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## Poor Policies, Wealthy Peasants: Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development in Vietnam

**K**hean is a kitchen-hand in a rice noodle restaurant in Chợ Lớn. Eighteen years old, she comes from an ethnic Khmer rice farming family in the Mekong Delta province of Trà Vinh. On occasion in recent years, her family has found it necessary to sell a portion of their fields to meet the rising costs of rice production and everyday living expenses. When Khean's mother fell ill three years ago, they sold a piece of land to cover her medical bills. Khean was in grade five at that time. Having already been forced to discontinue her studies more than once, she dropped out of school for good to take her mother's place in her family's small-goods stall. Little other work was available locally. The local authorities had announced plans to build a sugar mill, but as the price of sugar had slumped, the plan never came to fruition. As a way out of her difficulties, Khean contemplated marriage to a Taiwanese man. Several of her neighbors have renovated their houses with funds remitted from daughters who now live in Taiwan. But her plans changed after a visit to her local pagoda, where she met a resident of Chợ Lớn who had come to seek from the head monk a charm to exorcise ghosts from a recently purchased property. This person informed her that the restaurant where she now works was looking for workers and offered to introduce her to its owner.

Khean sleeps on the premises with her younger brother, who sells lottery tickets. Neither have residential registration in the city. But she says her

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employer treats her well and provides free food and accommodation, in addition to a salary of US\$38 per month. Her ethnic Chinese boss says she is a reliable and hard worker. She communicates with him in their shared language of Vietnamese. Every other month Khean sends money home, and her family has used it to tile the roof of their house. Her mother, now retired and in improved health, spends most of her time assisting the monks in the pagoda. Khean plans to return home soon to take part in a ceremony to reconsecrate the pagoda, to whose lavish restoration she has contributed some of her earnings.

How are we to make sense of these changes in the fortunes of this rural family? Proponents of economic liberalization would see the rise in rural living standards in Vietnam as the inevitable result of the government's adoption of market reform measures in the late 1980s. Some economists have argued that Vietnam's case demonstrates that trade liberalization delivers growth that is inclusive and pro-poor.<sup>1</sup> Khean's family's fortunes have indeed measurably improved in recent years, and she herself would agree that her life has become better. Yet her case does not confirm the theory that markets are pro-poor, for her family's experience of producing rice as a commodity for export and of paying for privatized medical treatment contributed to the loss of their rice fields. Socialist critics of neoliberal globalization policies seem to have a better explanation of these outcomes, pointing out that the liberalization of agriculture in Vietnam, as elsewhere, has led to great income inequalities and the undermining of rural livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> This critique would appear pertinent to the Mekong Delta, a region highly integrated into capitalist markets, where a growing rural-urban divide, destabilization of farmers, and growing landlessness point up the tenuous significance of poverty alleviation accomplishments. Yet a socialist analysis of rural development has no ready explanation for the apparent turnaround in the fortunes of Khean's family, which she herself attributes to the merit accrued in their religious activities. Earning a better living only after migrating to the city, Khean spends her scant savings on religious offerings that both liberal reform proponents and their socialist critics might see as irrational.

Others have argued that Vietnam has not really followed neoliberal prescriptions and that this why Vietnam's growth is socially inclusive. Pietro Masina argues that the Vietnamese state maintains a central role in

development initiatives in a manner similar to other East Asian countries, with a discerning combination of special attention to the rural world and social protections with gradualist movements toward neoliberalism.<sup>3</sup> The hand of the state is certainly visible in several of Vietnam's rural development programs: the investment in technological modernization and rural industrialization programs and the effort to universalize transportation and schooling. And yet Khean cannot thank the state for improvements in her situation: she missed out on secondary schooling, industrialization failed to take off in her locality, and she migrated to the city, without formal state recognition, utilizing a social network that state officials would see as "superstitious." Indeed, a different explanation for her problems might attribute them to the formalistic application by the state of reform measures that had little relevance to her area. James Scott has argued that attempts by centralized states to impose on rural areas one-size-fits-all solutions, be they the privatization of social services or the modernization and industrialization of agriculture, are inevitably doomed to failure because of the fatal simplifications they impose on invariably complex processes.<sup>4</sup> This may indeed be one explanation for the dislodgement of people from their land, the exodus to the cities, the school dropout rates, and the turn to religious solutions in rural Vietnam that Khean's story exemplifies. Yet it would seem unwise and indeed illogical to attribute too much efficacy to a state that is predestined for failure because of its own centralizing myopia. These processes may be explainable otherwise as the purposeful strategies of rural people themselves.

A final explanation for the changes in rural Vietnam is that the state is responsive to the needs of rural people. Benedict Kerkvliet argues that the party abandoned its collectivization policies as a result of the political pressure exerted by noncompliant peasants.<sup>5</sup> The explanation draws some plausibility from the reputation that the Vietnamese Communist Party gained as a vehicle representing peasant interests in the struggle against colonialism. Kerkvliet observes that the Vietnamese government continues to be responsive to rural interests, certainly more so than its counterpart in the Philippines.<sup>6</sup> Yet the weakness of this analysis is that in the government's suite of programs for rural development, the state is responsive to other interests as well: donors such as the Australian and US governments and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank, which offer aid conditional on the

adoption of market-based policies. There are strong indications that these interests—and those of an increasingly assertive urban middle class—have captured the voice of government, whose approach to rural development today embodies a mix of deference toward universally applicable laws of development and a paternalistic attitude toward rural people. This attitude is especially evident in depictions of rural people in official development reports as poor, backward, remote, unconnected, unaware, and dependent on the state for their uplift. It is most blatantly revealed in official attitudes toward ethnic minorities, including Khmer people such as Khean, whose “backward” customs, religious orientations, and cultural insularity are deemed to impede the operation of markets and of state programs, the beneficial effects of which are taken for granted.

Given these problems with explanations that situate the locus of development in the market or the state and the locus of inertia in the backwardness of rural people, I suggest an alternative explanation for many of the changes that are occurring in rural Vietnam. Following the case histories of people like Khean, I argue that we might better apprehend the trajectories of rural change by recognizing the unique set of resources to which rural people have access and that they deploy: moral and religious logics, reserves of connection and knowledge, and strategies of mobility and communalism. Although some of their strategies may seem dystopic from the perspective of a state planner, they make sense to rural people and may indeed account for some of the successes for which development planners take credit. By virtue of these strategies, rural people have come to enjoy a standard of living that is often not captured in conventional development indicators.

The paper is divided into two sections. In the first I assess a number of rural development programs against their objectives. These programs include the promotion of an export commodity economy, modernization and industrialization policies, attempts to universalize communications, and state education and user-pays “socialization” policies. Finding it difficult to account for social change in rural Vietnam solely in terms of the consequences of these policies, I turn in the second section to investigate strategies and trajectories of rural development that are obscured to state planners. These include practices of moral accumulation, vernacular modernism, the economy of mobility, decentered transnationalism, rural cosmopolitanism,

and counter-state formations. The main case study is the Mekong Delta, which has been a focal point of the state's rural development programs. The region is interesting because many of its successes, according to official development criteria, occur for reasons other than predicted, and because the failure of several official development programs suggests that other factors and rationalities are in play. Drawing on several years of ethnographic observation of social change in the delta, I highlight the resources and strategies that rural people have at their disposal.<sup>7</sup> I reassess practices that have been seen as traditional, insular, and maladaptive to reposition them historically and in regional perspective as modern, engaged, and sustainable. The specificities of social change in the Mekong Delta, I argue, imply the need for development policies that are sensitive to local differences.

## Rural Development Policies

### MARKET FUNDAMENTALS

Market reforms in Vietnamese agriculture began in the early 1980s and were pushed forward strongly late in that decade. These reforms included the endorsement of household contracts to sell agricultural produce, agricultural decollectivization, and the granting of permission to farmers to purchase, sell, and transfer land and other production factors. These policies addressed the economic crisis provoked by the centralized subsidy system and responded to local and international pressure for such changes.<sup>8</sup> As heralded in the open-door [*mở cửa*] policy statement of the mid 1980s, from the early 1990s the government began to assertively position Vietnam within the international market system, entering a host of trading agreements and reducing subsidies and tariffs on imported commodities. The rationale has been that making investment and trade more open will increase growth and prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most commonly cited indicators of the improvements to the rural sector brought by these reforms is Vietnam's dramatic shift from food shortages and dependence on rice imports in the 1980s to its status, by the 1990s, as a net food exporter and the second largest rice exporter in the world. In assessing the main achievements of the decade 1996–2006, state ministries give prominence to the lead rankings in the world attained by Vietnamese exports of rice, coffee, rubber, cashew nuts, and pepper and to

the increasing share of agricultural production dedicated to exports.<sup>10</sup> Rising rural incomes and expenditures are held to indicate the benefits brought to farmers by this process of integration with world markets. Rural incomes rose by 27.6 percent between 1993 and 1998,<sup>11</sup> and rural household expenditures increased by 30 percent.<sup>12</sup> Receiving the most attention in recent years has been the dramatic reduction in poverty. Compared with the mid 1980s, when, according to one report, 70 percent of Vietnamese were living in poverty,<sup>13</sup> the number of people living below the poverty line fell to 58.1 percent in 1993 and 28.9 percent in 2002.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the praise Vietnam has earned for its poverty reduction achievements, most commentators note that socioeconomic rifts have opened up between rural and urban areas and between regions and ethnic groups.<sup>15</sup> Nationally, rural incomes have declined relative to urban incomes; in 2002, they were less than half those of urban areas.<sup>16</sup> Poverty has declined more slowly in rural areas, which by 2002 were home to more than 90 percent of those living in poverty.<sup>17</sup> In the same year, the incidence of poverty among ethnic minorities was over twice that of the rural population as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Since marketization, rural areas have been home to growing internal inequalities based on differences in advantageous access to production factors such as land, remittances, power, social capital, and information.<sup>19</sup> This internal differentiation is especially apparent in the Mekong Delta, where inequalities in access to land, sea, riverine, and capital-intensive resources have grown sharply during a period of intensifying exposure to market forces.<sup>20</sup>

By their own estimation, many rural people report that their well-being has deteriorated since they were pushed into market integration. For example, in the Mekong Delta—the country’s biggest rice producer and contributor of up to 90 percent of the nation’s rice exports—declines in the price of rice combined with the rising cost of inputs such as fertilizer, pesticide, hired labor services, machines, and transport, have led farmers to describe export rice farming as unprofitable, as “a guaranteed way to become poor.”<sup>21</sup> The practice of purchasing inputs on credit and repaying creditors once the harvest has come in is widespread in the Mekong Delta. Rice farmers in Bạc Liêu and Trà Vinh with whom I discussed this practice in early 2007 estimated that 70 percent of those involved in rice agriculture were still in debt

after the harvest season, describing as “rich” the 30 percent who merely managed to pay off their debts. Those farmers unable to pay off the debts incurred in agricultural production have had to sell their land or seek work as unskilled migratory laborers. Similar declines were reported in the profitability of livestock production, the higher price of which is offset by the rising cost of feeds and medicines. Recently, caged fish and tiger shrimp aquaculture have been promoted as more profitable export activities, yet accessibility to these highly capital-intensive sectors is limited and the risks of losing one’s capital to disease and inclement weather are far higher than those faced by rice farmers.<sup>22</sup> Government and international donor reports describe the recent increases in per capita agricultural commodity production as an improvement in “food security.”<sup>23</sup> However, farmers face increased insecurity, patently as a result of having to depend for their livelihoods on export commodity markets. The security of poorer farmers is eroded by land sales, while wealthier farmers face increased investment risks.

In addition to being exposed to global markets, rural people in Vietnam simultaneously have been exposed by the development industry to new standards that evaluate their material standing as deficient in relation to urban people. The gloomy conclusion in development reports that poverty has become concentrated in rural areas and predominantly among ethnic minority people has taken hold in rural areas, where it is common for rural people to describe their standard of living as “poor” [*nghèo*], to characterize agriculture as an “occupation of the poor,” and to depict aspects of rural lifestyles such as thatched houses, sun-darkened skin, and religious orientations as signs of deprivation. This discourse is firmly entrenched among the Khmer in the Mekong Delta, who, despite their reputation in the region as consummate rice farmers, see themselves as backward [*lạc hậu*] and overwhelmingly poor. This negative self-image coincides with the popularization within Vietnam of indicators that place the Khmer near the bottom of the development ladder and theories that attribute these outcomes to this group’s geographical and cultural “remoteness” and religious orientation.<sup>24</sup> Vietnamese academics and officials report that the insular outlook and fatalistic mindset that they attribute to the Khmer impede communication, deter innovation, and inhibit capital accumulation.<sup>25</sup> Development reports explain the “pockets of poverty” represented by the Khmer as results of their

failure to integrate into mainstream society, engage the market, and abandon their customary ways and religious traditions.<sup>26</sup> Officials cited in these reports regard as wasteful the time and effort that the Khmer spend on ceremonies and the construction of religious buildings, resources that would be put to better use in making productive investments.<sup>27</sup> Apparently tenacious customs and moral orientations among ethnic minority communities—once deemed obstacles to their socialist modernization<sup>28</sup>—are now described as obstacles to the supposedly beneficial effects of the market.

#### THE LIMITS OF MODERNISM

Rural modernization is a longstanding policy orientation in Vietnam, with roots in the statist development policies of the socialist Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north and the “Green Revolution” introduced under Republic of Vietnam in the south.<sup>29</sup> In recent years rural modernization has included the mechanization of agriculture, rural electrification and infrastructure programs, improvements to irrigation, drainage, and flood control, research and development into new farming techniques, the introduction of new seed varieties and breeds, and agricultural extension. These programs have aimed to increase the productivity of rural areas and stabilize living conditions for farmers. Rural modernization implies using science and technology to harness nature: modifying or changing biology and ecology to increase production outputs. As one observer has noted, this policy orientation makes manifest a technocratic and materialist view of the environment and development that is pervasive among state officials in Vietnam,<sup>30</sup> a conviction that nature will be progressively subdued and turned to human advantage by technology.

Certainly this has resulted in impressively increased yields, increased exports, an end to hunger, and the emergence of new sources of rural wealth. Flood-borne floating rice, which was still common in the western Mekong Delta at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been replaced by “miracle” wet-rice varieties that deliver greater yields at less than half the growing time—proof, surely, of the capacity of science and technology to tame nature and bring progress. However, farmers speak of the costs of this new kind of rice. The work of preparing land and water courses and maintaining crop health is heavy and time consuming. Farmers complain of

exhaustion and injuries from operating machines. The cost of fertilizer and pesticides is so high that most rice farmers find it hard to break even. Their increasing reliance on mechanized pumps, ploughs, tractors, and tillers and new strains and livestock feeds increases input costs and thus decreases profitability. As several observers have noted, the mechanization of agriculture in Vietnam, as elsewhere, is associated with rural class differentiation.<sup>31</sup> Farmers in the Mekong Delta observe that the main group to make a profit from capital-intensive farming methods are the people who supply these inputs to farmers, who lend money to them, and who buy and resell the farmers' land when they default on their loans.

To these socioeconomic costs of rural modernizing programs must be added the environmental costs. Many of the main problems and setbacks in rural Vietnam of the last ten years have to do with cataclysmic environmental occurrences: the category five storm in 1998 and a succession of smaller storms and the floods of 2000 to 2002, which were followed by droughts, pest outbreaks, shrimp disease, and the bird flu pandemic. Add to these the chronic problems, such as the battles with acidic or saline soils, waterborne disease, and malaria. Yet some of these crises have been due to the expansion of settlement and production in areas that are ecologically fragile, such as the upland and coastal forests, or those governed by complex seasonal flows such as the Plain of Reeds or the Long Xuyên quadrangle. Coffee and rubber plantations in the highlands and the expansion of shrimp farming and commercial fishing along the coasts have destroyed local ecosystems, depleted resources beyond the point where they can naturally regenerate, and instigated resource-based conflicts.<sup>32</sup> The exploitation of a single resource such as rice, coffee, or shrimp on a large, industrialized scale has eroded biodiversity and has sometimes increased the severity of pest infestations, disease, and acid and saline buildup.<sup>33</sup> As rural areas have been subject to increased population and extractive pressures, most recently under conditions of a decentralized market economy, the risks to people's well-being have also risen as a consequence of increased human waste, chemical pollution, mechanical accidents, and exposure to typhoons and floods.<sup>34</sup> Nomadic lifestyles and swidden practices attract frequent criticism for the harm they do to fragile upland ecosystems,<sup>35</sup> yet the sedentarization of mobile populations and the influx of new migrants into areas where these

practices occurred have probably caused far more damage to forests, swamps, and coastlines than the former practices, which involved smaller populations and less intrusive methods.<sup>36</sup>

The use of science to harness the environment for human benefit is seen by Vietnam's Marxist theorists as a confident step forward from a time when, unable to comprehend or control the forces of nature, people made offerings to the gods of the sky, the earth, and the waters to placate them and thereby obtain peace and security.<sup>37</sup> However, if the effectiveness of science and technology is to be measured by the decline in spiritual beliefs, the modernization of the Mekong Delta has to be judged a failure. There, the search for spiritual patronage and ideologies of fate proliferate. A distinctly spiritual relationship with the environment is evident in the propitiation of rocks and trees for fertility, whales for safe passage at sea, tigers for the safeguarding of security, and nature goddesses for success in agriculture, business, and health.<sup>38</sup> The thirst for amulets, talismans, herbal cures, and blessings for protection against misfortune, curses, and possession by evil spirits ensures no shortage of employment for a legion of sorcerers, faith healers, and exorcists, many of them drawn from the ranks of the region's ethnic minority peoples.<sup>39</sup> These practices of propitiating nature and the spirits are dismissed by development planners as "superstition" [*mê tín*], a term with connotations of "backwardness" [*lạc hậu*] and "irrationality" [*vô lý*] that imply the failure of the official vision of modernization to take hold in this region.

#### FIXED ON INDUSTRIALIZATION

Rural industrialization, a longstanding objective that dates back to the 1950s Democratic Republic of Vietnam, has gone through many phases and has attracted different rationales. To this day, planners entertain high modernist ambitions for the socialist industrialization of the countryside. Billboards with images of tractors plowing fields, electricity pylons spanning the countryside, factories belching smoke, and industrial workers in overalls and hard hats are situated in the middle of rice fields throughout the country, signaling the desire of Vietnam's leaders that their overwhelmingly agricultural nation leap into full-fledged modernity. In the liberal reform era, a new objective has been to reduce the proportion of agriculture's contribution to

the economy as a whole, as this sector adds relatively little value and offers little poverty-reduction potential.<sup>40</sup> Another emphasis has been on developing rural-based agricultural processing industries and decentralizing industrial production by enacting preferential policies that encourage enterprises to shift to rural areas. The rationale for decentralizing industry is that it will overcome the pooling of industry in the southeast, north, and urban areas and create poles of growth that draw in labor and other resources from surrounding rural areas. As agriculture offers low wages and absorbs too little labor, the objective for rural industrialization has been to create more rural employment and reduce rural poverty.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, Vietnamese industrialization retains socialist characteristics: the state attempts to introduce this perceived driver of development to rural and remote places, rather than simply respond to market-driven demands to locate industries in places where profits can be maximized.

Nationwide, industry and construction sharply have increased their contribution to GDP, from 28.8 percent in 1995 to 41.05 percent in 2005.<sup>42</sup> However, the strategy to entice industries into rural and remote areas has had limited success. Industry and construction remain highly concentrated in the southeast, where they account for nearly two thirds of the region's GDP and help this small region contribute to more than one third of the nation's wealth.<sup>43</sup> In the three regions that rely most heavily on agriculture, the Central Highlands, the Mekong Delta, and the northwest, processing contributed on average to only around 10 percent of GDP in 2002, drifting up from about 7.5 percent in 1995.<sup>44</sup> To date, rural areas account for only 20–25 percent of gross industrial output.<sup>45</sup> Official reports lament the high level of rural underemployment<sup>46</sup> and the slow, unsustainable rate of rural industrialization.<sup>47</sup>

Underlying official apprehension at this situation are concerns about the large numbers of rural people who are abandoning rural areas to seek work in the cities. Critics fault the government for failing to adequately provide for these people. On arriving in the city, rural migrants encounter administrative obstacles that deny them access to health care, schooling, housing, and labor protections,<sup>48</sup> and they are targets of sometimes heavy-handed measures to clear them off the streets during major international events.

According to established urban residents, the influx of rural people to the city has its benefits. Migrants' economic contribution and cheap labor are

appreciated, and their plight earns the sympathy of the many urban residents who are themselves recent migrants. Yet there is a strong counter-discourse. The flood of rural migrants aggravates established urban residents who deem the surplus of unskilled laborers in the cities to be responsible for urban congestion, traffic accidents, crime, and lowered urban living standards. Many urban professionals have complained to me about the unplanned ruralization of the city and the consequent deterioration in the order, civility, and morality of their neighborhoods and public places. The spontaneous migration of rural people to the cities calls into doubt the efficacy of official schemes to initiate rural industries that would “absorb” rural labor. These attempts to contain the population in the countryside have failed, much as earlier colonial policies attempted in vain to “fix people to the soil.”<sup>49</sup> The state’s visionary ambition to move people from rice fields into rural factories invites skepticism, as do its credentials as a provider to rural people. And its repute as a guardian of unity and security is tested by the tensions and perceptions of unfair treatment that have been unleashed by the popular decolonization of the countryside.

#### STANDARDIZING SPACE

The program to develop the national communications grid accelerated dramatically in the mid 1990s. This program has included the upgrading and extension of the national road network, the enhancement of major waterways, the development of ports, and improvements to telecommunications. I focus here on the program to create universal road coverage. Between 1994 and 1998, this effort accounted for the largest proportion of Vietnam’s public expenditure and, by 1998, 94 percent of total transport spending, up from 74 percent in 1994.<sup>50</sup> Assisted by loans and grants from international agencies and contributions from national and local budgets, the results have been impressive and have transformed the face of much of rural Vietnam.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the road universalization program faces shortcomings and challenges. Whereas by 2000, 100 percent of communes [*xã*] in the Red River Delta were accessible by automobile, 8.2 percent of communes in the Northern Uplands and 12.9 percent of communes in the Mekong Delta still had no motorized road to their centers.<sup>52</sup> In 2002, 24 percent of the population still lacked access to an all-weather road, and subnational routes were

in poor condition, with under 30 percent of provincial roads having been paved.<sup>53</sup>

International donors and government agencies make ambitious claims about the beneficial effects of roads, which are said to connect people in remote areas with markets, increase trade and access to information and services, facilitate economic growth and diversification, and promote poverty reduction. A World Bank–funded study showed that between 1993 and 1998, people residing in rural communes with a road passing through them had income gains 16 percent higher than those in communes without roads. Poor households in communities with roads were found to have a higher probability of escaping poverty than households in those without them.<sup>54</sup> Studies funded by other international agencies provide additional indicators: that households living far from roads experience disproportionately more poverty and lower poverty reduction, lower incomes, and a lessened chance of securing rapid income gains than those in close proximity to roads.<sup>55</sup>

However, a number of telling comparisons indicate that roads do not deliver income increases as claimed. Development reports note that rural access to roads in Vietnam greatly exceeds that of countries at the same income level<sup>56</sup> and that its road coverage is on par with far wealthier countries, such as Thailand and Brunei.<sup>57</sup> Excluding Hà Nội and Hải Phòng, in 2002, not one Red River Delta province earned above the national average per capita income.<sup>58</sup> Yet average incomes in the Mekong Delta, a predominantly agricultural region with the worst road connections in the country, exceeded the national average. The four wealthiest provinces in the Mekong Delta (in order, An Giang, Kiên Giang, Cần Thơ, and Cà Mau), with incomes above the region's average, were accessible only by slow vehicular ferry, and some of them have particularly poor local road systems, with large areas cut off for months each year by heavy flooding. By contrast, Long An and Tiền Giang, the provinces in the delta with the best road connections to nearby Hồ Chí Minh City, had incomes below the regional average.<sup>59</sup> These comparisons cast doubt on the proposition that roads offer decisive benefits to rural localities. Indeed, they may impose extra costs on poorer communities. Contributions from local communities financed half of rural road expenditures in 1996–2000, and construction and maintenance costs are higher in uplands areas where incomes are also lower.<sup>60</sup> As the new road

network ages, maintenance will demand a larger share of the transport budget, particularly in flood-prone and mountainous provinces where erosion is a constant factor.

A further problem with this approach is that people in rural localities experience barriers to access aside from the imputed problem of geographical remoteness. Studies by Dominique Van de Walle and Dileni Gunewardena and by Taylor indicate that factors such as ethnicity, language, and access to political connections and remittances from relatives living elsewhere crucially determine rural people's ability to benefit from road improvement programs.<sup>61</sup> Khmer people in Trà Vinh Province, for instance, considered that they lacked the necessary capital, connections to the authorities, language skills, and experience in business to be able to take advantage of road improvements that took effect in their localities in the early 2000s. In fact, the main beneficiaries of these projects have been people from the provincial capital, some with advance knowledge of the road development plans, who have taken advantage of the new infrastructure and relatively cheap land prices to set up a business or engage in land speculation. Many local Khmer sold their land to these newcomers and relocated to the interior, where land was cheaper. Others migrated to urban areas in search of unskilled work, selling for a low price land whose value subsequently rose, sometimes tenfold. The outskirts of the capital now have an air of prosperity; many new workshops and distribution and service outlets line the roads. Yet rather than confirming that roads improve rural people's well-being, the evidence from Trà Vinh suggests that road improvements merely churn the population, drawing in people whose pre-existing resources enable them to benefit from the new roads and expelling locals who find that the way of life they know or prefer has become unviable because of the changed conditions.<sup>62</sup>

One effect of this displacement of Khmer has been to sever the connection between Khmer monasteries and their supporting communities. The five Buddhist monasteries in Precinct 8 in the outskirts of Trà Vinh are among the oldest Khmer monasteries in the Mekong Delta. Yet in the last decade, monks report that the number of families offering food to the monks on their daily alms round has sharply dwindled, as the non-Khmer newcomers do not offer alms. Weakened by this dynamic, monasteries are less

able to provide education in Khmer language and Buddhism to members of the surrounding Khmer community, many of whom have gone elsewhere in search of work or better opportunities. Consequently, the monks fear for the survival of their culture and communal institutions. The experience of being displaced and the perception that their communities are being dismembered lead some Khmer to make accusations of discrimination and to the belief that the policy's aim is to undermine Khmer cultural and economic standing. These perceptions amount to a sense of psychological remoteness from the national center to which their former lands have been newly connected by the road network. One result of this process is that some Khmer believe that their voices and interests are better represented by advocates based elsewhere: Khmer Krom ethnonationalists in Cambodia and in diaspora who accuse the Vietnamese government of the dispossession of the Khmer and demand that Vietnam relinquish southern Vietnam to Cambodia.

#### RAISING INTELLECTUAL LEVELS

Vietnam has comparatively good education indicators for a country of its income, with net enrollment at the primary school level at 96 percent.<sup>63</sup> After funding shortfalls in the early 1980s led to a slump in numbers of children attending school, the state has increased funding to the sector, leading to a marked rise in enrollments at primary and secondary levels.<sup>64</sup> School fees at the primary level, introduced in 1989, were abolished in 1993.<sup>65</sup>

However, as the government and international development agencies report, the field of education is beset by many difficulties, and among the most acute are the inequalities in access to education faced by rural people. In 2002, urban people were twice as likely as rural people to complete upper secondary school (18.24 percent compared with 9.29 percent) and were more than eight times more likely than rural people to have a university or higher education. Rural areas have just over one quarter the number of trained workers of urban areas.<sup>66</sup> Literacy levels in mountainous areas and the Mekong Delta are much lower than the national average. Illiteracy was highest in the northwest, at 20 percent of the population (29 percent of women), compared with just 4 percent in the Red River Delta.<sup>67</sup> The inequalities are considerably greater between Kinh and non-Kinh people.

A 1999 survey showed that while 93.4 percent of children from the ethnic Kinh majority were enrolled in primary school, the corresponding figure for Khmer children was 76.3 percent; for Ba Na children, 57.8 percent; and for Hmong children, only 41.5 percent. The disparities in lower secondary school enrollments were far higher: 64.8 percent of Kinh children were enrolled at this level in comparison with 22.5 percent of Khmer, 8.9 percent of Ba Na, and 4.5 percent of Hmong.<sup>68</sup> In 2002, illiteracy in Vietnamese among ethnic minorities was four times higher than among their Kinh and Hoa counterparts in rural areas.<sup>69</sup>

Disparities in educational access are of concern to development advisors who see education as the key to poverty reduction and increased incomes. A World Bank study team noted that in the late 1990s, low educational participation among ethnic minority people correlated with higher rates of poverty.<sup>70</sup> Several essays in a UN Development Programme—funded study of living standards in the 1990s found that those with high educational levels experienced an increase in incomes during that decade.<sup>71</sup> This trend appears to be borne out by a urban-rural comparison of incomes in 2002. Compared with urban areas, rural areas had more than twice as many people who never attended school as urban areas, and rural dwellers earned on average less than half the income. And the northwest, with the second lowest level of educational participation among the eight regions in the country (in 2002, 42 percent of its population either never went to school or never completed the primary level), was the country's poorest region.<sup>72</sup>

However, these correlations do not bear out in a systematic comparison of all eight regions. The Mekong Delta, with the country's lowest educational participation (in 2002, 45 percent never went to or never completed primary school), had the second highest average incomes. Meanwhile, the northern central coast region, with the second highest educational participation, had the second lowest incomes. And despite having the best education in the country, the Red River Delta had only the third highest incomes.<sup>73</sup>

Several hypotheses could be drawn from these regional comparisons. The first is that the “universal education” [*giáo dục phổ thông*] provided in state schools is not indeed universal but reflects and promotes a worldview that is culturally specific. Regions like the Red River Delta and the northern

central coast, with a high proportion of ethnic Kinh people and a long tradition of high attainment in state education, have higher than average levels of educational participation. Participation levels are lower in the northern and central uplands and the Mekong Delta. These places are multicultural, Kinh residence is relatively recent, and the Vietnamese language serves as a lingua franca for people with different mother tongues. Arguably, participation levels reflect the degree to which students can relate to cultural biases in the school curriculum: in its content, assumptions, the language in which it is taught, and the mode of its delivery. The second hypothesis that can be formulated with respect to this data is that the curriculum may be locationally specific. Participation in the state education system is highest in regions where there are opportunities for employment in the state, industrial, cultural, or high-tech service sectors or where Vietnamese language proficiency is the only means for social advancement. It is low where there are other opportunities for employment and advancement. There may be little motivation or rationality in attending school if the content it provides is not adapted to available local or extralocal employment opportunities. The third and related hypothesis is that the curriculum might be occupationally biased. Educational participation is low among those who practice commercialized agriculture or small-scale service delivery and among populations with high percentages of migrants. Are students acting irrationally or against their best interests by not participating in a time-consuming and expensive activity that both keeps them away from work and teaches them little about the types of jobs and sector-specific skills that offer them the best opportunities for remunerative stable employment?

Despite their weaknesses in attracting pupils and delivering relevant content, educational universalization policies have succeeded in introducing into rural areas a universal standard of knowledge. Some Cham Muslims in the Mekong Delta, for example, judge themselves at a “higher intellectual level” than the Khmer because of their superior grasp of Vietnamese.<sup>74</sup> In early 2007 a Khmer teacher of Pali in Sóc Trăng Province spoke glowingly to me of the improvements to the economic fortunes of his people in recent years since, “under the leadership of the party, the Khmer became aware of the world outside of their settlements and followed the lessons of the more advanced Kinh people.” Yet Khmer monks in Trà Vinh especially are worried

by the Vietnamization tendency in their communities, noting a decline in ordinations and in Khmer and Pali literacy, as young Khmer men prefer to learn Vietnamese in school, which better allows them to seek work elsewhere. The monks fear that this “brain drain” will soon result in the disappearance of their language, identity, and traditions. At the same time, Khmer students struggle with the official curriculum, repeat years in school, and often do not attain functional literacy, opening themselves to the perception in wider society that they are at a “low intellectual level” [*trình độ dân trí thấp*] and have little knowledge and awareness. Oscar Salemin, Terry Rambo, and Neil Jamieson report a similar erosion of self-confidence in both traditional and mainstream cultural standards among people in the Central and Northern Highlands due to the subjection of these regions to state development discourse.<sup>75</sup> Many rural people find themselves caught between two cultural standards—one central, the other local—and are painfully aware of their inadequacies in respect to both.

#### CREATING MARKET SUBJECTS

In the 1980s there was a shift away from the collective to the household as the primary unit for economic management, decision making, and economic activity. The dismantling of the bureaucratic subsidy system moved economic responsibility away from the state to individuals and families.<sup>76</sup> “Socialization” [*xã hội hóa*] was introduced in the 1990s. It is a user-pays policy that encourages individuals and households to contribute materially to social services formerly provided by the state: education, health care, cultural activities, and insurance. Among the rationales for devolving funding for social services to those who use them have been that it makes up for shortfalls in state finances and raises the standard of these services in line with “consumer” demand.<sup>77</sup>

Despite recent increases in government support for schooling, the private cost of an education has steadily grown. Although the first five years of primary schooling is technically free, parents still have to make unofficial contributions in addition to paying for school books, uniforms, and transportation. Amidst sustained criticisms of the low quality of state schooling,<sup>78</sup> it is widely believed that to obtain a high-quality education one must undertake additional study, and a host of private classes have sprung

up catering to this need, creating a further barrier to access for people in rural areas.

Since user-pays principles were adopted in the health system, the proportion of total household expenditures going to health care has risen sharply, placing a disproportionately heavy burden on the poor. Less than a decade after hospitals began to formally charge patients fees for consultations in the late 1980s, private payments for health care had become the largest share of total health revenues.<sup>79</sup> In addition to formal fees and providing their own food, hospital patients routinely make informal payments to see health personnel, secure a hospital bed, undergo tests, utilize equipment, or obtain prescription drugs.<sup>80</sup> The escalating cost of health care has placed hospitals and health clinics beyond the reach of many rural people. As Khean's case illustrates, for many rural people, access to medical services, aged care, or educational qualifications come at a punitive price. To obtain these services they must sell off vital capital or withdraw a child from school, a response to crisis that only increases their vulnerability.<sup>81</sup>

Among rural people in the Mekong Delta there is a perception that the socialization of government services is *de facto* privatization. One rural trader in Trà Vinh explained the meaning of the state motto "Independence and Freedom" [*độc lập, tự do*] as "everyone for himself" [*độc lập, tự lo*]. Farmers in An Phú District, An Giang Province, have told me that due to the prohibitive cost of hospital entry, the only time they will see a doctor is when their death certificate is issued. I know one former revolutionary cadre who actually died in the hospital and then came back to life. He risked his life in the war against France, but when he was hovering around death in the hospital, this service counted for little. After he came to, he still had to bribe the doctors and nurses to receive basic medicine and care. To do this he had to mobilize his official connections and ask for money from an overseas relative. Many people do not have these advantages. People in Châu Đốc tell of mafia-like [*xã hội đen*] relationships in hospitals, requiring one to find the right intermediary and pay them protection money in order to gain access to qualified professionals. Teachers withhold crucial elements of the state curriculum from students, only delivering them, for a fee, in supplementary private classes. Government officials, teachers, and doctors are held in low regard in An Giang Province: "They use their good fortune and

talents not to help others but to advance themselves.” From the vantage point of the residents of Châu Đốc, life seems to come down to the survival of the fittest.

A discernable trend in response to these exclusions has been for rural people to withdraw from state service provision, turning instead to kin and neighborhood groups or religious and ethnic networks to obtain child care, aged care, medical and educational assistance, social security, and emergency relief.<sup>82</sup> This movement of marginalized people opting out of services nominally supported by the national government and choosing instead those provided by nonstate networks reflects the state’s decreasing relevance to ordinary people and may suggest considerable popular alienation from it.

The government has attempted to ameliorate the effects of its neoliberal policies by providing a series of exemptions to the poor. Ethnic minority people are exempt from school fees, have lowered school entry requirements, and are provided free access to boarding schools. Poor families and those in remote regions are provided money for books and offered exemptions from school contributions. Yet although such measures reduce the cost of social services, there is concern that they are not working. Exemptions can be counterproductive, as they reduce the funding available to schools, resulting in larger than average class sizes and poor facilities.<sup>83</sup> Because of low public and private funding, rural and remote areas have poor quality teachers and poor classroom materials.<sup>84</sup> Regions such as the highlands and the Mekong Delta receive additional payments from the central government to counter this shortfall, yet questions have been raised in the media about the ineffective disbursement of such aid.<sup>85</sup> And people in rural areas who are formally exempt from fees report that service providers still demand informal payments. Meanwhile, I have detected some resentment among urban people about the contributions they must make to assist those in need in rural areas, given that they themselves are simultaneously under pressure to pay for their own social services. The system of exemptions and aid targeting poor rural areas has also contributed to a perception of rural people as mendicants, and government officials have voiced concerns that special programs for the rural poor might be encouraging passivity and laziness.<sup>86</sup> These urban and state views resonate with those expressed to me by members of the provincial bourgeoisie in the Mekong Delta that describe ethnic minority people, in

particular, as unable to care for themselves and in need of uplifting by urban people and members of the ethnic majority.

### Rural Development Policies in Balance

On the strength of this review of rural conditions in the Mekong Delta, a reader might be tempted to conclude that in this region the footprint of development as a transformative project for human betterment has been extraordinarily light. Relative to Vietnam's more prosperous cities, people in the Mekong Delta are accumulating very little materially; they still make offerings to the spirits in an attempt to control nature, do work that is considered unskilled, live far from rural roads, have minimal exposure to schooling, and appear impervious to exhortations to self-improvement. It might appear to a modernist's mind that the Mekong Delta stands outside the flow of time, isolated and untouched by progress. Indeed, many tourists, pilgrims, and return migrants are enticed to the region precisely because it is believed to exemplify traditional rural values, among these its technologically simple, water-based lifestyle, its residents' reputed lack of guile and materialistic acquisitiveness, and their attachments to seemingly primordial ethnic and religious values.<sup>87</sup> Whether backward or authentic, these distinctive attributes of the Mekong Delta are deemed to belong to the past.

This line of reasoning is hard to square with evidence such as the relentless efforts by a succession of states to bring the Mekong Delta into the present or its prodigious contributions to the nation's export commodity balance sheet. Indeed, one might see the region's distinctive features—be they the search for spiritual patronage, the nomadic lives of the rural population, or their reliance on ethnoreligious communal safety nets—as consequences of the state's development policies. Exposure to global markets and the emphasis on increasing export commodity production have led to declining profits, indebtedness, and land loss. The conquest of the environment and opening of new zones for exploitation have increased rural people's exposure to adverse environmental events that make their lives less stable. The extension of roads has dislocated many people from the access that they once enjoyed. While state-subsidized factories sit accumulating rust in rural locations, migrant laborers who have gone elsewhere to look for work lack minimal protections, representation, and access to services. People drop out of

schools as soon as they gain the rudiments for negotiating such an existence. The attempt to improve access to services by mobilizing people's own contributions has made these services even less accessible than before, leading rural people to look elsewhere for assistance.

With outcomes such as these, the fiscally cautious well might question the reliability of assumptions that inform existing development policies. The Red River Delta has the highest levels of schooling, the highest number of intercommune road connections, and the second highest level of industrialization of all eight regions in the country, yet it only manages to attain the third highest incomes in the country. The Mekong Delta has the worst roads, the lowest levels of schooling, and a low level of industrialization but the highest incomes in the country, excluding the largely urban southeast region. The Central Highlands is a textbook case in the application of market integration policies, exporting a diverse range of new commodities and enjoying soaring average incomes, yet it has become one of the nation's most turbulent sites of disaffection, much of it directed at the export commodity sector. These outcomes might lead prudent heads to question the wisdom of continuing to spend so much on current development policies, the costs of which are clear, even as their effectiveness is in question.

As for the state, these trends raise serious questions about its relevance. Against its own oft-presumed interests in maintaining order, the state is not keeping a grip on the direction of change. Indeed, a state planner is likely to regard as dystopic the portrait sketched here, of a rural population that is increasingly uprooted from the land, migrating elsewhere in search of work, not participating in the official educational system, and seeking solutions to their problems from beyond the nation's borders. With candor that is remarkable, rural Vietnam is today construed in government reports as a place of serious deprivation: a place where incomes are low, where poverty is concentrated, where there is insufficient utilization of modern technology, inadequate transportation and industrial infrastructure, a low cultural level, and lack of self-sufficiency. One can appreciate the many ways these reported results strike at the legitimacy of a party that ousted its competitors from power on the grounds that it was the authentic embodiment of modernity.<sup>88</sup> The results challenge the party's continuing self-representation as the efficacious engineer of the countryside's steady progress toward a high-status

future as technological, industrialized, and sedentary. Rural-urban disparities cast doubt on the party's assigned role as guardian of the interests of rural people and on its discourse about "development with socialist characteristics." The party's grip on power, to which even its critics give credence, is called into doubt by the fact that rural people are not following the script of "industrialization and modernization," they are not absorbing the minimal lessons of citizenship in schools, and they are turning instead to religious and transnational solutions.

One might question whether the failure to achieve normative development is necessarily a negative when "development" implies a rural population that is attached to the soil, gainfully employed in factories, connected year-round by roads to the political center, literate in the official culture, and using the earnings from commodity production to purchase state social services. This vision of development, although it is clothed in claims about its universal validity, embodies assumptions about progress, well-being, security, and cultural value that appear to be as arbitrary as they are flawed. Exploring alternatives to this model would seem necessary, considering not only that development is failing on its own terms but that rural people in Vietnam appear to have quite different ideas about development and ways of achieving it.

### **Alternative Trajectories of Rural Development**

In the remainder of this paper I offer a different perspective on the changes under way in rural Vietnam. Shifting the focus away from the market or the state as the locus of development yet keeping the Mekong Delta as my main example, I describe the resources available to rural people and the strategies they pursue improve their lives. Although these resources and strategies receive little attention in official studies, except when construed as marks of deprivation or obstacles to development, they are employed by rural people to obtain a certain quality of life for themselves. Countering characterizations of rural life as insular, backward, and dysfunctional, I discern in these rural trajectories a way of life that is engaged, contemporary, and viable.

#### **MORAL ACCUMULATION**

Despite claims by economists that market integration delivers inclusive growth, we have seen that market integration policies in Vietnam have failed

rural people according to the discipline's own preferred measure, that of material accumulation. Rural areas are falling behind urban areas in these terms, and marketization is leading to an erosion in capital and material security. Blame for this outcome is sometimes sheeted home to rural people's adherence to traditional moral orientations, which impede their participation in the market. This would imply that in rural Vietnam, the market has bowed before the tenacity of traditional morality and the insularity and backwardness of rural ways. If so, it would contradict much that we have been told about capitalism's transformative effects on social and cultural relations: Marx's dictum that "all that is solid melts into air," Durkheim's insights into the loss of societal cohesion, and Weber's bleak premonition about the descending "iron cage" of rationalization.

There may be some merit, however, in examining the seemingly tenacious moral logics of rural Vietnam in light of the frustrations they arouse, at the coal face of development, among materialistically minded planners. James Scott introduced the notion of moral economy to explain how peasants acted collectively and conservatively in defense of a traditional subsistence ethic in the face of depredations of their livelihoods caused by a colonial market economy.<sup>89</sup> The approach usefully distinguishes the morality of peasants against the impersonal rationality of bureaucracies and explains the survival of the former in terms of resistance. This conception of moral economy has been criticized for failing to acknowledge the calculative strategies of rural people or the changes to morality in regions affected by a long period of exposure to the market.<sup>90</sup> It could be argued that the model does not account for the expansive and often successful engagements with the market economy we see in rural Vietnam, suggesting to the contrary an incompatibility between capitalist and agrarian moralities. Yet if we modify Scott's notion of moral economy accordingly to encompass the calculative action of rural people in the historical context of a market economy, we can retain something of its value to account for the distinct moral logics we see in rural Vietnam. In a nod to the government officials from Vĩnh Long who, in a report on poverty in the Mekong Delta, attributed this tendency to the Khmer,<sup>91</sup> I would posit an alternative model of the rural economy as a project of "moral accumulation."

Let us start by illustrating this thesis with the resource considered indispensable to Tèo Châu traders in the Mekong Delta province of Bạc Liêu:

prestige [*uy tín*]. Tèo Châu people operate small grocery stores [*tạp hóa*] throughout rural areas of this and other western delta provinces. Bạc Liêu's Tèo Châu traders depict themselves as more rural and socially integrated than the Cantonese who, they say, are concentrated in Chợ Lớn: "in every hamlet in these rural parts you will find at least one Tèo Châu operating a grocery store." They also speak local languages—Khmer and Vietnamese—and marry locally. The Tèo Châu migrated to the western delta, Cambodia, and Thailand from Triều Châu, China, after World War II. Initially they worked as porters, laborers, drivers, barbers, fishers; "whatever work was in demand, we did it." These humble origins feature prominently in narratives that explain their transformation from urban proletarians into a moderately prosperous rural middle class: "Everything we have now we owe to our own two hands. We made just a small profit on the items we sold—to make them affordable—but we got rich by selling a high quantity." The rags-to-riches tale implies that there is nothing mysterious or backhanded about their success. All is owed to prestige: "In business the trust of customers is your only resource. We don't lie, sell fake goods, or use loaded scales or adjust the prices according to the appearance of the customer. We don't consider ourselves too good to sell to poor and ragged-looking people, most of our customers are like that and that is why people keep coming back to buy from us." Their trade's continuing viability lies in their willingness to extend credit terms to farmers who are often without cash between harvest cycles; their confidence in doing so is based on knowledge of their customers' personal circumstances, itself a function of Tèo Châu traders' integration into rural networks. Prestige comes into its own when buying large quantities of consumer goods on credit from distant urban wholesalers. Rural Tèo Châu traders are crucial intermediaries in the region-wide flow of credit that descends "in a cascade" from the wholesale markets of Chợ Lớn to the smallest and remotest houses of the delta.<sup>92</sup> The household consumables are obtained on credit from the urban wholesalers, sold onward to farmers on credit, and paid for at harvest time, when the next order is placed with the wholesalers, sometimes months after the initial purchase. This extensive credit network, still going strong more than fifty years after it was first described, is based significantly on prestige, a moral quality that rural Tèo Châu traders continue to work hard to earn from their buyers and sellers.

As mentioned, the notion of “moral accumulation” was advanced by provincial officials in a recent poverty study to explain why the Khmer remain the poorest group in the Mekong Delta. The argument is that, caring less about economic enrichment than moral attainments, the Khmer devote their energy and scarce material resources to merit-making and pagoda refurbishments.<sup>93</sup> The explanation counters those ventured by other officials cited in the same report, who attribute Khmer poverty to the perceived moral failing of laziness and to their lack of rationality, foresight, and calculation. Indeed, the Khmer are not to be despised for their poverty, for they are rich in morality and in these terms their actions might be seen as calculative, indeed rational. This relativist argument is won at the cost of placing the Khmer into a parallel yet distant universe, governed by an essentially alien logic and fed apparently by streams of spiritual nourishment. However, these realms of accumulation are not separable. In the cash-poor rice growing areas in which many Khmer people live, a young Khmer man can obtain years of education, food, and board as a monk supported by non-monetary gifts provided by lay members of the community. Accruing merit for his parents through the self-sacrifice of ordination, a young man also obtains recognition that he is mature, educated, and self-controlled, improving his prospects for marriage and his standing in the community. Later in life he may serve voluntarily as an *Achar*, or teacher, in a local school. The female householders who offer gifts to the monks cancel the demerits accrued in their businesses, earn status among their peers, and when elderly, enjoy the support and fellowship of membership in the monastic community.

These practices set a rigorous ethical standard for the Khmer, among whom recognition is to be earned by doing good deeds and meritorious community service. Importantly, this is not a closed moral system. Tèo Châu and Cham traders willingly sell to Khmer farmers on credit, explaining that, unlike others, the morally scrupulous Khmer can be trusted always to repay their debts. Tèo Châu and Vietnamese people who live proximate to Khmer communities say that Khmer people—both men and women—make faithful spouses and self-controlled, hardworking employees. This reputation is widespread in Hồ Chí Minh City, where rural Khmer people have recently come into demand as domestic workers [*osin*] since, it is claimed, they can be relied upon not to steal money or personal possessions when

alone in a stranger's home. These examples indicate that the moral reputation accumulated by the Khmer is a valued resource both within their own communities and, increasingly, beyond them.

Women in the Mekong Delta are active in marital alliances with men of means living beyond the region, the most notorious current example being marriages with Taiwanese men. Rural people in the region are aware of the relations of inequality and necessity that shape such marriage paths. Some analysts similarly construe these alliances with outsiders through a political economic lens, as a way out of poverty or as a business in commoditized cross-border marriages.<sup>94</sup> Locals also hold the view that such alliances are often informed by women's aspiration to better themselves materially or access the prosperous urban and foreign lifestyles that they see in the media. Many of Vietnam's urban intellectuals regard the apparent vogue in marriages to Taiwanese husbands with concern, as symptomatic of the material destitution of rural areas or the deterioration of traditional morality. At the same time, since the early 1990s, when I began to observe the region, there has been a view that constructs its rural women in precisely the opposite terms, as ideal marriage partners because they are seen to exemplify traditional virtue. The impression that the region's poor rural women are rich in virtue has driven a constantly evolving demand for rural brides from urban migrants, returning overseas Vietnamese, and men from neighboring Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore. This view suggests that the Mekong Delta has been incorporated into a transnational cultural hierarchy that fetishizes its rural women as the embodiments of Confucian virtue. The view is also symbiotic with the neotraditionalist constructions of femininity that are promoted by the state in its neoliberal "household economy" model.<sup>95</sup>

All this may suggest little room for rural women's agency, as their lives are encapsulated within these powerful political, economic, and cultural structures. Yet from a rural perspective, it is possible to see these alliances as consistent with a strategy of moral accumulation and the deployment of feminine virtue [*đức*]. As Helle Rydstrom suggests for the northern delta,<sup>96</sup> the process of socialization of rural women in the Mekong Delta consists of the embodiment of virtue. Women are brought up in a sacrificial ethic to care [*chăm sóc*] for their parents and siblings and to attend to their families' needs according to a notion of filial piety [*hiếu*] and sisterly duty. Girls are

socialized into a disposition to care for others that is valued beyond their natal family as transferable to husbands and their children and, more broadly, within the service sector of the region where employees are mainly women.<sup>97</sup> Although this sacrificial strategy can be viewed negatively as accommodation, by necessity, to onerous patriarchal standards,<sup>98</sup> it is also true that women earn esteem, security, and influence in rural society through their performance of these familial expectations. Where I would depart from Rydstrom is in suggesting that these strategies are also responsive to the external cultural evaluations of rural women as paragons of virtue. Indeed, they are consciously deployed strategies, for among the qualities of a rural bride most persistently advertised to potential marriage partners who pass through the region is their embodiment of the virtues of faithfulness and familial responsibility. In establishing alliances with men from beyond the region, women gain recognition for their accumulated virtue. After doing so, many women continue to try to assist their natal families by sending home remittances out of a sense of duty and empathy.<sup>99</sup> Put another way, the enrichment of many families in the region through remittances sent home by women who marry beyond it is consistent with a logic of feminine moral accumulation.

In contrast with economists' depictions of the rural economy as a project of material accumulation, these examples show rural people to be accumulating morality: be that prestige, merit, or virtue. I suggest that these moral logics are neither insular nor disengaged. The moral reputation accumulated by rural people is valued within the region and recognized beyond it. Furthermore, I suggest this to be neither a traditional residue nor a one-time conversion of moral status into commodity, but key to the way the economy functions in this region. In keeping with this perspective, we see can morality as something that is accumulated by agents who are calculative insofar as their moral accomplishments are a real measure of social standing. Advancing their own interests in the name of a moral imperative, their successes give this imperative strength and plausibility. And although this logic is not material it may indeed return material benefits. Hence, these strategies are also viable. They comprise a means by which families and communities gain access to material resources, while at the same time improving their social security and esteem.

## VERNACULAR MODERNIZATION

Among the most significant accomplishments of rural people in the Mekong Delta is their ingenious adaptation to its unique riverine environment. Houses are built above the high water mark on stilts made from locally occurring melaleuca trees. Water coconut palms are used to stabilize the river banks, and their fronds are used as thatch for walls and roofs. People use boats in preference to motorbikes and bicycles. Floating markets, services, and industries of various kinds are provided on the water. People live according to the seasons. During the floods people in the western delta turn from agriculture to catching fish, which are plentiful at this time. Migratory *cá linh* minnows are used to make *mắm* [fermented fish paste] and to feed catfish raised in netted pens. Nets are strung along the river's edge and stretched across the mouths of watercourses to trap fish in daily tidal movements. In low water season, people gather snails, crabs, frogs, and water plants and catch rats, eels, and wild birds. During the monsoon rains, people in coastal areas plant rice. In the dry season when salt water invades their fields, they shift to fishing, drying salt, raising shrimp, gathering clams, and other kinds of off-farm work.

Due to their reliance on water, the people in the Mekong Delta are often seen as living close to nature, regulated by natural cycles. This in turn is often given as a reason for their religious proclivities, as a way to make peace with an all-powerful nature in an isolated, technologically backward region. The region's biggest religious festivals, the festival to the goddess Bà Chúa Xứ and the Khmer festivals of Chol Chnam Thmei and Ok Om Bok, are seasonal, occurring at the beginning of the rains and at the end of the flood period, at the start and finish of the traditional growing seasons. They are depicted in Vietnam's ethnological literature as traditional spiritual appeasement and agricultural thanksgiving rites.<sup>100</sup> However, some gods are not easily appeased. The water goddess Bà Thủy commands the entire region of the rivers and is said to outrank Long Vương, the dragon lord who rules the rest of the country. She is mysterious, capricious, and cruel. People make offerings to her but dread to mention her name. The people who died in the floods at the turn of this century, it is whispered, went to meet Bà Thủy.

One explanation for the persistence of religion in Vietnam in contemporary times is that its people have become disoriented during their transition to

the unfamiliar world represented by the market economy.<sup>101</sup> Owing also to their alleged lack of a modern scientific outlook, many people in rural Vietnam turn to the gods for assistance to cope with the diseases, bad weather, and price fluctuations that, government planners concede, complicate the certainties of market-led growth.<sup>102</sup> Anthropological and historical studies of the Mekong Delta make the compelling case that the exceptional strength and vitality of religious networks in the delta are tied up with this region's intense exposure to global market forces.<sup>103</sup> Does the Mekong Delta represent a case of market integration without modernization? Might we foretell a decline in the reliance on the spirits here with the state's efforts to modernize this region through programs whose aim is to bring its technological and scientific level up to par with the rest of the country?

The case of An Giang Province, where intense integration with the market goes hand-in-hand with an extremely active religious life, would appear to support this line of thinking. An Giang is cut off from the rest of Vietnam by a branch of the Mekong River. Most of the province is covered annually for several months by flood waters. When the waters abate they pool in depressions that are highly acidic. Roads are washed away by the floods, settlements are swamped, children are killed. Clean drinking water and processing facilities are lacking. Downstream and along the Mekong Delta's coastal fringe, annual dry season saline incursions affect the rice yield and make it impossible to grow fruit. In an attempt to remedy these problems, the Mekong is getting a huge terrestrial upgrade. Efforts have been made to drain swamps of acidic water, control floods and saline incursions with levees and sluice gates, build bridges and roads, and heighten, seal, and solidify settlements.<sup>104</sup> Yet many of the delta's rural areas have not yet seen the benefits of these costly modernization efforts. As with the highlands and rural regions elsewhere in the country, where environmental disasters, high child mortality, disease, and poor health are endemic, An Giang appears to suffer from a debilitating lack of technological development. The difficulties faced in this part of Vietnam seem to come down to the problem of too much water.

However, water is at the same time this region's main comparative advantage. An Giang is the center of the capital-intensive catfish export industry and a large freshwater capture fishery. Its dynamic cross-border

trading economy relies on the Mekong River as a trading artery. The province has a huge and diverse flotilla of water craft and a thriving water-based transport industry. Vietnam's most water-bound province, Cà Mau, is its biggest sea products harvester and processor. Rạch Giá, the provincial capital with the most aggressive and ambitious urbanization program in the delta, is, mysteriously, also one of the most remote—a real end-of-the-road province [*tỉnh cùng*]. Water explains the mystery. The town area has been expanded by reclaiming the sea, using dredged silt from canals. There are plenty of buyers for the houses in these new areas, which cost up to US\$200,000 each. Much of the money for these homes comes from Rạch Giá's sea-based fishing industry, which exploits the waters of the Gulf of Thailand. The fishing fleet has grown rapidly in recent years, thanks mainly to money sent back by overseas Vietnamese. Rạch Giá has so many links to members of the Vietnamese diaspora because of its proximity to the sea.

To regard the abundant water resources of the delta as “natural” overlooks the fact that the delta is one of Vietnam's most technologically modified rural regions. Most of its watercourses have been dredged and widened over more than a century.<sup>105</sup> Drainage and irrigation channels have greatly expanded the area for agricultural exploitation. Mangroves have been stripped from the coastal region, mudflats excavated for salt pans and shrimp ponds, and marshes drained for the relentless extension of paddy fields. An enormous amount of silt has been scooped from the beds of watercourses to create elevated settlements, roads, and cultivation areas. Ponds have been dug for fish rearing, wells sunk for drinking water. Gravitational water flows are manipulated by sluice gates and dikes, and new flows are manufactured by mechanized pumps and propellers. These modifications enabled large population increases in the delta and account for its enormous productivity. They are also, in the view of many of its residents, among the main reasons for their problems.

The religious activities that are so common in the delta also reflect its economic and social complexity. The Bà Chúa Xứ festival attracts not only farmers but also the traders who purchase and market their produce, as well as retailers, wholesale distributors, and transport and service industry workers. Creditors propitiate the goddess to gain her assistance in recouping debts, and debtors seek her help in meeting repayment deadlines.<sup>106</sup> Those who

invest in shrimp ponds make offerings to Bà Thủy to ensure that their precious export shrimp do not die from disease. Land speculators obtain amulets from Khmer sorcerers to obtain a good price on their land and to evict the ghosts that linger there, relatives of the previous residents to whom new buyers owe no piety. Cham sorcerers are consulted by a rising class of urban employers to counter the evil amulets implanted in their properties by their resentful hired laborers and domestic servants. Motorists obtain assistance from Khmer exorcists to banish from their vehicles the ghosts of traffic accident victims who are said to cause most road deaths.<sup>107</sup> Far from reflecting a premodern mindset, the religious resources of people in the delta are turned to solving the many problems of its modernization.

Most locals hold hopes for the technological development of their region, sharing the government's vision for the future but also reflecting local priorities that have emerged over history. The watercourses along which most people live serve also as transport and trade routes and lines of communication. Although typically at the back of each house is a rice paddy, orchard, or fish pond, the front opens out onto a navigable waterway. As a result the whole delta is linked internally and with places beyond by water. The religions followed in the Mekong Delta, the elaborately syncretic Cao Đài faith being a notable example, reflect a local preoccupation with borrowing, mingling, and connection that corresponds with this communicatively open way of life.<sup>108</sup> Today there is great enthusiasm in the delta for the building of roads and bridges. People readily abandon the waterways to live along roads. A newly opened bridge quickly becomes a place for locals to socialize and a pilgrimage destination for those from other parts. Although described as a form of modernization, the local passion for roads is but the latest manifestation of a longstanding local emphasis on communication.<sup>109</sup>

The ecological adaptations in Vietnam's rural areas differ markedly from region to region. One thing we can learn from the case of the Mekong Delta is that it is a mistake to see ecological difference as underdevelopment or backwardness. Developing terrestrial infrastructure is not necessarily synonymous with modernization and opening, just as religious orientations do not connote backwardness and isolation. One way, therefore, to improve rural people's market position is to understand and enhance local ecologies

and economic adaptations rather than to seek to transform them in a unitary vision of modernization.

#### ON AND OFF THE FARM

The countryside is not a site merely for farming but for many other enterprises as well. The activities in Châu Giang village, across the Hậu River from Châu Đốc on an island accessible only by ferry, give us an indication of the variety of ways rural people make a living. Livelihoods here include food outlets, such as vegetarian and *halal* food stalls and fixed and mobile food vendors; entertainment venues such as *ruợu đế* [rice wine] bars, video cafés, and billiard parlors; retail sales in neighborhood markets, house-front stalls, hawkers' carts, and floating markets; sundry sales and services such as long-distance trade, road and river-based transport services, public telephone rental, karaoke machine hire, lottery ticket sales, credit provision, photographic and video services, and chair and table hire and repair services; female-dominated industries such as weaving, fabric dyeing, sewing, embroidering, hair-dressing, and domestic work; government employment; manufacture and processing such as furniture construction, coffin making, boat building, house construction, herbal medicine manufacture, ice production, and food processing [*mắm* and *prahoc*]; earthworks such as ditch digging and dredging of river silt; husbandry (cattle, pigs, chickens, ducks); aquaculture in fields, ditches, ponds, netted enclosures, and floating cages; hunting and gathering of a variety of water resources; fishing with drag and cast lines, cast and trawl nets, spears and traps, and farming, of rice, soybeans, and maize. Virtually all of these activities, save government employment, are household-based enterprises, with the allocation of work duties and outputs arranged by kinship.

As we have seen, one of the goals of rural industrialization policies has been to implant value-adding and labor-absorbing industries into rural areas. The main comparative advantage of these otherwise investor-unfriendly areas is generally seen to be their access to outputs from agriculture, husbandry, and forestry. This leads to a focus on agricultural processing as a special objective of rural industrialization plans. However, as the case of Châu Giang illustrates, farming is not the only enterprise that takes place in rural areas. Likewise, the activities that add value and absorb labor in rural areas are not restricted to agricultural processing.

Some of the enterprises that employ the most rural labor are not productive industries but services that organize consumption. For example, travellers in the Mekong Delta are able to eat on an industrial scale in a string of huge barn-like restaurants in between population centers that serve cheap, speedy, nutritious, and clean local food. Each employs a small army of laborers. These restaurants also serve as an outlet by which local families can display for sale various processed local delicacies. On a smaller scale but far more numerous are the many thousands of cafés that line the transport routes of the delta and cluster in intersections, confluences, and marketplaces. Run by female family members, the larger ones provide employment for several young women. Marketplaces are another major employer for women. Each village has at least one market with multiple stalls, and these are supplemented by smaller open-air markets and smallgoods stalls. Finally, many localities in the Mekong Delta are turning themselves into foreign and domestic tourist destinations. Locals artfully turn the tables on outsiders' stereotypes of the delta, marketing themselves as representatives of natural simplicity, authentic rural culture, unchanged traditions, and heightened religious experience.

Handicraft villages are not as developed here as in the Red River Delta. However, there are a number of focal areas where diverse industries cluster together that utilize specialized techniques and local resources. One of these is around Sa Đéc, in the true center of the delta, where one finds a concentration of incense manufacturers, brick kilns, tile makers, rice warehouses, fish hatcheries, pickled mince processors, milk toffee manufacturers, commercial flower gardens, and bonsai nurseries. Several areas specialize in boat production on a large scale, such as Phụng Hiệp in Cần Thơ Province. Many other areas focus on processing and distributing a single local specialty, such as rice wine, coconut candy, or pickled fish, or serving a particular delicacy such as seven-dish dog meat or seafood.

Some of the most significant rural industries are not fixed in place. Transport is such an industry. It is highly developed in rural areas and employs a great many people, from drivers, conductors, and ticket sellers to mechanics and bus park vendors. Despite all the road building that has taken place, water transport remains a major employer in the Mekong Delta, as is the case with other water-based industries, such as silt reclamation, aquaculture,

and fishing. One of the surest routes to prosperity in the region has been to secure a monopoly servicing the economy of mobility. Among the delta's wealthiest people are petrol station proprietors, vehicle and boat fleet owners, motorcycle dealers, warehouse operators, mobile team labor service providers, earth-moving contractors, and, as many a local will attest, transport police.

Residents of Châu Giang practice a diverse household economy, the various components of which are constantly being adjusted in responses to changing conditions at home and away. The sale of embroidered caps to Malaysia, for example, has recently replaced the weaving of scarves for sale to rural Khmer communities. Households retain a small plot of land to provide a subsistence base, but this is rarely the main source of income. At any given time, a high proportion of people from Châu Giang work away from home: trading or working as hired laborers or employees in service and manufacturing industries in Châu Đốc and further afield. Thus, income earned from local trade and craft activities supplements that earned from extralocal activities. Long-distance traders based in this village get to know a particular network of customers in a given location, and what they sell changes according to prices at home and demand from their customers. Cham clothing traders affiliated with the Mubarak mosque in Châu Giang have close relations with Khmer farmers living 150 kilometers away in Trà Vinh, to whom they sell rubber sandals and second-hand shirts on credit. Remittances from these ventures support family members who stay behind, as well as community religious institutions that provide schooling for their children.<sup>110</sup>

Rural areas in Vietnam owe much of their vitality to the very active exchanges that take place between them and proximate urban centers. Each of Vietnam's urban centers is integrated with a rural hinterland in a particular way. Hồ Chí Minh City is where most fruit and rice grown in the Mekong Delta ends up for consumption, processing, marketing, and export. It serves as the principal gateway for the capital, consumer goods, and services imported into the delta. The city and surrounding industrial zones also employ many migrants from this region. Some work in the urban factories that process for export foodstuffs grown in their home provinces, others, like Khean, in the city's service sector. Adding value to products from the delta, these migrant workers also repatriate remittances from the city that boost the

delta's economic and social standing. Whether exploiting in the city an education that was gained at home, sending home infants to be brought up by relatives, or caring for sick and elderly family members, people of the Mekong Delta subsidize much of the city's social expenditures. There is concern among some urban people that if not reduced, this influx of rural migrants will undermine their standard of living. Yet the economies of urban and rural areas are so intertwined that this isolationist suggestion, even if realizable, would be self-defeating.

#### DECENTERED TRANSNATIONALISM

It would be not saying anything new to note that the two biggest cities of Vietnam have been transformed greatly in this era of global integration and diversified international linkages. Hồ Chí Minh City and Hà Nội are centers for foreign investment and trade, bases for foreign companies and organizations, sites for exhilarating and challenging experimentation with an inflow of new ideas, cultural influences, and lifestyles.<sup>111</sup> By contrast, rural Vietnam is often depicted as the interior: remote, insular, for better and for worse shielded from this intense exposure to external influences.<sup>112</sup> But if we consult a map, we see that Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City are located just about as far as one can be in Vietnam from an international border. Because of the unusual shape of the country, most of rural Vietnam is closer to other countries than these supposedly cosmopolitan centers. The regions that are described as "remote areas" [*vùng sâu vùng xa*] are, in crude physical, geographical terms, far less so than the residents of these cities.

People in the rural Mekong Delta do not have access to an international airport. Most could not afford to fly if they did. However, they leave the country more frequently than people with the access and means required for air travel. Few residents of the delta have ever met someone from Hà Nội, let alone visited their capital city, but they take full advantage of their proximity to the nearest border. Cambodia is full of people from all over the Mekong Delta. The border is highly porous, formal travel documents are not required to cross it, and there is a lively cross-border movement of traders and workers in both directions. Communication poses few problems. Many people in the Mekong Delta know Cambodia's lingua francas of Khmer and Tèo Châu. Those who speak neither find that Vietnamese is widely

spoken there. For example, Trinh, a twenty-three-year-old woman from rural Bạc Liêu Province, does not know how to write Vietnamese. Speaking Cantonese and Khmer fluently, she works in a Chinese-owned café in Phnom Penh to save money for her brother at home in Bạc Liêu to study Vietnamese, and for her own planned trip to southern China.

The Cham in An Giang Province are the delta's best travellers. Although they live in tiny settlements on islands in the Mekong River and are reputed to keep to themselves, the Cham frequently travel to Cambodia, Thailand, and Malaysia. For generations, their journeys as religious scholars have taken them to these three countries and, also as pilgrims, to the Middle East. As travelling salesmen they are away from home for months at a time, visiting all the provinces of the Mekong Delta, Hồ Chí Minh City, the Central Vietnamese plain, the Central Highlands, the Red River Delta, and as far away as China. In their local and distant travels, they move within a transnational network that spans much of mainland Southeast Asia and beyond. They speak Vietnamese well; some I have met speak seven languages and can write three or four. The policies of the Malaysian, Thai, and Cambodian governments are as important to them as the relationships they entertain with Vietnam's imputed cultural and economic centers: the cities of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City.<sup>113</sup>

Another major concentration of Vietnam's rural population lives along its lengthy coastal plain. Australia is home to a large proportion of people who come from the coastal regions of Vietnam, from Hà Tiên to Quảng Ninh. These people make a living from the sea, own boats, and are familiar with sea travel, and so when life in Vietnam became too hard many weighed anchor and left for another port of call in the region, such as Hong Kong, Indonesia, or the Philippines, and from there gained entry to Australia. When they did so, they were retracing sea routes that predate their regions' incorporation within Vietnamese territory. The entire coastline of Vietnam bears the marks of this most recent wave of transoceanic engagements. New houses, vehicles, boat fleets, storehouses, processing facilities, and businesses of all kinds have been built with the remittances sent home from the departees. The wealth and power of local authorities in coastal areas have also been boosted by these water-borne interactions, which historians tell us have been vital to local state formation processes for several centuries.<sup>114</sup>

The situation in the mountainous areas of Central Vietnam, the north-east, and the northwest is similar. Hmong, Dao, Thái, Kinh, Lào, and Hán are among the many peoples who move through the borderlands of Vietnam, Yunnan, and Laos.<sup>115</sup> The mountains do not impede cross-border movements, which are continuous with older patterns of migration and trade, policies of sedentarization notwithstanding. These movements bring into play existing networks, knowledge of different locations, and familiarity with languages spoken on different sides of the border. Those who live in the Red River Delta have access to several border gates with China through which people and goods flow informally, sometimes with the assistance of local authorities.<sup>116</sup> Strong social and cultural links are found between much of rural northern Vietnam and the former Soviet bloc countries, a trajectory of rural transnationalism that is not as developed in the southern part of the country.

From the perspective of most of rural Vietnam, where residents are involved in a diversity of transnational networks and have a wealth of cosmopolitan experiences, it may seem that the residents of the cities of Hà Nội and Hồ Chí Minh City are themselves remote, isolated, and lacking knowledge of different languages and cultures. To consider the countryside as deficient in relation to the nation's purportedly more cosmopolitan urban centers is to overlook the many distinctive translocal networks into which rural areas are integrated. Rural Vietnam's wealth in transnational linkages contributes not only to the economic dynamism of the country but also to the cultural diversity for which Vietnam is justly famous.

Indeed, an important explanation for the cosmopolitan character of Vietnam's cities is that these urban spaces have been colonized by rural people to extend and supplement their cross-border networks. Hồ Chí Minh City is the place where a young woman from the rural Mekong Delta is most likely to meet a prospective husband from rural Taiwan, or where the delta's growing number of Mandarin students might come to sit for a Chinese literacy test. It is where Muslims from An Giang Province meet coreligionists from Malaysia and receive funds from Saudi Arabia to go to Mecca and to refurbish their mosques at home. Khmer monks from Sóc Trăng Province chant Pali sutras in the city's two main Khmer monasteries on behalf of the deceased overseas relatives of urban residents. Residents of the

“backpacker district” of Phạm Ngũ Lão, many of whom come from rural regions surrounding Hồ Chí Minh City, learn English by interacting with budget tourists in their place of work. Although often invisible and sometimes stigmatized, the cross-border networks maintained by rural people in Vietnam’s urban spaces add a great deal to the vitality and identity of urban life. Subtract them, and you might have very little left.

#### A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE

Among the explanations for the low level of educational participation in the Mekong Delta is the idea that its people take for granted the natural bounties with which they have been endowed, making them lazy or noncalculative. Alternatively, they are opportunistic—too busy trying to get rich in the present to spare a thought for the future. It has been suggested also that the region (like the highlands) lacks traditions of learning, compared with the imagined cultural heartland of the Red River Delta.<sup>117</sup> These explanations assume that the state educational system is the only locus for knowledge transmission. However, another explanation for why students in some regions, social groups, or occupations may not be attending school is because they have access to alternative nonofficial forms of knowledge transmission and exchange. The Mekong Delta is particularly rich in religiously, ethnically, and gender-specific mediated modes of communicating knowledge that is sensitively attuned to local conditions. This great richness in nonofficial intellectual resources—well known to anthropologists and historians, but overlooked in development audits—helps explain the paradox of a region with the highest income levels of Vietnam’s rural regions despite the lowest levels of formal educational participation.<sup>118</sup>

Take the case of Vĩnh Châu district in coastal Sóc Trăng Province. It is a rice-, fruit-, vegetable-, and seafood-exporting district, well connected by road and water to two provincial capitals. However, few people in the district marketplace have spent more than a year or two in a state school. Many cannot write much more in Vietnamese than their name and address. Hardly anyone in the district can read the newspapers. Many people in Vĩnh Châu’s rural areas cannot speak Vietnamese or even follow the news on television—if they have access to a television, that is. When I visited Vĩnh Châu the first time, one young man thought that I must be Taiwanese; he

had heard stories about foreigners from that country who were coming to his homeland to look for a marriage partner, although he had not yet met one in person. Someone else with whom I spoke thought that northern Vietnam was a foreign country.

Is this a district desperately lacking in knowledge? Vĩnh Châu has three ethnic groups, Kinh, Chinese, and Khmer. Members of each group speak their own language at home, but many are fluent in the other two languages as well. People normally use the Tèo Châu dialect of Guangdong Province to communicate with each other. Tèo Châu is the main language spoken in the district marketplace. I do not know this language, but Khmer people spoke it with me, assuming that I would.

Young Khmer men spend up to twelve years in their monastic schools. They study Buddhism: its history, philosophy, fables, and psychology. The language of instruction is Khmer. They learn to read and write Pali, the language of the sutras. They also learn to read and write Khmer, along with mathematics, geography, and Vietnamese. In a class in the nearest village, they also learn Tèo Châu. Of the four languages learned, most are strongest in Khmer. Because monasteries teach just one or two years of the Pali curriculum, students travel to another monastery to take the extra classes they need. When that class is finished, they move to another monastery, elsewhere in Sóc Trăng or in another province. One finds monks from every province of the delta gathered together in the larger monasteries of the region. In this vast interconnected Khmer-language-speaking educational network one can study many subjects, including computing, English, pharmacy and tourism. The goal of many monks is to travel to Thailand or Burma to study Buddhism at the university level. Many go to Cambodia, although this is done informally and with difficulty.

Khmer people are said to have the lowest cultural level in the Mekong Delta and to be in need of uplifting to the level of the Kinh. To the contrary, I have found them to be enormously educated. The Khmer monks in Vĩnh Châu know more languages than I do, and more than most of my educated friends in Hồ Chí Minh City. They have wide horizons and have travelled extensively. The languages they speak are contextually relevant. It is hard to see how they might be better equipped to deal with the realities of their region. The main obstacle they face is the prejudice of their supposedly

better-educated neighbors. Yet it is not obvious that adjusting themselves to that “level” constitutes development.

#### COUNTER-STATE FORMATIONS

In considering the final rural trajectory of development, let us take a closer look at Khmer Theravada Buddhist monasteries. After training in these communally supported institutions, monks become householders, teachers, and community leaders or remain in the monasteries as teachers, healers, or abbots. The monasteries also serve as Khmer literacy schools for local children, health centers, migrant hostels, venues for seasonal, religious, and life-cycle ceremonies and for regular collective feasting, meditation retreats for older laypersons, and depositories for the remains of the dead. They are also places for redistributing and socializing wealth. Financial contributions to the monasteries generate prestige for the wealthy in the community. This prestige is achieved through contributions to collective institutions that provide support for less well-off people and an opportunity for all to earn prestige through labor, dedication to study, and demonstrations of religious prowess.

Among the Khmer, a redoubling of attention to their collective religious tradition has occurred in a context in which the Khmer feel that they are being insidiously undermined by what they perceive as discriminatory development policies.<sup>119</sup> Confronted by what some characterize as colonialism, the Khmer emphasize the imperative to build up the religious institutions that maintain their distinct culture. Their focus on the monasteries is a nostalgic communitarian vision, which identifies Khmer culture exclusively in terms of the monastic tradition and Khmer ethnicity in terms of a single religion. Although past-regarding, this perception is at once a moral critique of the inequality of the system in which they live and a response to alienation and atomization. The emphasis on monasteries also can be seen as a rational endeavor to modify or live within a commoditized economy by relying on communal solidarity and the support provided by collective institutions. Highlighting the monasteries as the exclusive base for communal authority strengthens their role as redistributive institutions, as places that well-off Khmer people must support in order to earn esteem within the Khmer community.

The delta is home to many other localized, ethnic, and religiously defined communities: the Cham Muslims, ethnic Chinese, Hòa Hảo,

Cao Đài, Tịnh Độ Cư Sĩ, Catholics, and Protestants. What is noteworthy about these groups is the diversity of social services that their religious institutions collectively provide, including schooling, health care, forums for women, child support, aged care, the provision of material assistance for the destitute, communal feasting, and collective burials. Other features shared to a greater or lesser extent among these groups include an emphasis on equity and mutual obligation, the monopolistic position of their religious institutions as the primary basis for communal authority, and the “state-like” character of the institutions in the life of the community.

The Cham Muslims live in a different part of the delta and make a living from different occupations. Yet they share with the Khmer a critique of structural inequality, unfairness, and the corruption of mainstream society. They see the state as representing someone else’s interests. In response, they emphasize the exclusive authority of Islam in their community. Their mosques play a central role in local life and in sustaining the economic ventures of this migratory group. The imperative to support mosque-based social programs in the community induces members of a widely dispersed community to concentrate the resources earned in a host of extralocal ventures in the maintenance of communal institutions that collectively attend to the socialization of children who remain at home. Those who so contribute gain esteem in the eyes of their peers and are awarded with scarce resources to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage, a reward that also bolsters the authority of Islam in their community.<sup>120</sup>

There are affinities here with the so-called “feudal” Hòa Hảo Buddhists, a group that emerged in the western delta the late 1930s. With a similar critique of the injustices of contemporary society, the Hòa Hảo embarked upon a purposive attempt to construct a rational alternative. A persuasive explanation for the emergence of the Hòa Hảo is that it responded to the late-colonial breakdown of paternalistic patron-client relations between large landlords and tenant farmers, which were supplanted among the Hòa Hảo by a new focus of communal authority centered on the charismatic personage of the living Buddha Master Huỳnh Phú Sổ.<sup>121</sup> In addition to condemning wasteful sacrifices to the spirits, whose reputation for efficacious assistance was called into doubt, the Hòa Hảo developed medical dispensaries and engaged in public works and charity, activities that conferred prestige upon those who contributed to them and assisted less-fortunate sectarians.<sup>122</sup> The Hòa Hảo have

continued this philanthropic legacy up to today, when many people in their region depict social relations as exploitative, pitiless, deceitful, and mistrustful and bemoan the disregard for their needs shown by state authorities.

What each of these groups share is their location in a part of rural Vietnam that is deeply integrated with the capitalist economy. Members of these groups make a living on the market in a zone where agricultural commodity production and trade are the major sources of livelihood. They experience volatile economic conditions, marked by sudden windfalls, dramatic losses, and constantly fluctuating prices. This instability has led to pronounced indebtedness and dislocation. The region has high levels of social inequality, land concentration, and unemployment. Working conditions for men, women, and children are frequently exploitative. People compete with each other for small gains in an environment dominated by trading cartels from which most locals are excluded.

We can understand the intensely communalist religious orientations in the Mekong Delta, therefore, as a response to contemporary economic difficulties and marginalization. These religiously defined groups are purposive efforts at collective empowerment in a context of perceived anomie, inequality, and exclusion. What is happening here is a variety of self-help that resonates with current neoliberal policy. Vietnamese officials offer their approval for the contributions made by religious and ethnic groups to the sustaining of the poor and the building of a moral community.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, after decades of criticizing religious orientations, the ruling party has come to the belated recognition that religious energies can be tapped to generate moral (and material) resources for socioeconomic development.<sup>124</sup> Yet the state is playing a risky game in implementing policies that lead people to a sense that they are being abandoned and undermined and then seeking to co-opt their collective self-defense mechanisms as a cost-free social safety net. The state cannot really have it both ways, for these communal redistributive networks resolve problems of inequality that stem directly from state policies, and they are premised on a perception of moral unravelling in wider society and, most damagingly, a sense of the state as an alien, discriminatory, and ineffective entity.

In many respects what we are seeing in the Mekong Delta is the renaissance of theocracy: the party's nemesis in the 1930s to 1960s. These religious

movements are informed by a sense of alienation, a feeling that the state is not responsive to people's needs. They are driven by the conviction that genuine assistance lies elsewhere. Indeed, they each draw on the several sets of resources available to rural people that I have highlighted in this paper: moral accumulation, spiritual patronage, on- and off-farm employment, remittances from migration, transnational networks, and communication in a common language with like-minded peoples across borders. Drawing on such resources, these religious-based movements have the potential to develop into overt opposition to the state in the manner of the demonstrations that took place in the Central Highlands in 2001 and 2004. Apparently less newsworthy, but just as worrying to state officials, is the continuing sympathy among the Khmer in the Mekong Delta for the irredentist claims of Khmer Krom ethn nationalists in Cambodia and elsewhere.

For the state to regain the initiative, it must address the socioeconomic injustices and the sense of cultural alienation to which these movements respond. The socialization policies are not the answer; they are going in the wrong direction. Rather, the state must provide assistance that is relevant to rural people. To do so, I suggest, requires several leaps of the imagination. The first is to set aside a view of rural people as deficient according to existing criteria of rural development and attempt to understand the resources they have at their disposal and the strategies they undertake to further their interests. A quality of anthropological imagination is needed to see how ways of life that do not conform to urban, statist, or universal modernist categories might indeed be engaged and sustainable ways of coinhabiting the present. An ability to see history outside the state frame is also required, for many strategies rural people adopt reflect continuities with longstanding practices. In implementing solutions it would make sense to work within the institutions that rural people have developed as a solution to their problems. The question is, can the state find a way back in? It is a reasonable question as the state is so thoroughly urbanized, prone to hectoring and diminishing rural people and caught up in appeasing a range of special interests that it seems to have lost its feel for the problems of ordinary people in rural Vietnam. If it does recover its rural sensibility, it will have to provide a superior or at least complementary alternative to the variety of resources upon which rural people already draw. ■

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#### ABSTRACT

*Examining recent momentous changes in rural Vietnam, this article contends that many rural development policies implemented by the state and international development agencies adopt criteria of progress that are inappropriate to the situation and needs of rural people. However, far from being left entirely bereft by the failures of official development schemes, rural people in Vietnam have access to an alternative set of resources and strategies to improve their lives. Using examples from the Mekong Delta, the article demonstrates that these resources and strategies help rural people realize a quality of life that is engaged, modern, and viable.*

KEYWORDS: *Vietnam, rural development, Mekong Delta, ethnic minorities, religion*

#### Notes

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  43. *Ibid.*, 21. In 2002, agriculture contributed only 6.2 percent to the southeast region's GDP, whereas it accounted for 20.1 percent in the Red River Delta (including Hà Nội and Hải Phòng), 34.4 percent in the Central Coast, 40.6 percent in the northwest, 50.9 percent in the Mekong Delta, and 51.6 percent in the Central Highlands.
  44. *Ibid.*, 21. Industry and construction contributed 11.5 percent to the Central Highlands economy in 1995 and 17.8 percent in 2002. In the Mekong Delta, the figures were 14.1 percent and 19.8 percent, and in the northwest, 18.6 percent and 21.8 percent, respectively. Discounting construction and mining, processing accounts for only about half of this sector's value.
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56. World Bank, *Accelerating Vietnam's Rural Development*, 6. Rural access to roads measures the proportion of the population connected by an all-weather road. In 2002, the figure for Vietnam was 76 percent, whereas the aggregate average of seven countries at the same income level was 43 percent.
57. Joint Government and Donor Working Group, *Vietnam Managing Public Resources Better*, 67.
58. GSO, *Result of the Survey on Household Living Standards*, 86.
59. *Ibid.*, 93. In 2002, the national average monthly per capita income was 356.08 thousand đồng. The regional average for the Mekong Delta was 371.30 thousand đồng; and for the Red River delta (including Hà Nội and Hải Phòng), 353.10 thousand đồng. The figures for the Mekong Delta provinces were as follows (in thousand đồng): An Giang, 415.72; Kiên Giang, 411.14; Cần Thơ, 400.10; Cà Mau, 394.83; Long An, 360.64; and Tiền Giang, 352.17. (GSO, *Result of the Survey on Household Living Standards*, 86, 93).
60. World Bank, *Accelerating Vietnam's Rural Development*, 7.
61. Dominique Van de Walle and Dileni Gunewardena, "Sources of Ethnic Inequality in Vietnam," *Journal of Development Economics* 65 (2001): 177–207; Taylor, "Redressing Disadvantage," 252–256.
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64. Jonathon London, "Rethinking Vietnam's Mass Education and Health Systems," in *Rethinking Vietnam*, ed. Duncan McCargo (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2004), 135.
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70. Baulch et al., "Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam," 17.
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73. Ibid.
74. Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta*, 238.
75. Oscar Salemin, "Enclosing the Highlands: Socialist, Capitalist and Protestant Conversions of Vietnam's Central Highlanders" (paper presented at workshop "Politics of the Commons: Articulating Development and Strengthening Local Practices," Chiang Mai, Thailand, July 11–14, 2003); Rambo and Jamieson, "Upland Areas" (see note 35).
76. Jayne Werner, "Gender, Household and State: Renovation (*Doi Moi*) as Social Process in Vietnam," in *Gender, Household, State: Doi Moi in Vietnam*, eds. Jayne Werner and Daniele Belanger (New York: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2002), 29–47.
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82. Rita Liljestrom et al., *Poverty and Profit in Rural Vietnam: Winners and Losers of a Dismantled Revolution* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998); Do Thien,

- “Charity and Charisma: the Dual Path of the Tinh Do Cu Si, a Popular Buddhist Group in Southern Vietnam,” in *Vietnamese Society in Transition*, ed. John Kleinen (Amsterdam: IIAS/Her Spinhuis, 2001), 159–182; Philip Taylor, “Apocalypse Now? Hoa Hao Buddhism Emerging from the Shadows of War,” *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (2001): 339–354; Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta*, 102, 118, 283–284.
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  102. MPI, *The Five-Year Socio-Economic Development Plan, 2006–2010*, 9. Explanations of religion as a way to cope with the vagaries of nature and the crises and uncertainties engendered in the process of market integration are discussed in Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise*, 34–35, 91–95.
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115. For a Vietnamese perspective on this cross-border mobility, see Đậu Tuấn Nam, “Tình hình di dân tự do của người Hmông ở miền tây Thanh Hóa và Nghệ An hiện nay” [Contemporary Spontaneous Migration among the Hmong of Western Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An], *Dân Tộc Học* 3, no. 141 (2006): 30–35. Several studies on the cross-border networks of Kinh, Hán, and Hmong people in the northern highlands are found in Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng, eds., *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Regions* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2000). See also, Mekong Migration Network and Asian Migrant Centre, *Resource Book: Migration in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*, 2nd ed. (Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, November 2005).
116. See contributions on the Sino-Vietnamese border trade in Evans et al., *Where China Meets Southeast Asia*, 72–97, 236–253.
117. See, for instance, the news article: “Government Pledges More Aid for Ailing Mekong Delta Schools,” *Viet Nam News*, January 1, 2007.
118. This argument with respect to the Mekong Delta has been made elsewhere (Taylor, “Redressing Disadvantage,” 259–260). Tran Thi Thu Trang has made a similar contribution with respect to the northwest province of Hòa Bình. See Tran Thi Thu Trang, “Vietnam’s Rural Transformation, Information, Knowledge and Diversification,” in McCargo, *Rethinking Vietnam*, 110–124 (see note 64).
119. Taylor, “Redressing Disadvantage,” 260–265.
120. Taylor, *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta*.
121. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam*; Brocheux, *The Mekong Delta* (see note 103).
122. Taylor, “Apocalypse Now?”; and *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta*.
123. Committee for Religious Affairs, Religions and Policies Regarding Religion in Vietnam (Hà Nội: Socialist Republic of Vietnam Committee for Religious Affairs, 2006), 35–36.
124. Taylor, *Goddess on the Rise*, 44–45.