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RESEARCH

The Politics of Modernization: Shifting Construction of the Peasant, Mobility Trajectories and Rural Revitalisation in Post-reform China and Vietnam

Minh T.N. Nguyen[1], Ly T.C. Vo[2], and Lan Wei[3]

Abstract

Based on a comparative study of two villages with distinct translocal and transnational migrant economic networks, this article examines the ideological underpinnings of China and Vietnam's rural development programs in relation to rural people's actions and strategies. Central to these programs are enduring modernizing agendas that seek to reform rural people and transform rural places according to state-defined criteria moulded on class-based notions of civility and population categories that construct rural people as backward and in need of reform. Our ethnographic research finds that villagers undertake multidirectional mobility trajectories to generate social and economic values that defy such constructions. Yet, these are often incorporated by the said state agendas, which maintain a social order based on the rural-urban hierarchy that is crucial for legitimating the political power of their party states. We underscore a complex politics in which rural people contest the imposition of the categories with their actions and at the same time view the said modernising agendas as a social space for value creation.

Keywords: rural development, new countryside, modernisation, mobility, China, Vietnam

1 Faculty of Sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany, minh.nguyen@uni-bielefeld.de.
2 Faculty of Tourism and Social Work, Vinh University, Vietnam, vocamly1978@gmail.com.
3 Strategy Department, Shanghai Rural Revitalization Research Centre, China, weilananthropology@126.com.

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Introduction

In recent decades, the talk of revitalizing and renewing the countryside has been prominent in policy discussions in both China and Vietnam, two formerly state socialist countries that have been pursuing the political economic model so-called market socialism since their respective market reforms several decades ago. In China, the New Socialist Countryside program was put into place in 2006 and a Vietnamese program roughly under the same name in 2009. Both these national programs are underscored by the goals of modernizing the countryside through improving rural infrastructure, integrating rural and urban development while maintaining the rural society's cultural identity as well as its political and social order. In China, the program's goal was "to build a new socialist countryside according to the requirement of advanced production, improved livelihood, a civilized social atmosphere, clean and tidy villages and democratic administration"[4]. According to the Vietnamese government decision that approved the program in 2009[5], its aim was to modernize the entire rural mode of production and improving rural life according to socialist orientation:

> *To build a new countryside with a gradually modernised socio-economic infrastructure, appropriate economic and productive structure; linking agriculture with rapidly developing industries and services; linking rural development to planned urbanisation, maintaining a rural society that is democratic, stable, and rich in the nation's cultural identity; protecting the environment, maintaining security and social order; steadily improving the people's material and spiritual life under socialist orientation.*

More recently, there seems to be intensification of these modernising goals in what the governments of both countries refer to as a new direction in rural development.

4 China daily website on the review of the New Socialist Countryside within the 5-year plan period of 2006-2010: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/20/content_11436582.htm

5 Prime Minister Decision No 800/QĐ-TTg, dated 4 June 2010 on Approving the National Target Program of Building the New Countryside between 2010-2020, available on the government's portal http://www.chinhphu.vn/, accessed on 26 August 2016.

In 2017, the Xi Jinping government put forward The Rural Revitalisation program, following the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2017 at which the president announced that modernization of agriculture and rural area was one of the core tasks aimed at achievingthe Chinese dream of "national rejuvenation" and achieving a "moderately prosperous society":

> *To build rural areas with thriving businesses, pleasant living environments, social etiquette and civility, effective governance, and prosperity, we need to put in place sound systems, mechanisms, and policies for promoting integrated urban-rural development, and speed up the modernization of agriculture and rural areas.*[6]

Since then, the rural revitalisation drive has been in full swing in China, both in terms of government discourses and local government actions; in 2021, the National People's Congress approved the 'Rural Revitalization Promotion Law' which further emphasized the significance of rural development. In Vietnam, too, the results of the first 10 years of its new countryside program are considered one of the most important achievements of the party state, which even makes claims about having initiated an open-ended revolution[7]. A new plan for further advancing the course of rural modernisation has been laid for the next decade – aiming for so-called "exemplary countryside" (*nông thôn kiểu mẫu*) – which, like the Chinese rural revitalisation program, also places stronger emphasis on integrated rural-urban development, industrialisation of the countryside and greater market integration[8].

In both countries, the intent to modernize the countryside is further accentuated in these master policy narratives about rural people and the countryside within which the "three rural problems" (*sannong/tam nông*) – namely the countryside, agriculture and peasants – are to be tackled. Between the lines of party state rhetoric about turning rural people into the subjects of national development and "rejuvenation", as we discuss below, is an underlying construction of the countryside, including its mode of production and its people, as problematic and in need of improvement in order to justify interventions by the state and the political elites (see also

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6 Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm, accessed on 06/12/2022.

7 See government news at: https://baochinhphu.vn/cuoc-cach-mang-khong-dung-lai-102262820.htm (The non-stop revolution), accessed on 08/12/2022

8 Resolution 19 of the Vietnamese Communist Party on agriculture, peasants, and the countryside until 2030, available at: https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/he-thong-van-ban/van-ban-cua-dang/nghi-quyet-so-19-nqtw-ngay-1662022-hoi-nghi-lan-thu-nam-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xiii-ve-nong-nghiep-nong-dan-nong-8629, accessed on 6/12/2022.

Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024). While the party states have consistently sought to reform the countryside through their varying rural development schemes since the founding of these socialist republics, we suggest that there is a shift in the problematisation of the countryside in the market economy, namely in the ideological status of the peasantry from being a revolutionary force under high socialism to a population category to be improved upon. This market-oriented problematization of the countryside and rural people for the state to realise its "will to improve" (Rose and Miller 1992; Li 2007) not only serves to mask the consequences of state-led development on social and cultural lives but also the increasing level of self-responsibilization by rural people in ensuring livelihoods and wellbeing (Nguyen 2017; Hoang 2024; Wang 2024). Conversely, our ethnographic material from rural China and Vietnam suggest complex trajectories of social and spatial mobilities whose translocal and transnational character transcends any kind of rural-urban distinctions to produce social outcomes that challenge the very conception of rural people as passive and resistant to change. Rural people, however, continue to serve as the trope of the deficient subject (see Harwood 2013; Hoang 2024) for the state's work of improving. This logic is familiar to varying modernization projects in history, including the colonializing mission, which consistently deny coevalness, namely the experience of living in the same era, to certain groups people (Kipnis 1995; Fabian 2014). They are seen as "embodying a mode of production and a way of thinking felt to be antithetical to both socialist and capitalist development" (Kaneff 2001:6). Such denial relegates the peasantry to bygone and unmodern times, thus building them up to be the ones to be catching up with and improved upon by dominant groups and the state. The last several post-reform decades have shown the material implications of this modernisation agenda for rural labour, land and environment in both countries, with the countryside increasingly becoming the frontiers of commodification, financialization and capital accumulation (Lin and Nguyen 2021; Cole and Ingalls 2020; Chuang 2020).

In this article, we will first take a look at the changing ways in which rural people and the countryside are problematized in post-reform rural development discourses in China and Vietnam viz-a-viz their national development orientation in the new economy. What follow are two ethnographic case studies from rural China and Vietnam that link the local implementation of the national rural development strategy to local mobility trajectories. The China site has a mobile network of trading that specialises in operating convenience stores catering to migrant workers in different parts of the country, and the Vietnam case is home to a network of transnational labour migration to Europe.

The research was conducted as part of a long-standing comparative anthropological study of rural mobility and welfare in China and Vietnam led by the first author

since 2018, with the research assistance of the second author in Vietnam and the third author in China. During the first two years, we made three visits about two to four weeks in each site where we conducted participant observation, interviews with local people and government officials, including some officials at the district level in Vietnam and the county level in China. During 2020-2022, two team field trips were conducted in Vietnam, and because of pandemic restrictions on cross-border mobility later on, the second and the third authors made further stays in the villages on their own, in close consultation with the first author. During this period, the first author also met villagers from Vietnam who have migrated to Germany through multiple short field trips to Berlin, where many of them live and work. In both villages, the researchers stayed with a host family and participated in their daily life and kinship events, also extending visits to their relatives and friends. Our main informants were villagers, both those based in the village and those living and working in other cities in China and in Europe (in the case of people from Blue Mountain), with many of whom we shared meals, tea table conversations and pleasantries. These case studies indicate how rural people take part in the said politics of modernization with their mobilities and aspirations, simultaneously challenging hegemonic discourses about peasant backwardness and using state-led development goals as spaces for value creation. The comparison between China and Vietnam is productive for considering the varying manners in which this politics of modernization unfolds in the two countries with similar polities yet relatively different historical experiences and trajectories.

The Backward Other: Peasants, Rural Life and Agriculture

The notion of the Chinese peasant, according to anthropologist Myron Cohen (1993), is an invention at the turn of the 20th century. With it, the Chinese elites, including Maoist and communist intellectuals, consistently constructed the old social order as worth eradicating for the sake of modernising China; for them, "the physical, political and economic liberation of the peasantry required its cultural destruction" (Cohen 1993:155). The Chinese adoption of the Japanese term *nongmin* then is, according to him, "a conceptual transformation of the rural populations from farmers into peasants" (ibid.), the latter referring to subsistence-oriented agriculturalists of pre-modern society and the former market-oriented producers. This conceptual transformation went in the opposite direction as that of the European modernizing project of turning peasants into farmers. China in the late imperial era had been in fact notable for the cultural, social, political and economic interconnections between the city and the countryside. As well, there was much greater variety in the rural economy of China and Vietnam than the then rural-urban distinction allowed. In both

countries, rural people had been actively involved in small market trade and commercial disposal of their crops, with small-holding farms often acting as mini-enterprises managing their kin-based human resources and property (Endres and Leshkowich 2018; Cohen 1993; Goody 1996). In Vietnam, as in China, villages had commonly been the locus of industrial and commercial activities alongside with small-holding agriculture (Gourou 1955) – a feature that explains people's relatively easy movements between subsistence agriculture and market trade in the two villages we study. The communist governments' characterisation of the peasant was not unlike that of the earlier European representation of Asian societies as uncivilised and resistant to change that served as the moral justification for colonial civilizing missions (Tappe and Nguyen 2019). In the same way, it denies the dynamism that had led to flourishing commerce and technological advances in agriculture responsible for the high productivity of the limited arable land area serving large populations over centuries (Bray 1986; Goody 1996). Despite complex mobility trajectories and diverse forms of productive enterprises that rural people have been engaging since the reform, they continue to be "held by definition to be incapable of creative and autonomous participation" in the project of national reconstruction (Cohen 1993:154).

More than a pure cultural category, however, the invented peasant has highly political underpinnings. It first served as the basis for these communist governments' classification of the populations into different kinds and classes of persons, before turning the invented peasant into "statutory peasants" (Cohen 1993) through legal provisions that later came to be solidified in both countries' household registration systems (*hukou/hộ khẩu*). Installed in the 50s, the household registration system ties provision of social services and citizen rights to one's place of registration, and one's household registration status is transmitted to the next generation. To varying extents, these systems regulated the spatial and social mobility of the Vietnamese and Chinese populations and formed the structure of resource distribution during state socialism. As part of this system, the small proportion of urban residents and industrial workers enjoyed employment and welfare privileges unavailable to most rural people for decades, if even these privileges were modest compared to current living standards. Rural people, meanwhile, had access to collectively owned agricultural land as a source of subsistence and basic welfare organised through the agricultural production units (Nguyen and Chen 2017). As Kipnis (1995) suggests, what had started as a construction to emphasise the revolutionary potentials of the peasants as an exploited class and description of a social order to be overcome as strategic basis for building coalition turned into a highly discriminatory social classification after 1949 in China (see also Solinger 1999). To a lesser degree, the same can be said of Vietnam after 1954 in the north and after 1975 in the whole country following the end of the second Indochina war. This took place despite the major role of the rural

populations in sustaining the socialist central planning system in both countries and in contributing to the eventual power of the Vietnamese Communist government in unified Vietnam after 1975 (Kerkvliet 1995).

In post-reform China and Vietnam, meanwhile, the notion of the peasantry as problematic continues to hold sway despite increasing co-residence of people formally classified as rural and urban through internal migration, urbanisation and growing transnational mobility (Chu 2010; Guldin 2001; Harwood 2013; Oakes and Schein 2005; Nguyen and Locke 2014). But something has changed in the very problematization of the peasantry since their respective reforms at the end of the 1970s and in mid-1980s, ushering in the era of market socialism, i.e. marketization under Communist party rule. If before and during state socialism, the peasantry, having been constructed as part of the feudal social order, was imbued with historical agency as revolutionary subjects, it came to be seen more and more as the obstacle to growth-based national development with its backwardness (Day 2008; Kipnis 1995; Truong and Vo 1974). Along with the revaluation of labour according its differential quality, in contrast to the more egalitarian mode of valuing labour under high socialism, arose the understanding of the peasants as "needing liberation to develop their capitalist tendencies and transform themselves into entrepreneurial farmers" (Day 2008:55). The economistic understanding of the peasantry under market socialism thus disregards its once central political agency that had helped the party states to power in both countries. Originating from the notion of population quality/quality of labour at the beginning of the countries' respective reforms, it implies that the low quality of the (then) majority peasantry led to economic stagnation and should be addressed by investing in training and education and developing commodity production (Schneider 2015; Kipnis 2007).

Over the last few decades since the reform, the technocratic notion of "quality of labour" has morphed into the moralistic notions of "human quality" in China (*suzhi*) and "people's intellectual level" in Vietnam (*dân trí*). These notions refer to a shifting range of desirable citizen qualities such as being educated, law-abiding, technologically aware, and possessing cultural skills and consumption knowledge (Anagnost 2004; Nguyen and Locke 2014). The moral construction of the peasantry as lacking in such qualities serves to further underplay its political agency by "displacing class as a way to understand social inequality and peasant agency" for a dichotomy between those are of low and high qualities (Day 2008:65), qualities that are assumed to originate in urban centres to be acquired by peasants to improve themselves in their image (Harwood 2013). The current framework of rural revitalisation and modernisation heavily promotes agro-industrialisation and commodity farming in both

countries[9]. In it, one could detect the underlying connection between the said problematisation of the peasantry as a social form and of small-holding as an agricultural form, forms that are known to be responsible for centuries of sustainably high level of production in these agrarian societies (Bray 1986; Schneider 2015). Casting peasants and their small-scale production as problems turns them into targets of the ongoing capitalist transformations directed by the party state seeking to integrate them into its market-oriented modernizing project, sometimes leading to their dispossession and dislocation (Harwood 2013, Schneider 2015, Nguyen and Locke 2014, Lin and Nguyen 2021). As Wang (2024)'s contribution to this special issue indicates, the expansion of the platform economy and e-commerce in rural areas is being promoted as key to rural revitalisation in some Chinese provinces. Its operation, she shows, valorises the visibility of a small number of rurally based e-commerce entrepreneurs who are able to take advantage of market-based solutions to sell rural produce online while rendering rural producers and their labour invisible, eventually helping to reinforce the dominant construction of the backward peasants as a whole. The invisibilization and thus devaluation of the labour of marginalized rural populations are also highlighted in Nguyen T. A. and Nguyen T. N. M. (forthcoming)'s analysis of contract farming for global agro-businesses in Northern Vietnam, where migrants of ethnic minority background are employed to live in complete isolation on the farm for disease protection of the animals.

Since their market reforms, the double-layered construction of peasants and smallholding agriculture as problematic underpins the mass mobility of labour from rural areas into industrial and urban centres to support industrialization and tertiarization, seen by policy makers as a way for rural people to move out of subsistence agriculture. While both states have promoted this mobility of labour, they have made sure that the reproduction of the labour largely rests with the countryside through the household registration systems that deny crucial social services and welfare access to rural migrants for decades (Wang 2005; Nguyen and Locke 2014). Recent reforms to the household registration in Vietnam make it easier for rural migrants to obtain urban household registration while solidifying them through digitalisation, rendering *hộ khẩu*-related transactions and claims more easily traceable for the sake of citizen control. In China, rural and urban hukou is now being integrated, making it possible for migrants to get registered in cities of up to five million (relatively modest size for the country). However, hukou access in megacities, the preferred destinations

9 See coverage and documentation on the internet portal of the Chinese Rural Revitalisation Program: http://p.china.org.cn/ and the Vietnamese New Countryside program: http://nongthonmoi.gov.vn/Pages/Trang-chu.aspx

for rural migrants from poorer provinces because of their large labour markets, has become highly selective through a strict point-based system that favours elite migrants with higher-education credential and skills and continue to exclude labour migrants from poorer provinces (Lin and Mao 2022). These household registration reforms thus have practically transformed the rural-urban distinction from one based on modes of production to one premised on *suzhi* (human quality) though statutory classifications that continue to treat rural people as the backward Other, even as their labour mobility is instrumentalised for the state project of modernizing the countryside. The social order thus is sustained through the modified statutory classifications feeding into the dominant discourse of the "uncivilized peasants" that does not recede even in former villages that have now been absorbed into urban centres in China (Du 2021; Nguyen and Wei 2024).

The problematization of the peasantry and its mode of production, despite the changing terms just discussed, is underpinned by a form of high modernism akin to what was adopted by authoritarian states throughout the last century that James Scott (2020) identifies in *Seeing Like a State*. While Scott (2020) points out the social engineering imposed on local conditions as a means to make populations legible to the state and the planned social order, we underscore the imposition of moral and cultural categories on population groups to justify state interventions in their communal and private lives. As the other articles in this special issue, especially Hoang (2024) and Wang (2024), show, the legibility of the rural populations in China and Vietnam today are mapped onto moral scales premised on capacities for market participation and marketized notions of the good reified by the New/Beautiful Countryside Program. Emblematic of market-induced homogenization, these scales are endorsed by states that continue to orchestrate social interventions through the use of socialist structures and institutions. Contra Scott's predictions of such schemes' ultimate failure on account of the standardization that denies or even suppresses the existence of local diversity and knowledge, however, we suggest that these rural development schemes are sustained as a primary public space for value creation by ordinary people (see also Hoang 2024; Nguyen 2017, 2018). Even when they take actions that are not endorsed by the state (Chau 2019) or contest the devaluation of their labour and personhood given rise to by these categories, rural people in China and Vietnam today tend to map their or their children's personal transformations in the terms of *suzhi* and *dân trí,* and thus the party states' vision of modernity (Chu 2010; Harwood 2013; Nguyen and Wei 2024). This form of subjectivation has incorporated governing techniques deriving from earlier periods of socialist mobilisation and the use of moral exemplars in contexts that Bakken (2000) refers to as "the exemplary society" in combination with certain elements of neoliberal governmentality (Kipnis 2007).

As such, the politics of modernisation here refers to both people's contestations at the level of actions and their alignments at the level of value creation vis-à-vis the state's modernizing agenda. Anthropologists have shown how modernisation as a teleological trajectory of an onward march towards a future in which the possibilities of a good life are guaranteed is a myth that consistently does not hold up to realities but that which has important social functions (Brenner 1998; Ferguson 1999). This myth does not only legitimize state interventions such as the New/Beautiful Countryside Program and its construction of rural people as in need of improving, but also "gives form to an understanding of the world, providing a set of categories and premises that continue to shape people's experiences and interpretations of their lives" (Ferguson 1999:16). In the context of market socialism, this myth helps the state to offer market-based aspirational possibilities for its citizens while backtracking on socialist promises of shared prosperity and universal care (Nguyen, Wilcox, and Lin 2024). In the following, we present the cases of two villages that are formally recognised as exemplary models of rural revitalisation in each country. The dynamism and the possibilities for social change unleashed by their mobility trajectories indicate both their capacity to take actions that deviate from or even defy the agenda of the party states (see also Chau 2019, Nguyen, and Rigg 2024) and their identification with the state's narrative of modernisation that deems them as inferior according to the benchmarks of *suzhi* and *dân trí*. We suggest that both their actions and identification with state categories indicate the agency of reflexive subjects that challenge the said constructions of rural people and places. The party states, meanwhile, are shown to be appropriating the values created by the very rural people they deem backward and deficient for their claims to be the only legitimate arbitrator of modernity and progress.

Lianqi (China) and Blue Mountain (Vietnam)[10]: Exemplars of Rural Modernisation

In their respective countries, both Lianqi and Blue Mountain have been lauded as models for the modernization of the countryside. Given that they were still considered relatively remote locations by the end of the last century, the two villages today boast a visibly well-built infrastructure and standards of living that are seen as enviable for other rural regions. But more than any state-initiated improvement

10 Lianqi is called an administrative village, which in China combines a number of former natural villages. Administratively, Blue Mountain is called a "commune", which in Vietnam also grew out of putting together smaller former villages. The two thus are relatively comparable, and we sometimes refer to both of them as villages for the sake of simplification.

measures that both states credit themselves with, our ethnographic records indicate that these are connected to rising land prices, partly due to state strategies of converting agricultural into urban residential land for revenue generation (Lin and Mao 2022) and local people's self-driven trajectories of mobilities that had started before their respective reforms. Given the policy intentions of directing agricultural labour to the factories and urban services, these mobilities follow their own goals and moral logics, even as they are driven by certain hegemonic desires and aspirations (Wilcox, Rigg, and Nguyen 2021).

The Local Implementation of Rural Revitalisation as National Strategy

Lanqi (China)

Lanqi is located in a semi-mountainous region of Lishui city, southwest of Zhejiang province. It is within the vicinity of the township and a big industrial zone of the city, with good transport connections. The village is composed of seven natural villages, 18 village groups (*cunmin xiaozu*), with a total population of 1703 in 2020. As agricultural producers, villagers shifted from paddy rice to vegetables around the 1990s, which continue to be the main crops until now, and the village's initiative to set up of two vegetable markets in the 2000s facilitated the sales of vegetables grown here to regional cities, a factor that made it a model village under the Chinese Socialist New Village programme in 2006. The village authorities started with selling residential land to village outsiders, usually urban middle-class people yearning for a rustic life or those born in the village but whose *hukou* was no longer registered there. In the words of the former party secretary of the village, the New Chinese Socialist Village programme started here "with nothing but only the title of model village". The local government had not provided any funds except a promise to improve the road conditions of the village. Therefore, the village leadership decided to attract wealthy 'outsiders' to buy land and build new houses in the village, while encouraging villagers to sell unused residential land to them. According to the land law, however, all the land of the village is collectively owned and cannot be transferred to village outsiders. Thus, the built houses under these village-initiated transactions had been considered illegal until 2016 when under a pilot project, owners were allowed to pay a fine to get their properties legalised. The fines for the more than 100 houses built under this initiative fetched a large sum of 60 million RMB, part of which can be used to finance infrastructure projects.

As a result, the infrastructure of the village had been significantly improved before the Rural Revitalisation program, with which the local government focused more on improving the 'aesthetic effect' of the village (see also Wei 2021). For example,

the village committee spent three million RMB in decorating a road by the riverside where village cadres and wealthy settlers are concentrated, replacing apricots with more expensive trees and the former cement road with asphalt road and supporting families by the roadside to build brick fences on their front yard. In term of industrial development, the municipal government expropriated a large tract of agricultural land to build a new township that includes a 'High-tech Town' (*kechuang xiaozhen*), the kind of development that Wang (2024) describes in her contribution to this special issue. The main strategy to implement these programmes is to expropriate land from the village at low cost before selling it to the enterprises at high price and using the profit from land sale to finance the public infrastructure construction. With the implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy, the population of Lianqi has been increasing through the arrival of construction workers recruited by real estate companies, factory workers, and those who moved in having bought houses in the village, although many newly built properties remain vacant. As we see below, however, many villagers have long been migrating all over China as part of a rural network specialised in operating household-based convenient stores and, their migrant livelihoods have brought about major changes to household economy. As with the migrant networks originating from the Vietnamese village, these changes are equally significant to those brought about by the expropriation of land as a way to finance their infrastructural development and spending.

Blue Mountain (Vietnam)

Divided into eight hamlets, Blue Mountain commune has a population of more than eight thousand persons, including many who were born and are living overseas and yet still registered in the village. It used to be a rice-farming village in a semi-mountainous terrain, which allows some parts of the local population to have access to forest land and products while endowing local people with limited farming areas. Both oral histories and official accounts suggested that due to the shortage of land and the ravages of the American war (carpet bombing had destroyed much of the land and infrastructure), the commune used to have high level of poverty until the 1990s, which prompted an increasing number of local people to leave for Europe in search of livelihoods opportunities when this became possible.

Unlike in Lianqi, where the recent local implementation of rural revitalisation has come to depend heavily on the expropriation of agricultural land for sale to private developers, Blue Mountain follows the approach of "the state and the people jointly carry out the work" (*nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm*). Promoted by the Vietnamese government, who can less afford to openly antagonize the rural populations because of its earlier dependence on the latter's support during the two independence wars (Kerkvliet 1995), this approach involves a gentler degree of rural land expropriation

combined with a greater level of mobilization of contributions by local people. This basically translates into the local government financing a number of major projects of the communes with the funds generated from land auction and making available some construction material (mostly cement) for village-based infrastructural items whose costs are to a large extent covered by local contributions, both mandatory contributions and voluntary donations. As for Lianqi, a large part of the resources for local infrastructure project has been made available thanks to the emergence of a rural land market (see Chuang 2020 for broader dynamics shaping this). In China, however, this involves the local government's expropriation of agricultural land at low costs for sale to private developers at higher prices, whereas in Vietnam, the communal land put up for sale through auction to villagers and outsiders has been made available from previous land consolidation. Land consolidation (*dồn điền đổi thửa*) was a national activity of the New Countryside Program through which a certain percentage of agricultural land was taken from local households to release land for communal projects such as irrigation and to generate funds for local construction project. As elsewhere, the Blue Mountain government can keep 40% the funds generated through the auctions (around 12 billion VND – 500 thousand EUR in 2021) and the rest are transferred upwards to higher levels of administration.

Apart from the ample funds from the land auctions (whose sales are boosted by the great interest of transnational migrants with high purchasing power), the commune has been able to reach the 19 criteria set by the New Countryside program (see Hoang 2024) thanks to the high level of mobilization of local resources through the so-called socialisation policy (Nguyen 2018). While local officials often present these as achievements of the local party and government, they cannot help noting in informal conversations that it is the high incomes from transnational migration have made it possible for both the resource mobilization and the change in the local economic structure, with remittance being invested in commodity production of agricultural produce, construction material and others. In both Lianqi and Blue Mountain, as we show below, villagers' mobilities do not just breathe new economic energies to their villages, but also usher in social changes in ways that reveal the dynamism and agency often denied to rural people by national discourses that cast them as backward and anaemic to changes.

Trajectories of Labour Mobility and Rural People as Drivers of Change

Let us start with the network of translocal mobility in Blue Mountain. In the 1980s, people in north central Vietnam, including Blue Mountain, were sent to Eastern Europe under labour export agreements that the Vietnamese government had with socialist governments then, especially to Eastern Germany, Russia and Poland.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communist states in Eastern Europe, which coincided with the begin of market reforms in Vietnam, some stayed on to become the first generation of the post-reform diaspora. Having grown up in unified Vietnam, their political perspectives differ from those having arrived earlier following the two Indochina wars, often displaying stronger affiliation and association with the discourses and legitimacy of the ruling party state. The fall of the Berlin wall made it possible for many to acquire asylum and residence in the newly unified Germany. Former guest workers served as the first point of contact and social support upon arrival for the people from Blue Mountain in Germany, many of whom came to Germany from the later 1990s and increasingly more so in the 2000s. While some sought immigration status as family members of those who have settled there, others have paid intermediaries to be transported to Germany where they spend long years of their life in transit and fraught struggles around the acquisition of immigration papers, often through marriage or childbirth (Mai 2021). Both the journeys to Europe and legal documents are costly affairs that often require the pooling of major resources by extended family members (from several thousand Euro in the early 2000s to 50-70 thousand 20 years later). The money often comes from the land sales, bank credits and/or private loans that their extended families can mobilize for the sake of the departure of the first member, who, once established with a viable income source would pay the family debts and sponsor other family members to follow in their footsteps.

Within two decades, this mobility trajectory has brought hundreds of people from the village to Europe. By 2022, about 2000 villagers from less than 2000 families, including children born overseas, are residing in different European countries, about a third of whom are in Germany, according to the local government. Until the early 2000, people from the village were mostly employed as hired hands for small businesses or self-employed in open bazaars or Vietnamese markets – some were hawking cigarettes on the street. Nowadays, while many entertain businesses within and around the bustling ethnic markets in Berlin, Warsaw or Prague, others have established themselves as owners of restaurants, nail salons or flower shops within the cities, creating vibrant economies largely powered by the self-employed and hired labour from homeplace networks. In Berlin, the popularisation of Vietnamese food has been partly initiated by people from the north central region of Vietnam where Blue Mountain is located, not a few of whom have come to Germany straight out of their villages. Unlike the earlier mom-and-pop stores selling cheap eats under Chinese or other Asian names, the growing number of the now visibly Vietnamese restaurants carrying Vietnamese names operated by Blue Mountain villagers offer Vietnamese food as dining experiences for professional and middle-class Germans. A few operators have managed to upscale their businesses into well-known chains

occupying frequented urban spaces of major cities. Needless to say, this mobility trajectory is by no means smooth, and often requires a high level of risk assumption, sometimes innumerable sacrifices for both the migrants and their families, even the possibility of death is taken for granted as one of the risks of the migration (Nguyen 2021).

Yet, the growing number of villagers who are economically active in Europe has brought about major changes in the village in terms of wealth accumulation and incomes as well as lifestyle. The high level of remittance makes it possible for many families to increase their living standards and everyday consumption. Often the first priority for families once the remittance starts to be sent back and the debts are settled, many of the recently built houses in the village are large professionally-designed European style buildings, even villas, that are equipped with modern facilities. Although the houses throughout the year are mostly occupied by elderly people and the children of the migrants, the new houses stand as proof of the families' achievements (see similar dynamics of translocal mobility within Vietnam in Nguyen 2018). If improved housing standard is one of the first criteria for a locality to achieve the new countryside status (see Hoang 2024), Blue Mountain government hardly needs to do much for the housing and infrastructure that are the subject of envy by people in other localities. As well, for a community whose oral histories are full of anecdotes about the "hungry" and dirt-poor period decades ago that had prompted people to leave Vietnam to improve their lives, it is important for people that their village as a whole has gone up in the world and that they contribute to the improved image of their homeplace. In Blue Mountain, families with members living and working in Europe, which are the majority, are expected to make monetary contributions to the improvements of the village as a whole. Funds are mobilized from migrant households that have been absent from the village as long as their registration remains here. Yet most would readily do so, sometimes even overdoing it for the sake of recognition by the village and the local authorities – the sending and receiving of money between the village and overseas for such purposes are facilitated by a range of formal and informal monetary transfer services that has been enabling the circulation of huge volumes within Blue Mountain's transnational economy. Consequently, the infrastructure of the village, including the irrigation systems, its well-built road networks and community centres have benefited from financial resources mobilized from local families, much in the same way that the national program has been implemented elsewhere in the country on the basis of the "socialization" of resources (Nguyen 2017, 2018; Hoang 2024).

Now, let us consider the Chinese village, Lianqi, whose mobility trajectory differs from Blue Mountain's in that it takes place mostly within China (a few people went

overseas as migrant labourers in the past, but have returned due to rising wages in China). Yet, it shares the starting point of local people acting under the imperative of economic hardships induced by the constraints of the centrally planned economy by taking hold of a gradually emerging pathway of livelihoods beyond the village and beyond government approved forms of labour mobility. Lianqi villagers' narratives of their village's history are similarly rich in stories about how difficult life was at the turn of the 1980s and how poor the village had been as a result of the then government restrictions and their unfavourable remote mountainous location. Already before the reform, some villagers had started going around the country to practice mobile vendoring or operating stalls in open markets even as families were cultivating rice and practicing self-subsistence agriculture. With the growing migrant labour force in China in the 1990s, villagers identified a niche in the provision of low-cost household goods and processed food and drinks, such as instant noodles or sugared teas, to migrant workers in industrial areas and their households in migrant sending areas. For migrant workers who often cluster around their factories in coastal cities, they provide an important service when catering to their daily consumption needs in ways that suit the latter's restricted time availability (due to shift and overtime work on the production line) and living space as well as their high degree of job mobility (Nguyen and Wei 2024). At the beginning, villagers would rent vacant plots of land to set up temporary stores in those areas. Later, with urban development in coastal cities, they turned to spaces in more stable buildings such as the ground floor of factory worker dormitories or residential housing to open household-operated convenience stores that they refer to as supermarkets (*chaoshi*). Nowadays, a large number of families in the village are operating *chaoshi* all over the country; in order to optimize sales, their household reproduction and business operation align with the mobility patterns of migrant workers and their production lines (Nguyen and Wei 2024). If their stores used to be mostly located in coastal cities in places with high concentrations of migrant workers, many now are following the movements of migrant workers to provinces further inland alongside the industrial relocation that has been occurring as a result of rising wages and stricter environmental control on the coast.

As for Blue Mountain villagers, Lianqi people's mobility is underscored by risk assumption due to the instabilities and fluctuation of their mobile customer base and the likelihood of indebtedness, and the personal costs of long-term family separation because of the need to frequently shift locations. Notwithstanding, it demonstrates a high degree of resilience thanks to the strength of their rural networks based on which they could find suitable store locations, reliable suppliers and important pricing information. As well, a dynamism emerging from long years of cumulative experiences with translocal mobility, frequently setting up shop in new

places and restarting business after set-backs, allows for the easy inclusion of new members. Despite the trade-offs and risks (Nguyen and Wei 2024), the resulting expansion of the *chaoshi* network has become one of the main sources of livelihoods for many villagers and brought about major material changes as can be seen in the high level of housing construction and improved living standards in the village, which provided the conditions for receiving further state funding for its infrastructure development. As for Blue Mountain villagers, some Lianqi villagers have managed to own urban properties with the earnings from the *chaoshi* trade. When speaking about these material changes in their life, most people would say that they have come about as a result of them having "eaten bitterness" in order to earn the "blood and sweat" money that makes these changes possible. "Eating bitterness" refers to the experience of persevering in the face of great hardship and personal sacrifices (note that during the land reforms in the 1950s, speaking bitterness was a political mobilization technique aimed at re-enacting the class-based violence that peasants had endured before the revolution – see for example a discussion in (Yan 2008)). It is often used to measure success by individuals and communities through the moral strength to withstand challenges in order to reach eventual desirable outcomes. Such narratives of overcoming insurmountable challenges to arrive at what one has achieved are also common in Blue Mountain, where the first things people would tell us is how impossible it seemed to mobilize large sums of money to finance the transnational mobility to Europe in the face of extreme poverty, and yet they still managed. Their assessments of the visible material changes in their village would invariably evoke the extremely precarious paths of mobility on wich they or their family members embarked, including immature and violent deaths (Nguyen 2021; Nguyen and Wei 2024).

In their narratives, villagers in both sites emphasize that the changes in their lives and that of their villages would not have happened if it had not been for their daring undertakings despite all sacrifice and hardship as well as their ability to master lives on the move throughout the country and across the national borders. As Lianqi people would often say: "We rely on ourselves!" (*kao ziji*) – they refuse to frame these changes as being brought about by the state rural development programs, although they appreciate being members of a model village with a higher level of development than other rural places. If asked about these programs, the Chinese villagers tend to talk about the issues of compensation for land expropriation or the unequal distribution of infrastructural projects. Some would laugh off the efforts of the local government to put on a show with their infrastructure projects, as our hosts in Lianqi did when once telling us about the houses with the beautiful flowery facades on the roadside leading into the village that in her opinion looked awful inside. The Vietnamese villagers would point out how "labour export" has enabled their village to

become a New Countryside exemplar, although many would complain about the level of contributions to the construction of public infrastructure projects. In Blue Mountain, this has been inflated by richer migrant households' readiness to donate large sums as an indication of their success.

The narratives of the villagers contest the party states' claims that their policies have changed rural people's life through their project of improving the "quality" of the people, the mode of production and the beauty of the countryside. In the same way as depicted by the ironic statement of a farmer in North Vietnam (Nguyen 2017) – "the countryside can only be new if the people's pockets are full" –, implicit in these narratives is a commonly shared conviction that the outcomes of the state program depend less on state interventions than on local people's actions and the material improvements generated by migrant livelihoods. Even as they thereby recognise the authority of the party state in shaping the direction of rural development (Wilcox, Rigg and Nguyen 2021), these narratives are also people's claims to be the drivers of change, which pose implicit challenges to these party states' assertions of being the sole guardian and arbitrator of the modernity to be achieved by rural subjects through its orchestrated development programs. Simultaneously, people do map their personal transformations according to the state sponsored categories such as *suzhi* and *dân trí*, categories that define them as belonging to a different time and place from those occupied by modern citizen subjects (Chu 2010; Nguyen and Wei 2024). As a Lianqi mother, a successful migrant trader who had managed to build a profitable business, said to us: "Even if I had to be a beggar, I would try to support the education of my daughter". She wanted her to be respected by others, she said: "it is important that people do not look down on you", a statement that she made several times during our conversation. To Minh Nguyen's comment that she would be surprised if such a successful business person like her would not be respected by others, she said that those with jobs requiring higher education have "stable lives and stable incomes", which people like her do not have, before adding: "They have higher *suzhi* and are more civilised. When they invite someone, even if they spend little money on the food, people would say it is great, whereas people like me could spend a lot of money on a meal to invite others and would not get as much appreciation." The Chinese mother's determination to obtain higher education for her daughter to make up for her supposedly lower *suzhi* than educated professionals is underpinned by the same reference used by other *chaoshi* traders when commenting on the low *suzhi* of their customers in poorer regions (Nguyen and Wei 2024). In Vietnam, meanwhile, a very similar reference is evoked by Blue Mountain people when they talk about how far they have come from a beginning of poverty and low *dân trí* to become an exemplar of development to be looked up to by others in the region.

Conclusion

In both Lianqi and Blue Mountain, one could see how the transformations of rural infrastructure and economic life depend greatly on the commodification of rural land as well as rural people's actions and mobilities in finding their way out of poverty and pursue their aspirations for a good life. As pointed out by various scholars, the economic problems they had confronted had nothing to do with their assumed backwardness, but due to national policies and in the case of Vietnam, decades of war (Schwenkel 2020; Day 2013). Deploying their home-place networks and moral economic systems to traverse complex terrains of trade, risk and accumulation and multiple locations and spaces, these mobility trajectories of Lianqi and Blue Mountain people lay to rest any assumptions of peasant backwardness and passivity. As the editors of this special issue (Mao, Nguyen, and Wilcox 2024) also point out, they are by no means in need of being liberated from themselves – their habits and their way of thinking – and improved upon to become entrepreneurial subjects fit for the new economy as implied by state development programs. As they emphasise the moral strength of their homeplace and their rural networks, rural people articulate an agentic positioning in engaging with the global and national economies to improve individual and communal lives that departs from the construction of them as the object of the state's will to improve (Li 2007; Rose and Miller 1992).

Yet, even as people's actions contest the state programs' underlying ideological construction of them as deficient subjects through categories of population quality, i.e. *suzhi* or *dan tri*, that relegate them to the lower rungs of the social order (Hoang 2024), they tend to seek validation of their actions through the very categories with which they are so constructed. This makes it possible for the social outcomes of such grassroots actions and trajectories as those undertaken by Lianqi and Blue Mountain villagers to be absorbed by the state project of improving the countryside (Taylor 2007; Nguyen 2017, 2018; Nguyen and Wei 2024). Such appropriation of the value created through bottom-up initiatives is often made with the backing of the hegemonic notions of civility and progress as collective goals (Harms 2016; Hoang 2024) that generate desires for national belonging and recognition. In the meantime, the construction of peasants and rural areas as deficient and in need of reforming continue to serve as a political foil for modernizing agendas that legitimise the power of the intellectual and political elite often located in urban centres, and that of these party states.

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