportedly lament the passing of the Communist system and the elements of stability and certainty that it had once provided. These sentiments were once sardonically expressed by a Long An resident who commented, "when you join the hop tac xa nong nghiep you only have one concern: To do what the hop tac xa tells you to do."

As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, there is a danger in over-relying on historical stereotyping as a way to explaining farmers' attitudes and commitment to cooperative farming today. In 2001, Adam Fforde and Nguyen Dinh Huan produced an exceptionally valuable study, which represented the first fieldwork based (and non-Vietnamese language produced) effort at describing new-style cooperatives and cooperative groups emerging in rural Vietnam at the start of the 21st century.513 In tackling subject, Fforde and Nguyen’s report has subscribed to two-flawed lines of

reasoning and research. The first of these is to transpose past actions on to present day outcomes. Fforde and Nguyen write:

> In Long An there are no new-style cooperatives, matching a general failure in the past to secure an effective collectivization of the Mekong.\(^{514}\)

Factually Fforde and Nguyen are wrong because in 2001 there were two registered new-style cooperatives in Long An, the Duc Hoa dairy cooperative and the Hau Thanh Dong cooperative in Tan Thanh district. Relying on inaccurate data, Fforde and Nguyen have neatly presumed that since collectivization failed in the past in the Mekong, it has no chance of succeeding in Long An province today. This presumption relegates the personal agency of farmers' independent decision making to no more than a conditioning by past events. Furthermore, whilst many studies and ordinary Vietnamese say that collectivization in the Mekong failed, some studies do reveal pockets where collective farms were well managed and actually engendered some positive sentiments from local farmers.

The second problem that mars this otherwise good report relates to the research methodology. Although research was conducted in Ben Luc district and Tan An township, most of the interviews and other material that the researchers relied on was collected at provincial level government (in Tan An). The more appropriate place for such research, however, is the district, where the new-style cooperatives and informal cooperative groups are active and officials are more knowledgeable.\(^{515}\) Both my interviews and those of Fforde and Nguyen in Tan An indicate that provincial authorities do not favour hop tac xa past or present, but in Duc Hoa district itself the

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\(^{515}\) It is recognised that this approach would widen the scope and work involved in the research project.
story is very different. Therefore research conducted at the province level may generate viewpoints that are different to those held at the district and lower levels. More specifically, the provincial authorities are quite unlikely to hold an accurate picture of the growth of cooperative groups at grass roots level. The most formal of these groups are registered with district and commune authorities (who may or may not pass on accurate information to the provincial authorities) but many cooperative groups are less formal and represent mutual assistance amongst societal groups.

Participation in new-style cooperatives in Long An is firmly based on farmers rational judgment of how to best maximize their profits and potential for further development. District extension officers in Duc Hoa have also played a role in this decision process and have encouraged farmers to participate in a new-style dairy cooperative. This appears to be the role that the Party would like agricultural extension officers to play. As one study says:

> Agricultural extension organizations have the responsibility of guiding, assisting and directing cooperatives to make contracts and follow regulations and plans in action under civil law. This way will create favourable condition for them to exist and expand.\(^{516}\)

In Ben Luc district, farmers and agricultural extension agents have not chosen to develop new-style cooperatives. Instead they have determined that it is in their best interests to independently develop their household farms and develop more informal cooperative groups. The forceful collectivization movement that took place in this district and the disincentives of work points and corruption that co-existed with the old state collectives may have conditioned this decision. However, despite linguistic

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similarities many people do view the new-style state cooperatives as reasonably separate entities and to be judged on independent merits. Though the majority judgment in Long An at the start of the 21st century, as expressed to me by farmers and some local cadre, is that the policy governing new style cooperatives is simply not clear enough yet, \( (\text{chinh sach cua nha nuoc doi voi hop tac xa moi chua thong thoang}) \).

While many farmers consider the policy governing new-style cooperatives to be unclear, I would not expect to see a huge growth in this type of cooperative in Long An. Figure 5.1 shows the results of a provincial study conducted in 2000 regarding farmers' feelings towards cooperative groups and practices. Of the 488 farmers interviewed, only 0.5% saw the need to join a new-style cooperative. It is also significant that this small number of farmers was mainly comprised of model farmers \( (\text{nong dan san xuat kinh doanh gioi}) \).\(^{517}\) However, the overwhelming majority of the respondents did identify the need for more informal cooperative groups to facilitate specific tasks. This indicates that it is these types of organizations that are most suitable to farmers in Long An and most likely to grow and develop in the future.

\(^{517}\) Model farmers are chosen by the local state and mass organizations for demonstrating particular flair in agricultural production and entrepreneurial techniques. It is meant to elevate the chosen farmer to a status in the community where other farmers may learn from their skills and successes.
Figure 5.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want some form of local cooperative group but only in specific tasks</td>
<td>89.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See the need for a cooperative group for credit purposes (tin dung)</td>
<td>62.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See the need for a cooperative group for soil preparation and irrigation</td>
<td>24.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See the need for a cooperative group for procuring good rice seeds</td>
<td>54.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See the need to join a new-style state cooperative</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Khuynh Diep, “Nong dan va ruong dat o Dong Bang Song Cua Long” (Peasants and Land in the Mekong Delta). Part of an unpublished manuscript, given to me by the journalist, Mr Khuynh Diep in November 2001.

*The author of this study has qualified this final statistic by stating that the very small number of farmers who did see the need to join a new-style state cooperative were model farmers (nong dan san xuat kinh doanh gioi).

Formal Cooperative Associations and Informal Cooperative Groups
There were estimated to be 11,409 cooperative groups in Long An in 2000. Figure 5.2 indicates the number and types of groups but these are only the groups that have been officially registered with the local government and mass organizations. Many more informal groups exist throughout the countryside. Most farmers I met at the T & V meetings said that they are overcoming obstacles in their daily lives through forming cooperative groups. Often the questions I posed to groups of farmers about their cooperative practices precipitated long discussions. From them I learned that the main areas of cooperation among farmers were for tasks such as buying seeds, selling produce and preparing the soil. Nearly all the farmers told me that in times of crisis and need, they did not rely on the local or national government for assistance; instead, they formed mutual aid groups to help one another. This may be an indication that farmers are re-developing their own safety nets in an era when the state can no longer commit itself to such social ideals. The lead extension officer in Ben Luc district also recognised and tried to impress upon her commune staff, the need for poorer farmers to cooperate to overcome hardships. Cooperative groups can also benefit farmers at all

518 “Ve hop tac va hop tac xa cua nong dan,” Part of an unpublished manuscript, given to me by the journalist, Mr Khuynh Diep in February 2002.
levels of the economic stratum for facilitating the marketing of produce. Arguably this purpose is of greater importance in Long An than for other provinces because Long An is an easily assessable fruit and vegetable belt for the large national markets in Saigon. In a study by Vu Trong Khai and Pham Ngoc Thu, one of the most important functions of a cooperative group is marketing so that the role of the middleman can be curtailed.519 As Chapter Three highlighted, the role of middlemen buying from farmers and selling later for higher prices has been a common practice in Long An province. In the 1970s and 1980s, efforts by the central government to curb this activity, particularly by penalizing Chinese-Vietnamese merchants, failed to eradicate the institutionalized role of middlemen in the province. In the early 21st century, many farmers in Long An still chose to use the services of middlemen considering that marketing and distribution of their own produce was too complex and difficult.

The cooperative groups that exist outside the legal framework of Decree #68 are hard to define because their structures and functions are fluid and ambiguous. It is also hard to gain concrete information about the groups since they are seldom discussed publicly. Furthermore, because they are primarily grassroots initiatives they do vary greatly across the province. Nevertheless, it is important to try to learn more about these informal groupings since they do constitute an integral part of rural life. As Fforde and Nguyen have pointed out, "farmers groups are clearly important to farmers. Further, they are also even more clearly of considerable potential

519 Khai and Thu refer to cooperative groups as “self help organisations” and new-style cooperatives as “new model cooperatives”. In this instance they were referring to self help organisations: Vu Tong Khai & Pham Ngoc Thu, Self Help Organisations of Vietnam farmers (Rome: Vietnam Case Studies, FAO, 2003), p.2.
These groups are likely to increase in number and size and could potentially benefit poor and better-off farmers in Long An.

**Figure 5.2**
Figures for Registered Cooperative Associations and Groups Existing in Long An, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Association/Group</th>
<th>Number of groups/associations</th>
<th>Number of participating farming households</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac san xuat (Producers Group)</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>4,772</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lien ket san xuat (Producers Association)</td>
<td>3,273</td>
<td>50,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lien ket ve sinh hoat doisong (General everyday living Association)</td>
<td>1,052</td>
<td>30,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac khoa hoc ky thuat (Groups to share agricultural skills and information)</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>5,760</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac bao ve thuc vat (Plant and animal protection group)</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>3,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac san xuat giong (Seed group)</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>2,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To lien ket vay von san xuat (Capital credit and borrowing group)</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>11,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac gap von nua may moc san xuat (Pooling capital to buy agricultural machinery Group)</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>5,318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To keo dien (Bringing electricity to local homes)</strong></td>
<td>2,867</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To hop tac gap von lam nhu (Pooling capital to build homes)</strong></td>
<td>316</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To hop tac tuong tro nhau trong ned ho nong dan (Farmers mutual aid group)</td>
<td>741</td>
<td>13,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To hop tac thuy ki (Irrigation group)</strong></td>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** No figures made available for the number of participating households. These figures represent only those groups that were registered in 2000. It is very likely many informal groups also existed throughout Long An at this time. Since this survey was made in 2000 it is also likely that many more associations and groups are now in existence, some groups may have grown in size and many of these groups and associations may have more developed more complex structures. Furthermore there are also likely to be new types of groups being formed today such as the animal husbandry associations (Hiop hoi Chan nui).

**Source:** "Va Hop tac ve Hop tac xa co Nong dan" , Private research paper made available by journalist working for Long An newspaper (Bao Chi Long An), February 2002.

Figures 5.3 and 5.4 represent an attempt to broadly define the different types of cooperative arrangements existing in Long An at the start of the 21st century. I have tried to classify these groups into formal cooperative associations and informal cooperative groups. Semantically it is very tricky to make a strong case for calling them either *associations* or *groups*, especially since people refer to them differently.

The associations (*lien ket and hiep hoi*) usually involved a significant degree of input.

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from district-level mass organizations. The meetings were quite formal and usually conducted in a district capital town since the association members lived in disparate areas around the district. In the case of the animal husbandry association (hiep hoi), both extensionists and a representative of the district Farmers Association (Hoi Nong dan) told me that it was only in an embryonic stage and they expected its membership to vastly increase so that it would be able to take on a more complex range of activities in the future.
### Types of Cooperative Groups in Long An Province, 2002

1) **Most formalized Groups** - 1 - 4 represent groups that are quite formal in character, they are registered with local authorities at commune or district level, the internal working of the groups are governed by a series of written rules and regulations and members are likely to have paid registration fees. These groups are also likely to have been facilitated and assisted with input from local Mass Organizations and Agricultural Extensionists. I refer to these more formalized groups as Associations.

1) **To hop tac san xuat** (Producers association)
   Large association of farmers, pooling resources and capital to further production, for example buying large/expensive agricultural machinery (they are usually operated on a commune level)

2) **To lien ket san xuat** (Small producers association)
   Very similar functions to hop tac san xuat (above) but can be smaller scale

3) **To lien ket ve sinh hoat doi song** (General everyday living association)
   Quite large association where farmers pool resources and capital to cooperate in matters pertaining to everyday life such as house construction, flood protection etc

4) **Hiep hoi chan nuoi** (Animal husbandry association)
   Large association of farmers across a district cooperating to share skills, information and technology to further raise development of animal husbandry in the district. Possible future efforts to cooperate in selling produce. This type of group is a new phenomenon and only one had been established in Ben Luc in 2002

* Sometimes the word *nhom* is substituted for *to*, this can imply that the group is smaller than (under ten people) but the operative principles remain the same.

Source: Information collected from interviews with district cadres and agricultural extension officers in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts, 2002.
II) **Less Formal Cooperative Groups**: 5-13 represent groups that are less formal in character than Associations, mostly they are registered with local authorities but not always. These smaller groups are orientated to fulfilling more specific localized objectives. It is likely that they were given support and assistance in their establishment from extensionists or mass organizations but this may not always be the case. This list is by no means fully comprehensive and many more types of groups may exist in Long An. Generally, I refer to these as **Cooperative Groups**.

5) *To hop tac khoa hoc ky thuat* (Groups to share agricultural skills and information)
Small size groups of 20-30 members who regularly meet to share skills and information. They correspond to the Groups who subscribe to the Train and Visit meetings. They are very much associated with district and commune extension assistance.

6) *To hop tac bao ve tlmc vat* (Plant and animal protection group)
Small size group of 20 - 30 members who regularly meet to share skills and information in this field. Very similar in nature to To Hop tac Khoa hoc Ky thuat and associated with the work of district agricultural extensionists and plant and animal protection officers.

7) *To hop tac san xuat giong* (Seed group)
Very common cooperative group in Long An where farmers form small groups to produce seed (usually rice seed)

8) *To lien ket vay von san xuat* (Capital credit and borrowing group)
Small group, like a credit group where capital is pooled and borrowed to buy agricultural inputs.

9) *To Hop tac gop von mua may moc san xuat* (Pooling capital to buy agricultural machinery group)
Small group where farmers cooperate to buy agricultural machinery

10) *To keo dien* (Electricity group)
Small group where farmers in a hamlet cooperate together to try and provide electricity to people's homes

11) *To hop tac gop von lam nha* (Pooling capital to build homes)
Small group where farmers pool capital to build houses

12) *To Hop tac tuolg tro nhau trong noi bo nong dan* (Farmers mutual aid group)
Quite ambiguous and multi-purpose group. Loose group of local farmers who mutually assist one another, particularly in times of crisis such as failed crops and flood.

* Sometimes the word nhom is substituted for to, this can imply that the group is smaller (under ten people) but the operative principles remain the same.

**Source:** Information collected from interviews with district cadres and agricultural extension officers in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts, 2002.
The less formal groups are also semantically ambiguous. They are different from the associations in three ways. Firstly, the membership is smaller and may be based within a local neighbourhood, hamlet or commune. For example, the Plant Protection and Agricultural Information and Skills groups receive input from district officials and extensionists but future contact may be increasingly with lower level officials and commune extension agents. Secondly, these groups tend to be organized around more specific and localized tasks such as irrigation projects or seed groups. The third difference is the attitude of district authorities to the registration of the groups. When asked about the number and type of groups in the district, officials would tend to be clear how many associations existed but vague as to the number and type of these more local groups. This reaction suggests that great ambiguity does exist in regard to these local voluntary groups and hints that they may not always be registered with the local authorities and may be a community group involving no actors outside of the participating members. This is one of the primary reasons that they are a politically sensitive issue.

It is tempting to see local voluntary groups as small and relatively simple cooperative arrangements that are perhaps in transition to becoming more complex organs, akin to the associations. However, I would suggest that whilst these groups may proliferate in number and function, they will likely remain localized and farmers are probably quite content to have relative autonomy from state officials and mass organizations in their internal operation. These groups represent voluntarism and collective action to coalesce around community goals. They may also be the closest contemporary relatives of early mutual aid groups that were established by the early settlers nearly
three centuries ago and later observed by Gerald Hickey in Long An in the 1950s. With the help of district extensionists in Ben Luc, some groups may also represent an important societal mechanism for helping poorer farmers escape poverty in Long An. This is examined later in the chapter.

Comparing and Contrasting Duc Hoa and Ben Luc Districts

Duc Hoa and Ben Luc are contiguous districts but they remain quite distinct from one other. At anecdotal level, local residents such as Van and Nhan (introduced in Chapter One) consider the districts as separate entities in terms of the attitudes and values of the local people and the reputation of the district authorities. The provincial newspaper also underlines these separate identities by regularly publishing articles that highlight specific social, historical and geographic characteristics unique to each district. These articles now paint each district in a favourable light unlike the reporting of the 70s and 80s, which aimed to promote competition between the districts in reaching production quotas and establishing collective organisations.

In terms of agricultural development, Duc Hoa and Ben Luc have been able to forge divergent paths. During the effort to collectivize farming during the 1970s and 80s, Duc Hoa (and her neighbor Duc Hue) were the only districts to have no collective farms (hop tac xa nong nghiep). However, today Duc Hoa plays host to what is considered one of the most successful new-style cooperatives in the country and was

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521 Gerald Hickey undertook an anthropological study of Khanh Hau village in Long An during the late 1950s. He observed, "In the village, primary group relationships are found for the most part in the residential clusters.... the residents have daily contact, and among the households in the clusters there is a great deal of mutual aid. For the relatively well-to-do, mutual aid usually consists in lending money when necessary and giving assistance with large family gatherings. For other families, mutual aid also involves assistance in thatching roofs or making household repairs, and in aiding with farm work and harvesting." Hickey, Gerald, *Village in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p.96.
the only large-scale dairy cooperative in Vietnam in 2000. This new style cooperative did not align with preferences that were held in the provincial government in Tan An or indeed with many farmers throughout the province. It was most closely in step with national policies concerning cooperatives emanating from Hanoi. Aside from this large and growing dairy cooperative, Duc Hoa has been successful in diversifying cultivated land into the production of cash crops. Whilst paddy still accounts for the largest area of cultivated land, many farmers are now engaged in cultivating corn, sugar and peanuts. Local agriculture preferences expressed to me by the director of the state Agriculture and Land office in the district capital were more oriented towards cash cropping than enhancing the role of the dairy cooperative and animal husbandry in general.

During the era of collectivization, Ben Luc was a model district where large-scale collectivisation was promoted most intensively. As a result Ben Luc was often praised in the local press for having the highest number of hop tac xa of all the districts in the province. At the start of the 21st century, Ben Luc farmers, agricultural officials and extension officers still showed some residual distrust of the new-style agricultural cooperatives. Instead they preferred to develop their household farming units in conjunction with more informal cooperative groups.

522 I have chosen to follow the term adopted by Adam Fforde and Nguyen Dinh Huan and refer to new-style state cooperatives as those cooperatives that are implemented and governed under the Cooperative Law of 1996. They should not be confused with the old state collectives. Admittedly, in Vietnamese the terms of reference to these two different types of farm can be confusing. Old state agricultural collectives are referred to as hop tac xa and the new type as hop tac xa moi but it is very common in newspapers for the suffix of moi (new) to be omitted when referring to the new-style state cooperatives. Fforde, Adam & Nguyen Dinh Huan, *Vietnamese Rural Society and its Institutions: Results of a Study of Cooperative Groups and Cooperatives in three Provinces* (Aduki Pty Ltd, June 2001).
In the 1990s the central leadership refrained from further district re-organisation campaigns of the type undertaken by the GVN in the Republic of Vietnam and the district building campaigns after 1975. Moreover, the precept of local officials for local jobs, for the moment, is still honoured. This has generated stability for the district administrations, which has gone hand-in-hand with diminished central government control over district government and a freer reign to local sentiment. This transformation has given greater latitude for districts and agricultural extension staff to use their own initiative and resources to develop farming. Therefore, the matrix of farmers, agricultural extension officers and district government in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa are now configured in different ways to produce different agricultural strategies. But how have they configured differently? And what is the end result of these variant configurations?
Bringing on the Good Times in Ben Luc: Profit, Privatisation and Household Farm Units

Interview with the Director of the Ben Luc District Agriculture and Land Office, November 2001

"In 2010, Ben Luc District will have the highest development of all the districts in Long An. The countryside will no longer have under-employment since many of the farmers children will work in factories and 30% of all children will finish grade 12. One hundred percent of the countryside will have electricity and access to clean water. There will be less agricultural land but it will be more productive, particularly in production of cash crops. A few farmers will become shareholders in agricultural processing factories. The farmers will have learnt better cultivating techniques and how to look after their environment better and will make full use of biotechnology in agriculture. Aside from cash crops the main focus of development will be on the raising on animal husbandry and in particular pigs and dairy farming."

The leading official of the Ben Luc Agriculture and Land Office in 2001-2002 was a young cadre and a native of the district. He was optimistic about the future of his district and was proud of what had already been accomplished. He spoke at length and with enthusiasm on the office’s role over the last five years in converting a large swathe of under-productive paddy and wasteland (dat hoang) in the northeast of the district into the large-scale production of sugar cane. The establishment of a large sugar refining plant in the district had stimulated the conversion, which was funded by the state agricultural bank and local government funds. The scale of this project also led to the creation of two new administrative commune units that were primarily engaged in cultivating sugar cane. However, this scheme, planned and funded by the state, could not be expected to succeed without the support of the district extension service who had to teach, support and encourage a new community of farmers who knew little about the requirements of growing sugar. This example demonstrates a relationship of planning and dependency that exists between local government and
extension in Ben Luc. The associates of the state have the expertise and trust within a community to link local state objectives and local farming communities, resulting in a confluence and execution of mutually shared goals.

Ben Luc, much more than Duc Hoa, had close working relationships between local state institutions, mass organizations and extension officers. This impression was re-enforced after interviewing a district representative of the Farmers Association in Ben Luc. He explained that the district People's Committee, the state Agriculture and Land Office and the Farmers Association cooperated and collaborated as a tripartite to best serve the farmers and help implement the policies of the Party and government. These sentiments represent a repetition of the traditional and official role of the Farmers Association.\(^{523}\) However, increasingly there is evidence of the mass organizations re-defining their traditional roles on a local and \textit{ad hoc} basis. There are examples, such as Mrs Nguyen Ngoc Ha cited in Chapter Four, when the Women's Association has acted more in the capacity of an NGO assisting female farmers throughout the countryside in small-scale micro-credit and animal husbandry schemes. Alternatively, there are cases higher up in the organizational hierarchy where the Farmers Association has behaved in a corporatist fashion, articulating farmers concerns with the intention of influencing state policy.\(^{524}\)

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523 This official's answers represented the Party line and what a foreign researcher would expect to be told. During this interview, the representative frequently referred to the official handbook of the Farmers Association when we were talking, \textit{(Dieu le Hai Nong Dan Viet Nam, [HaNoi: 1988].)}

524 Kerkvliet, Benedict Tria, "An Approach for Analysing State-Society Relations in Vietnam," \textit{Sojourn}, 16, #2, 2001, pp.238-275), p.247. One of the functions of the mass organisation (including the Farmers Association) is to provide the central government with information on the prevailing situation amongst various societal groups. Melanie Beresford, however, has determined, "Mass organisations do not normally function to express the interests of their members....They are not seen as organised pressure groups." Beresford, Melanie, \textit{Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society} (London: Printer Publishers Limited, 1988), p.120.
One way to analyse the relationship between the local government and agricultural extension is to examine the utilization of public space. In Ben Luc town all the agencies responsible for agriculture (mass organizations and the Agriculture and Land office) were located within the compact district People’s Committee compound. The exception was the agricultural extension office, which was located just outside the compound. This proximity meant that all the officials and extensionists were frequently in one another’s offices, discussing, eating and drinking and generally routinizing their social and professional networks. The extensionists not only held meetings in the People’s Committee compound for their own commune staff and had shared meetings with local state cadres, but also used this space to inaugurate a series of new, voluntary, livestock associations (hiep hoi chan nuoi).

The practice of agricultural extension officers using public space also extends down into the communes in Ben Luc. T & V schemes, led by district extensionists, were almost always held in some type of official building such as the commune People’s Committee office, the home of a commune official or a school. Representatives of the Farmer’s Association (Hoi Nong dan), Women’s Association (Hoi Phu nu), Youth Association (Hoi Thanh nien) and usually the chairman of the local People’s Committee would also be in attendance. As mentioned earlier, these meetings were also an opportunity for farmers to discuss a wide-range of matters not necessarily pertaining to the subject of the T & V meeting. The real opportunity for the community, associates of the state, and state officials to talk about a whole host of local matters came afterwards at a banquet. This banquet was always held in the private home of one of the participating farmers.525

525 The farmers who had participated in the extension meetings shared the cost of the banquet.
The Development of Internal and Extra-state Alliances in Agricultural Extension

Despite the close relationship highlighted between extensionists and local state officials in Ben Luc, they are not entirely mutually dependent. Since the local state does not fund district extension running costs, extensionists are required to act entrepreneurially to raise money themselves. The collection of user fees is a simple and effective way to raise money. However, it does not generate enough income for current needs and is highly unlikely to be able to meet the requirements of assisting farmers in the adoption of bio-technology that the director of the agriculture and land office foresaw over the next decade.

Aside from the constraints of budget, the Ben Luc agricultural extension service was also under-staffed. In 2002 there was one district extensionist per 4,218 farming families (figures for all districts in Long An are shown in Table 4.2). Whilst the infrastructure is reasonably good and the homes and hamlets are less dispersed than in Duc Hoa, reaching the most farmers possible with the available resources still poses a serious logistical problem. The strategy to surmount these problems has been to conduct T & V schemes on a fee-paying basis and promote the role of model farmers in the community to demonstrate and disseminate information and techniques to other farmers who perhaps could not afford (either in time or money) to attend extension meetings. I think of this strategy as a policy of supporting the strong. Model farmers are in many respects much easier and more satisfactory targets for agricultural extension officers. Often they have private resources to invest (which they prefer to use rather than trusting local bank loans), relative financial security to be able to risk
experimentation, and access to televisions and information that engenders a wider knowledge of non-traditional farming methods.

The informal practice of supporting model farmers will begin to have two significant effects on the local fabric of district society. Firstly and most obviously, it may lead to greater economic stratification as wealthy farmers improve their livelihoods at an inverse relationship to poor farmers who receive little suitable assistance. Secondly, poorer farmers will likely lose out on the participatory forum that extension meetings and the banquet afterwards is currently providing to participating farmers. This may ultimately begin to make struggling farmers feel disenfranchised from their local communities. This state of affairs gives some weight to Mark Turner’s suggestion that decentralized local services often end up serving the local elites. He cautions that

A major danger of decentralisation is that its benefits may be captured by local elites. The latter gain control or strong influence over the decentralized institutions, and are able to orient policy, especially in its implementation, towards satisfying their own interests. Thus initiatives aimed at promoting participation by the poor and improving their material welfare can end up serving the community’s better-off members. The politics of local communities can be highly exploitive, far from the model of cooperation and solidarity imagined by some development professionals.526

I would not suggest that the district extension officers callously set out to promote wealthier farmers over poor ones; rather it is a strategy of expedience based on the constraints that negate an idealized extension programme that could assist all the community. Indeed, this policy of supporting the strong increasingly concerned the lead extension officer, Chi Lang. She repeatedly reminded her commune extension staff not to forget the poorer members of their communes and to assist them at all

available opportunities. Chi Lang's prescription for assistance re-enforces the importance of the informal cooperative groups discussed earlier in this chapter. She counselled her extension officers to encourage the farmers to work in these groups. She was not prescribing that the commune extension officers assist in the formation of new-style cooperatives or even association. Instead she was promoting the formation of informal groups of mutual aid, such as the pooling of resources to buy a breeding pig. Central government and donor organizations recognize that the problem of agricultural extension reaching wealthier farmers and further marginalizing poorer members of the community needs resolving. They have devised various solutions to overcome this dilemma. However, what is significant is that a district extension officer is informally devising her own methods for resolving this problem. Her solutions involved forming cooperative groups. Whilst these groups were small and localized, they still represent small societal groups encouraged and operated by actors outside of the party-state system.

Although district extension agents in Ben Luc have channeled their assistance primarily to wealthier farming households, their roles and strategies have not been static. They have facilitated the organization of farmers into associations and informal cooperative groups. They have also started to build extra-state alliances to further their work. Two types of alliances that extensionists are forming in Ben Luc may indicate that private interests are incrementally capturing these agents. The first is a

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527 The government in Hanoi addresses these issues in a broad reform agenda in the *Master Plan for Agricultural Research in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development & FAO, 2001). The Asian Development Bank is seeking to redress this problem through an Agriculture Sector Development Support package beginning in 2004, which aims to bolster the number and role of commune extensionists and provide greater access to market information for all farmers throughout the rural areas. In 2003 AusAID began implementing a second phase Collaboration in Rural Development project (CARD II), which specifically aims to reduce the focus on technological solutions that mainly assist wealthier farmers and change to a more holistic approach to developing sustainable livelihoods for all members in farming communities.
consultative partnership between wealthy farmers and an extension agent. The second is an alliance with local agri-business people who seek to use the agents to promote their technology and equipment. I refer to these alliances generally as internal alliances since they are made with other actors within the district. This distinguishes them from the external alliances that are being built in Duc Hoa with actors outside of the district and province.

One district extension officer who I closely observed provided technical services for a small portfolio of wealthy farmers. The arrangement was quite simple. The district extension agent operated in the nature of a free-lance consultant; farmers contracted him to design, implement, and assist in the ongoing running of an agricultural project. These were usually intensive livestock and poultry rearing schemes, which were constructed on a large scale but based on the household farm unit. Unlike the other district extension agents, this extensionist did not conduct T & V schemes and was not involved in any of the meetings associated with establishing cooperative groups. He was younger than other officers and was frustrated with the backward farming practices he saw in Vietnam generally. It is likely that the freedom he had to develop his own informal strategies of assistance was one reason he remained in his position. It is possible that his arrangement with these farmers shows some indication of an embryonic patron-client type of relationship. Typically patron-client relationships in Asia, and specifically the Mekong Delta, are based on reciprocity where the peasant takes the role of the client and enters into a relationship with a patron in order to ease or improve his livelihood. However, in the case of the extension officer and

528 A discussion of patron-client theories in Southeast generally: Scott, James, C, “The Erosion of Patron-Client Bonds and Social Change in Rural Southeast Asia,” Journal of Asian Studies, #32, pp.5-37. Randy Cummins specifically discussed these relationships in the Mekong Delta: Cummings,
wealthy farmer, this relationship has been reversed with the district extension officer taking on the role of the client. He may hope that by performing services for a wealthy farmer he can escape a poorly paid rural job through potentially earning more money and having the valuable opportunity to enhance and develop his own skill set. In terms of reciprocity, the farmer receives technical advice and inputs that regular agricultural extension services (delivered through T & V schemes) cannot currently provide.

A normal day with this district extension officer was as follows: departing the office at 7.30am, he usually visited four or five farmers’ homes, spending approximately fifty minutes with each farmer. He inspected the animals and the conditions of the animal enclosures, discussed and advised the introduction of new types of technology and usually discussed plans to enlarge the farming enterprise. Unlike the T & V meetings, I never saw money being paid for his exclusive services. I asked whether the farmers were paying for his personalized help, and he informed me that they paid for individual assistance. Reticence on his part and a sense of propriety on mine meant that I never fully resolved the ambiguity regarding whether this money was paid directly to the district office or whether he was able to retain some portion of it himself.

All the farmers who were employing the services of this extension officer were some of the more prosperous ones in the district, although not yet in the millionaire farmers bracket. They were outwardly better-off than most of the farmers who were attending the T & V schemes. Figure 5.5 shows the results of some interviews I conducted with the farmers receiving assistance from this district extension officer. The farmers’

Randy, *Vietnamese Villages in the Mekong Delta: Their Articulations with the Wider Society and the Implications for Local Social Organization* (State University of New York: PhD dissertation 1977).
responses to my questions illustrate that there are some similarities between all these farmers. There is also a pattern of development for entrepreneurial farmers in Ben Luc, who were employing the personal services of an agricultural extensionist to develop, diversify and modernize their household farms.
### Figure 5.5 Interviews with Ben Lue District Farming Households, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qu.</th>
<th>Farmer A</th>
<th>Farmer B</th>
<th>Farmer C</th>
<th>Farmer D</th>
<th>Farmers E</th>
<th>Farmer F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of farming</td>
<td>Animal husbandry - swine (and recently started a small VAC project)</td>
<td>Animal husbandry - swine</td>
<td>Chickens (battery)</td>
<td>Chickens (battery)</td>
<td>Animal husbandry - swine</td>
<td>Animal husbandry - swine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long have you been engaged in your current agricultural production?</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were you farming prior to converting to this type of agricultural production?</td>
<td>Vegetables and production of a variety of compost</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Previously a teacher - not engaged in agricultural production</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Rice and vegetables</td>
<td>Rice and very small-scale chicken rearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did you change from your previous type of farming?</td>
<td>i) More profits in animal husbandry. ii) Help and encouragement from the extension service</td>
<td>i) More profits in animal husbandry. ii) Help and encouragement from the extension service</td>
<td>Switch to agricultural because more profits than in teaching</td>
<td>Poor quality of land meant low rice yields and little profit</td>
<td>Poor quality of land meant low rice yields and little profit</td>
<td>More profit in raising swine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you find the initial capital to help you to diversify/change production on your farm?</td>
<td>Sold land to find small initial investment then continually re-invested profits</td>
<td>Sold land</td>
<td>Initially tried to secure a bank loan but this caused too many problems so raised money from family members</td>
<td>Raised money from family members</td>
<td>Re-invested profits of rice farming and sold chickens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What have been the biggest changes for you over the last 12 years (1990 - 2002)?</td>
<td>Big growth in household income. ii) Learnt more skills</td>
<td>Significantly greater profits</td>
<td>Big growth in household income</td>
<td>i) Big growth in household income ii) New technology and better chicken types</td>
<td>Big growth in household income</td>
<td>i) Big growth in household income ii) Can now afford to send children to university in Saigon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the agricultural extension service existed (1991), who helped/advised you in agricultural matters?</td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>Provincial State agriculture department (before reform in 1996)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No one assisted</td>
<td>No one assisted</td>
<td>No one assisted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much land do you own?</td>
<td>1.5 hectares</td>
<td>1500 m²</td>
<td>1000 m²</td>
<td>1500 m²</td>
<td>1.5 hectares</td>
<td>1500 m²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much livestock do you own?</td>
<td>102 pigs (breeding stock and meat)</td>
<td>75 pigs</td>
<td>150 chickens</td>
<td>490 chickens</td>
<td>55 pigs</td>
<td>50 pigs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you employ off-farm labour to assist you on your farm (i.e. non-family members)?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the most serious problems/difficulties with your farm?</td>
<td>Male breeding stock is not good. Foreign varieties better</td>
<td>i) Male breeding stock needs improving. ii) Need leaner meat from the animals</td>
<td>No problems</td>
<td>i) Finding even better strains of chicken to breed ii) Enlarging the enclosures on the small amount of land available</td>
<td>i) Looking after the health of the pigs</td>
<td>i) Male breeding stock needs improving - further need for foreign technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you sell your produce?</td>
<td>In local area, deals directly with one selling agent</td>
<td>Sold to one selling agent</td>
<td>In local area, deals directly with one selling agent</td>
<td>In local area, deals directly with one selling agent</td>
<td>In local area, deals directly with one selling agent</td>
<td>In local area, deals directly with one selling agent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The most striking similarity between the farmers (or patrons) was that they were all household farms. They did not rely on labour outside of the family unit, nor did they belong to any cooperative groups. The earlier section examining formal and informal cooperative groups suggested that such organizations could play an invaluable role in helping Long An farmers to market their produce as a group rather than relying on middlemen. Yet the farmers receiving assistance from this district extension officer rejected this notion and preferred to market their produce on an independent basis using local middlemen. Another commonality between the farmers was they raised capital for their farming projects from independent sources rather than a credit cooperative or a bank. (Nearly all farmers interviewed in Ben Luc district mistrusted bank loans.) All the farmers agreed that there had been a large increase in household revenue over the last ten years. The farmers had initiated their projects in the last three to four years (with the exception of farmer C), which suggests that their relationship with extension in this capacity was relatively recent. A future re-study would highlight how these relationships will evolve and whether they will more closely resemble a patron-client typology in the future.

The final surprising thread that flows through these interviewed farmers is the very small amount of land they use. This does not mean that they do not own land elsewhere in the district or province, but it does neatly follow the plan of the district agriculture and cadastral office that there will be less agricultural land but higher productivity in the district over the next decade.

529 I define the household unit as members of the family living in one house. In most cases this was the principle farming couple, their children, and grandparent(s).
The second type of internal alliance that extensionist may be starting to form is one with local agri-businesses. Currently the district extension office is the key input supplier for many farmers, particularly for a variety of seed strains. However, the extension service cannot fully supply this demand and has turned to private suppliers to buy these inputs so effectively they are becoming merchandise agents of private businesses. This trend is likely to increase, as local farmers require more technology but also the assistance of an extension agent who is able to demonstrate and assist in its practical utilization. Agri-businesses are realizing that due to the extensionists trust and respect in their local communities; they are the ideal sales people for agricultural technology and machinery. In fact, on a number of occasions, I was approached by an acquaintance and entrepreneur in Tan An, who had designed and built a piece of rice drying equipment. Apparently his attempts to utilise his contacts in the provincial agricultural department and those in Ben Luc had failed to garner any interest from these sources. He hoped that I could be a valuable contact and interest the district extension staff in his equipment. Ultimately, the scope for entrepreneurial activity in this sphere is great and whether this would be used for private or public gain was impossible to judge in 2002.

The Future of Agricultural Extension in Rural Relations in Ben Luc District
Societal-state relations in Ben Luc district concerning agrarian development are in a dynamic and fluid state, owing in part to the role of the district extensionists. Extension agents have helped the development of wealthier farmers through regular extension meetings and through more personal consultations. However, on many occasions, extensionists have really just helped to expedite congruent goals in agricultural development shared by both farmers and the district state agricultural
planners. In other words, extension agents are the link between society and state objectives. It is possible that as the wealthy farmers grow in strength and experience, they may out grow the need for extension services. District extension officers’ role of linking state to society may recede as farmers form corporate groups more concerned with their own planning objectives. I would expect some extension officers to become captured by private business or choose to contract out their skills privately but this will be very contingent on the policy choices dictated by the lead extension officer. At least while Chi Lang remains chief officer in Ben Luc, I would expect continued efforts to avoid marginalization of the poorer farmers in the district.

The greatest potential for a fundamental change in district rural relations is already taking place in Ben Luc. Extensionists and mass organizations have helped to stimulate the formation of associations and informal cooperative groups. Farmers themselves have taken the initiative to coalesce into cooperative groups focusing around the achievement of local initiatives and production goals. These groups have very little in common with new-style cooperatives such as the Dairy Cooperative in Duc Hoa but they potentially represent a strong foundation for local societal groups outside of direct state control.
Agrarian development patterns in Duc Hoa had little in common with the neighbouring district of Ben Luc. The leading official at the Duc Hoa Agriculture and Land Office in Hau Nghia liked to plan and enjoyed outlining both the success and statistical goals of cultivating cash crops in the district. He was less interested in the famous new-style dairy cooperative whose offices were located close by. The matrix of relations between the district state agricultural office, the work of extensionists, and the local farming community in Duc Hoa were not as cohesive nor aligned as they were in Ben Luc. The associates of the state and parts of the farming community were working together on an agrarian model of development, which was more aligned to national policy initiatives than to district or even provincial ones. Farmers engaged in rice and cash crop production, who in Ben Luc received

530 While diversification to cash crops has been a re-current theme for the agricultural development of Long An in the last decade, it should be noted that Duc Hoa has always cultivated peanuts. Unlike many areas in Vietnam during the collectivisation period where state planners enforced cultivation of inappropriate crops, the cultivation of peanuts continued during that period. For example, in 1976, Duc Hoa was already cultivating 6,000 hectares of this crop and apparently producing an annual 4,500 tonnes: Bao Chi Long An, 25 September 1976, p.1.
considerably attention from the extensionists, were largely left to fend for themselves or seek assistance elsewhere.

The Development of External Alliances in Agricultural Extension
There were two noticeable differences between Duc Hoa and Ben Luc. The first was the distance between the agencies responsible for agrarian matters in Duc Hoa. All these offices were scattered around the capital town, Hau Nghia, and officials and extensionists seldom met. The second was the greater size of this district, coupled with a less developed infrastructural system and wider dispersed settlements and homes. As Figure 4.10 (Chapter Four) indicates, Duc Hoa had fewer district extension staff than Ben Luc and the average number of families per district extension officer was a huge 9,284. The problem of reaching and assisting the maximum number of farmers was difficult for the district extension office because it was constrained by a small and locally generated budget.

Upon entering the district extension office for the first time, I quickly suspected that extension in Duc Hoa had adopted different strategies to those in Ben Luc. Firstly, the Duc Hoa office did not have the agricultural input material such as seeds and fertilizer that lay floor-to-ceiling in the Ben Luc office. Secondly, the notice board, which in Ben Luc resembled a finely crafted and intricate battle plan of tightly scheduled meetings and T & V schemes, was blank in Duc Hoa except for a number of field trips and meetings that were being conducted with the dairy cooperative or at the cooperative members’ homes. Unlike the office in Ben Luc, the extension office in Duc Hoa was not the focal point for local farmers or commune extension officers.
The Duc Hoa extension office did operate some T & V schemes, which are
categorized into two types. The District Plant and Protection officers (Bao ve Thuc
vat) led the first type of T & V, which trained farmers on Integrated Pest Management
(IPM) techniques. These were quite lavish affairs, probably due to generous donor
funding for IPM implementation. The participants were exclusively male and
involved in the cultivation of sugar and corn. They were clearly prosperous and more
urbane than many farmers in Ben Luc. Unlike Ben Luc farmers who did not trust bank
loans, nearly all of these farmers had raised capital from the local bank. In
1997 Axel Wolz estimated that 40% of rural farmers relied on credit from family, friends and
relatives and also used rotating savings and credit associations. 33% raised credit by using private
moneylenders. And the remaining 25% relied on banks. Wolz, Axel, The Transformation of Rural
heidelberg.de), p.15. Further in-depth research is required to explore why farmers in Ben Luc and Duc
Hoa differ in their choices of acquiring credit. It is possible, and re-enforced by an interview with the
director of the district Agriculture and Land office, that the district government has done much to
support the use of the district branch of the Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBA) and
the Duc Hoa People’s Committee has been proactive in supporting loan applications. On the other
hand, following Ben Luc farmer’s proclivity for small-scale cooperative groups, it may be possible that
more sources of credit are raised through these informal methods. Varying credit and financial systems
between districts serves to re-enforce a growing separate identity between districts within one province.

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inputs to offer the farmers and came armed only with the ubiquitous extension centre pamphlet, usually pertaining to pond-fish farming (nuoi ca ao). This subject was greeted with no more enthusiasm in Duc Hoa than it had been for the hapless commune extensionist leading a train and visit scheme in Ben Luc, recounted in Chapter Four.

A few common themes ran through all of my interviews with the farmers in eastern Duc Hoa. They had experienced improved development in the last decade but life was still very hard and they had yet to see the results (ket qua) that they hoped for. No one had assisted them prior to the establishment of the district extension service and it was implied that they were still not being helped much. On one occasion an old farmer announced to the meeting that further reform was needed in agricultural development and this must also include better-trained commune extension officers. The pervading sense from these meetings was that these farmers wished to be left alone to work their household farms as they saw fit.

The main work of the district extension officers in Hau Nghia was to assist the dairy cooperative. This cooperative was registered in 1998 as a new-style cooperative and officially operated under the legal guidelines of decree 68, which sets out the legal basis (which is still reasonably ambiguous) for public cooperatives. The presence and indeed vitality of this cooperative is incongruent with both district farmers’ sentiments and provincial policy. In the case of the former, attitudes against past collectives and the idea of re-vitalised large-scale cooperative enterprises provoked some strong and very critical reactions. In the case of official provincial

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322 This strategy of agricultural extension correlates most closely to the North American model where assistance is provided within the framework of a cooperative group.
attitudes, the agricultural officials that I interviewed considered that collectivisation in the past was a grave mistake. They expressed further concern at the prospect of new-style cooperatives in Long An and indicated that they did not want to encourage large-scale farms along the lines of the Song Hau Farm in the Mekong Delta province of Can Tho. Therefore the new-style cooperative in Duc Hoa is more closely aligned with central government and Party policies. As mentioned in an earlier part of this chapter, one of the five major resolutions stressed at the fifth plenum of the Party Central Committee in March 2002 was a continuing commitment to boost and support the cooperative economy - of which these new cooperatives are an indivisible part. According to Hong Vinh, a member of the Party Central Committee and deputy chief of its Culture and Ideology Commission:

Cooperatives are part of a socialist economic model and an important factor in the building of an equitable, democratic and civilized society. They help raise community-based development awareness. They also have the potential to increase cooperation with state-owned enterprises in order to boost sustainable economic development and re-enforce the peasant-worker alliance under the Party's leadership.

It seems anomalous in a Mekong Delta province such as Long An that local extensionists should choose a strategy of assisting national development projects for large-scale cooperatives over more local development patterns, such as supporting household units and facilitating informal and smaller cooperative associations. It seems particularly incongruous considering Duc Hoa never had a collective farm at
the height of the push for collectivization in the early 1980s. How can these anomalies be explained?

There are four ways to begin to explain the support and success of this dairy cooperative in Duc Hoa. Firstly, the very fact that Duc Hoa never had a collective may have made farmers less apprehensive about joining a large scale cooperative in the first place. Every participating farmer interviewed, articulated clearly that the impetus to join was predicated solely on voluntary will and a desire to seek higher profits. Secondly, while the new-style cooperatives bear strong linguistic relation to the old collectives, they are very different entities. Participating farmers own their own property and are not required to farm as a collective unit. Furthermore, this dairy cooperative was a democratic unit that benefited greatly from the charismatic and energetic leadership of the cooperative manager. Thirdly, the cooperative was almost immediately profitable and expanded rapidly as more farmers became eager to jump on the bandwagon.

The fourth explanation is that the district associates of the state, and by this I mean extensionists and the cooperative manager, had enough latitude to seek alliances and patrons outside the province. The national government was eager to lend financial support for cooperatives (registered under Decree 68) and was a benefactor to struggling local agricultural services if they promoted favoured policies. The district extensionists, in tandem with the cooperative manager were able to attract millions of dong from the National Institute of Animal Husbandry to experiment with new crossbred cows. The district extensionists frequently led fieldwork trips around cooperative members’ farms for students from agricultural universities in Saigon and
the Mekong, such as Can Tho University. If extensionists in Ben Luc were heading
down the road to privatization due to their need to collaborate with private business, it
is possible that Duc Hoa extensionists were becoming public relations agents for the
dairy cooperative. It would have been apposite to ask who had paid for the numerous
billboards across the district that welcomes visitors to Duc Hoa, the “Home of the Duc
Hoa Dairy Cooperative.”

The growing success of the cooperative was evident at the fortnightly meetings. The
number of participating families swelled from eighty families in 1998 to two hundred
and three families in 2002. At that time there was a credit pool being used to buy
more machinery and better livestock. There were even plans to diversify into
aquaculture. The cooperative was able to successfully exploit a number of advantages;
it was a favoured development project of national planners. It also contributed to a
market where the domestic consumption for dairy products was increasing by 14
percent each year. Furthermore it was selling to a stable buyer - the state company
Vinamilk. After observing the entrepreneurial skills of the manager, it is quite likely
that the produce will also shortly be marketed to private companies.

At the grassroots level, many cooperative members revealed a similar vitality and
entrepreneurial spirit. One cooperative member, who had been amongst the first
recruits, had five dairy cattle and had branched out into a cottage tanning industry. He
was employing off-farm labour in this enterprise, which was his own business and not
part of the cooperative. Another farmer explained that he had first begun raising dairy
cattle with the assistance of the district extension agents in 1992 and in 1998 had
decided to pool his resources into the dairy cooperative. Once again district extension
agents apparently played a transitional role acting as facilitators in the transfer of information, stimulating diversification and encouraging farmers to join the new-style cooperative. What is not clear is the future role of extensionists. Perhaps they will become victims of their own success. Their promotion of the cooperative to external forces has been so successful that the cooperative had the input of technology and skills from research institutes and universities with far higher levels of scientific training than the extension officers. Perhaps it is time to invest in better training for commune extension officers and focus on strategies to help poorer farmers in Duc Hoa.

**Summarizing the Varying Roles of Agricultural Extension in Ben Luc and Duc Hoa Districts**

In regard to agricultural development, the matrix of district state-associates of the state-community was far more closely configured in Ben Luc. Its district extension officers had chosen strategies of assistance that focused on supporting household farms and encouraging the formation of informal cooperative groups. In Duc Hoa, by contrast, extensionists channelled their efforts to assisting the development of a new-style cooperative. This strategy represented stronger linkages with national policy objectives and outside inputs. However, this strategy still represents district extension officers acting on local initiatives and in the interests of local people, since despite provincial ambivalence, the associates of the state have been able to stimulate a highly successful enterprise. This prospering cooperative has not only enhanced Duc Hoa’s identity within the province but also nationally in that, it is often cited in the national press. Disparate approaches to agricultural development in two districts of one province indicate the significant local impact that associates of the state can have on transforming farming communities in their constituencies. Freed from the centrally
planned agriculture and the spirit of district competition promoted in the local media in the 1970s and 1980s, the districts of Long An are happy, so it seems, to develop in ways that suit them best.

The leitmotif that links the work of agricultural extension officers in these two districts is the transitional nature of their positions. In 2002, the extensionists were starting to experience an incremental erosion of their public roles as facilitators and conduits of technological and methodological information. In both districts, extensionists still have a potential role to play in assisting poorer farmers but for this they will need to find more state or extra-state funding which may well upset their delicate position at the interface between the local state and local communities. It seems likely that in Ben Luc private interests will slowly capture the extension officers. In Duc Hoa their future is uncertain having pinned their colours to a successful new-style cooperative that has moved beyond the assistance that the district extensionists can offer.

I suggest that district extension agents have helped lay the foundations for a long-term evolution in state-societal relations. In Ben Luc, district extension officers, sometimes in partnership with state cadres and the mass organizations, have promoted the regular association of farming groups who coalesce around shared local goals to improve their farming units. At all the interviews I conducted with farming groups in Ben Luc, farmers had formed into voluntary associations to mutually assist one another in shared goals such as in soil preparation or selling their produce. In Duc Hoa, district extension officers had helped facilitate the growth of a large new-style cooperative. However, farmers generally in this district showed less inclination to form into the
type of cooperative groups found in Ben Luc. This re-enforces the proposition that districts in one province are increasingly diverging in their agricultural development patterns.

Conclusion

The advent of new-style state cooperatives and other cooperative groups in Long An has enhanced "a disposition to favour what is local". The affect of these two types of cooperatives however, has been different. The dairy cooperative in Duc Hoa has greatly enhanced the national and provincial profile of this district. Both the extensionists and cooperative manager have forged external alliances to garner resources from outside of the district and province. Furthermore, based on my interviews and those conducted by Fforde and Nguyen in Tan An, the very policy of a new-style cooperative is more in line with national government and Party directives than the views held in the provincial capital. Nevertheless, the officials and associates who are involved in promoting the new-style cooperative are still acting first and foremost in local interests; it just happens that these are also congruent with central policies.

Ben Luc extension officers and household farmers have been active in the development of local associations and groups, which may not sit too comfortably with central government sensitivities but are supported by the local state. It may be suggested that extensionists and, to a degree, the Farmers Association, have acted as facilitators for some of these cooperative groups but they are not the coercive agents that Popkin supposes are necessary for peasants to act as a group. The nascence and

growth of these groups constitute the outcome of rational decisions by farmers to minimize financial and personal risk and achieve development and security in their lives. At the start of the 21st century, the issue of cooperative groups was a sensitive issue for the party and central government because many of these groups are organized outside of the party-state system and represent local initiatives to enhance rural livelihoods.

This chapter has demonstrated that both Ben Luc and Duc Hoa districts have been able to pursue disparate agrarian strategies that reasonably suit their locales, rather than following agendas set by either the provincial or central government. The final chapter will examine how central government perceives this situation and whether district organizational adventures are likely to happen again in the future.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

The Past, Present and Future of District Government

It is a *sine qua non* that “the nature of central-local relations can be understood only in relation to history” but few studies on Vietnamese local government have systematically analysed central-local relations through regime and ideological transformations.\(^{536}\) By taking this approach, we can identify longstanding influences on district government that exist outside the immediate logic of war and political ideology. This generates a deeper understanding of the factors that condition the interaction between local officials and their local communities and the relationship between local officials and the central government. It can also provide a good framework for determining how local government will evolve and transform in the future.

This thesis began by examining district government during the revolution (1955-1975). Throughout this time the central government in Saigon responded to the exigencies of war and revolution by manipulating the district units geographically and administratively in an attempt to better control the rural areas. In doing so, the GVN destroyed some fundamental pre-requisites of good governance. The mandarinate tradition of district chiefs mostly being native and acting as moral custodians of their community was jettisoned in favour of outsiders whose posts were more contingent on Saigon’s goodwill than the interests of local people. Interaction between district officials and local people was distant and therefore the chance for a dialogue between

societal and state forces was stunted. This situation was exacerbated by the introduction of other outsiders in the district such as American advisors, civic action cadres and rural development cadres whose policy agendas bore scant relation to the interests of local people. This left very little opportunity for the development of local initiatives at a district level. Instead the district officials were left with the task of implementing inappropriate central government policies such as the strategic hamlet program. The chance for district government to be a functioning interface between higher authority and the grassroots was lost.

In the new regime of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam after 1975, the practice of using native cadres for district government was re-established. District officials were now not only in the community but of the community too. In addition to this, many cadres were seasoned revolutionaries who had fought and sacrificed in the hope of creating a better future for the southern Vietnamese people. It is possible, although difficult to prove, that the northern leadership’s attitude to southern Vietnam after victory, which at times was moralising and domineering, caused further tension amongst local cadres in the south. In some respects, the central government in Hanoi represented a continuum from the GVN regime in terms of its efforts to centralise power, control the rural areas and implement unpopular, centrally inspired policies. In common with the ancien regime, the SRV also failed to effectively implement most of its policies in Long An. The crucial difference now was that rural cadres were instrumental in undermining central government control. If some district cadres
reflected on what it meant to be a “good cadre” in the new regime, then many in Long An decided that it was loyalty to the community first and the party-state second.\textsuperscript{537}

Le Duan’s grand plan to reorganise the districts into powerful and political entities in the countryside drew on longer traditions of Vietnamese governance where the district was the primary interface between the centre and grassroots and a means to penetrate rural communities. However, the district building campaign of the late 1980s and early 1990s was flawed. District officials were only granted greater power in order to enact central policy dictates. This essential element of local initiative in policy making was missing.

In the 1990s and start of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the central government relaxed its control over district government by retreating from the principles of central planning. Senior policy makers in Hanoi, such as Le Duc Tho, publicly acknowledged and embraced the role that grassroots initiatives could play in policy formulation and encouraged limited decentralisation of decision-making and provision of public services. This has given district government greater flexibility to develop agricultural initiatives best suited to their local situation. District officials are now also part of a more complex matrix of relationships consisting of local farmers and associates of the state that work together to drive district agricultural policies.

The growing effectiveness of the district unit and the increasing localist tendencies has brought advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are national and foreign recognition that development assistance is most effective when targeted at the district

level and below. It has also meant that the district can now steer policy and enter external alliances without heavy-handed provincial or central government chaperoning. The disadvantage of a stronger district profile has been to place it under the shadow of another centrally inspired organisational initiative. Aside from the positive aspects that stronger district government can bring, it is also considered by senior officials to give greater opportunities for corrupt practices amongst local officials. Hanoi’s commitment to highlighting and solving this problem has become something of a cause celebre in recent years. One solution to the problem was the promulgation of Politburo Resolution #11 in January 2002, which introduced the principle of rotating party and government officials between departments, ministries and the People’s Committees. The resolution aims to appoint cadres to provinces and districts where they are non-native in order to dispense with the concept that “tigers should rule in the forests where they live.”\footnote{Vietnam Economic Times, March 2002, p.10.} The provinces, at least in Long An, have long been accustomed to non-native cadres within the administration. The district government, however, is not. One of the successes of Long An district government in the SRV has been the local cadre’s association and interaction with the community and the potential for a dialogue between the two. Indeed local cadres for local government jobs was a revolutionary strategy that helped defeat the previous GVN regime. Resolution #11 reverses this policy and is intended to re-orient cadres’ outlook and management skills to serving national interests before local loyalties.\footnote{Nhan Dan, April 9 2003, p.3.} Whether residents in Long An identify their interests with national interests and how these interests will be mediated is an interesting question for the future. What can be concluded with some certainty here is that organisational adventures of the district government are symptomatic of contesting centrifugal and centripetal forces, which
are unlikely to end. Looking back through recent history, this has always been the case.

**Towards a Deeper Understanding of Local Politics in Vietnam**

Clearly there is not one model that can accurately conceptualise the complex dynamics of the Vietnamese polity. At best, we may hope to understand it better in a fragmented fashion. At the outset of this thesis I suggested that my theoretical framework would adopt features of Kerkvliet’s “dialogue” approach by prioritising the significance of societal demands and synthesise them to how local cadres respond to these demands. By doing so, I have identified the integral role that local cadres can play in local and national policy implementation. This approach is underscored by the premise that Vietnam can only be understood in terms of geographic regionalism. This implies that each region will operate in a *sui generis* fashion in regard to local concerns and centre-local relations. Normally notions of geographic regionalism are explored in terms of large territorial entities such as the “north”, “centre” or “south” or by province. I have argued that this approach can equally be extended down to the district level. It is only by focusing on the micro level that the dynamic and complex interactions between government and the grassroots can be fully captured. I would not suggest that this approach can facilitate macro assumptions on the Vietnamese body politic, but as Migdal has suggested “for those interested in discerning how Third World societies are ruled and the influence of politics on social change, the local level often holds the richest and most instructive hints.”

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The Dialogue Approach: The Interaction Between District Officials and Local Communities

The Vietnamese party-state may be domineering but it not always dominant. In some instances district government and local communities in Long An have been able to develop local initiatives that are incongruous to the prevailing national interests prescribed by senior policy-makers in Hanoi.

In the Republic of Vietnam, described in Chapter Two, there was scant dialogue between GVN rural officials and local people. This was partly due to the fact that there was no common bond of shared experience or understanding between these two groups. During this time Long An residents considered their senior district officials to be haughty and aloof. However, this is not to say that local societal demands were curtailed. In fact the opposite was the case. Some people expressed their discontent by supporting or actively participating in the overthrow of the GVN regime.

Chapter Three, which examined the first decade of communist rule, demonstrated a high level of dialogue between farmers and their local officials. Compared to the previous regime, there was a far greater sympathy and trust between people and their new district and commune cadres. This resulted in central government polices being adapted locally to suit local interests. The Long An media also reported public declarations from district officials calling for the preservation of community loyalty above and before divisive land reform policies. More specifically there were cases of district cadres, such as Mr Nam Tam in Moc Hoa district, who developed his own compromise solutions for dealing with long-standing tax defaulters in the district. He also argued that the realities of life in his district were not suited to the national state subsidiary system (bao cap).
In Chapter Four and Five, the dialogue between farmers and local officials shifted to a more positive and dynamic association from the earlier reactionary stance. This dialogue resulted in the establishment of a provincial agricultural extension service in 1991, almost two years before a national extension service was set up. However, the dialogue between officials and farmers has become more complex in the 21st century. Sometimes the district agricultural extension officers are able to act as facilitators by linking some farming interests with district government objectives. While agricultural extension officers may at times represent societal preferences to the local authorities, this does not correspond to what Turley describes as “corporatist representation.” I have determined that extension officers are not necessarily part of the party-state apparatus and have underlined this point by conceptualising them instead as associates of the state.

State-in-Society

The terms “state” and “society” are useful shorthand for referring to the party-state apparatus and all those who stand outside of it. However, as an analytical tool for conceptualising the Vietnamese polity, the terms “state” and “society” are frustrating because they raise a number of tricky questions: What criteria do we use to define who stands in the party-state camp and who stands outside it? How can we account for people such as agricultural extension agents or new-style cooperative managers who appear to have a foot in both camps? The answers, unfortunately, are that there are no definitive answers to these questions because the reality is the that “edges of
the state are uncertain."\textsuperscript{541} It is more instructive to examine the rich and varied interactions between a host of forces at a local level. In Chapter Two, I examined the influence that American advisors had on the politics of Long An province. They did have a dramatic impact on local people and local government officials but they could not be described as part of the southern Vietnamese state or society. In Chapter Three, I described how some district and commune cadres were loyal, first to their local communities, and second to the party-state policies on collectivisation and land reform. According to Koh when local ward-level officials stand on the side of the people and against the state’s interests, they “certainly cannot be counted as part of the state.”\textsuperscript{542} I suggest that it not helpful to remain trapped in dichotomising whether an act or actor belongs in the realm of state or society. It is the means and the ends of the interplay between a host of individuals and groups that matters; not always the labels by which we identify them.

In the reform era, China scholars have conceptualised local government cadres as autonomous from the party-state system. Lu Xiabo identified these cadres as “principals” with a separate agenda that frequently puts them at odds with the central government (“ruler”) and the masses.\textsuperscript{543} The notion of district cadres in Long An acting like “principals” is not accurate. Instead there is a coalition of forces including farming groups, district officials, mass organisations and district extension officers that influence policy direction in their district. At times the policies they adopt are favoured by the central government such as the new-style dairy cooperative in Duc

Hoa district. At other times, this coalition of local forces adopts policies that may not be favoured by the central government, such as the promotion of informal cooperative groups in Ben Luc District. The configuration and composition of these forces will vary from district to district and therefore so will the policies they choose to implement. Yet the district level remains a key interface where a variety of forces can enter into a dialogue to bring about change in people’s lives. This is the essence of local politics in the districts of Long An province.
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