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Social Organization and the Management of Natural Resources: A Case Study of Tat Hamlet, a Da Bac Tay Ethnic Minority Settlement in Vietnam's Northwestern Mountains

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Abstract

Community-based resource management has become the latest magic bullet employed by development planners in the uplands of Southeast Asia. It is assumed that devolving power to local communities to manage natural resources will produce better results than continuing to rely on agencies of central governments. This policy has enjoyed remarkable success when applied in areas where indigenous communities are cohesive and endowed with abundant social capital. But not all ethnic minority settlements are well-endowed with social capital or able to successfully mobilize their inhabitants for collective action. Tat hamlet, a Da Bac Tay settlement in Hoa Binh Province in Vietnam's northwestern mountains, is such a community, characterized by scarcity of social capital, lack of social cohesion, and limited ability to collectively manage its natural resources. In this case study, the historical background of social organization in Tat hamlet is described, and the implications of social organization for management of natural resources explored.

In recent years the concept of "community-based resource management" has gained great popularity among governments, NGOs, and international development assistance agencies as a solution to the problems of environmental degradation [Ford Foundation 1997]. Devolving power to manage natural resources from central government agencies to local communities has become the latest in a long series of magic bullets employed by development planners working in Southeast Asia's uplands.

As Agrawal and Gibson [1999] have pointed out, however, remarkably little attention has been paid to the question of how the internal social organization of villages constrains their capabilities for effectively managing natural resources that are entrusted to them. The prevalent assumption seems to be that rural villages are inherently endowed with the institutional capacity to organize successful collective action to use resources in an equitable and sustainable manner. Social solidarity, that most problematic of social science concepts, is simply assumed to exist, providing the necessary basis for cooperative management of community resources. But, as has been repeatedly revealed by empirical investigations of rural villages, social

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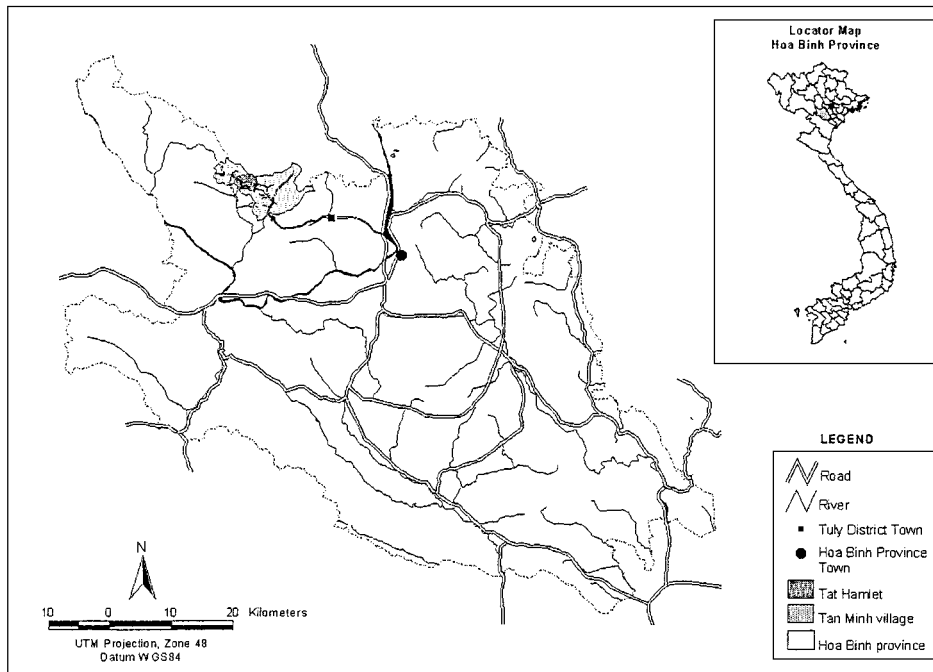
organization is not a constant. Some rural communities may approximate the ideal model, but others are characterized by high levels of inter-household competition, pervasive distrust among members of unrelated households, and a near total absence of community solidarity. Indeed, it can be argued that in many such villages “social capital” is in shorter supply than financial capital.¹⁾ In such situations, the villagers, whatever their individual intentions and desires, lack the institutional capacity to manage resources for the common good.

The existence of social capital is as problematic in villages in Vietnam’s Northern Mountain Region (NMR) as it is elsewhere [Jamieson, Le Trong Cuc and Rambo 1998]. Although it is commonly assumed by outsiders that all ethnic minority communities there are tightly organized entities displaying a high level of social solidarity, empirical investigations show that there is a considerable range of variation in the extent of their social cohesion [Le Trong Cuc and Rambo 2001]. Many communities, notably those of the H’Mong and Dao, display great cohesion and ability to collectively manage resources [Khong Dien 1996; Pham Cong Hoan 1995]. Other communities are much less cohesive and have very limited endogenous capacity to collectively manage resources. Tat hamlet, a settlement of the Da Bac Tay ethnic minority, is in the latter category.²⁾

Tat Hamlet: An Overview

Tat hamlet is administratively part of Tan Minh village in Da Bac District of Hoa Binh Province (Map 1). It is located in the watershed of the Da River (referred to by the French as the Flueve Noir and known in English as the Black River).³⁾ In the language of its Tay inhabitants, Tat

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- 1) Social capital has been concisely defined by Francis Fukuyama [1999: 16] as “. . . a set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them. If members of a group come to expect that others will behave reliably and honestly, then they will come to *trust* one another. Trust is like a lubricant that makes the running of any group or organization more efficient.”
 - 2) Given the paucity of community studies in the NMR, it is impossible to say how many communities are similar to Tat hamlet. Our impression, however, is that it represents a relatively extreme, although not unique, case of the scarcity of social capital. Certainly the Black Thai community in Son La Province studied by Thomas Sikor and Dao Minh Truong [2000] displays a much greater capability for collective action.
 - 3) The Da River is the site of the Hoa Binh dam, Vietnam’s largest hydropower project, which provides most of the country’s electricity. Flooding of the reservoir in the late 1980s forced relocation of 9,305 households, or an estimated 52,000 people, mostly members of the Muong ethnic minority, from their homes in the valley bottom. Many have resettled on steep slopes above the lake where their swidden fields are a major source of sediments flowing into the reservoir [Vu Quyet Thang 1991]. Others have migrated into surrounding communities located on higher ground that were not flooded by the reservoir. Several of these households have settled in Tat hamlet, further intensifying pressure on limited land resources there, although Tan Minh is not officially classified as a village heavily impacted by resettlement and therefore does not qualify for special assistance under the massive 747 Program established by the government to help local communities overcome problems arising from the in-migration of households forced to move because of the construction of the Hoa Binh dam.



Map 1 Tan Minh Village in Da Bac District of Hoa Binh Province

Source: This map was designed and drawn by Dao Minh Truong, RS/GIS Specialist, CRES, Vietnam National University.

hamlet means “the hamlet of the waterfalls,” which is an apt choice given the many small streams that cascade down over the steep rocky hill slopes that fringe the valley where the hamlet is centered.

Tat hamlet is located in the mountain and valley realm of the NMR, a zone characterized by sinuous narrow valleys cut by rivers through steep mountains. Flat land is scarce. The total surface area of Tat hamlet is 743 ha, most of which is hill slopes and mountains. Less than 20 percent of the land surface has a slope less than 25 degrees. Only a few hectares in the valley floor are flat enough for construction of bunded wet rice fields. The elevation of the valley floor at Tat hamlet is approximately 360 m asl. Surrounding peaks reach an elevation of 800 to 950 m.

Although much of the territory of Tat hamlet was covered by primary forest until the 1960s, today only tiny remnant patches survive on extremely steep and inaccessible peaks [Fox *et al.* 2000]. Hill tops and ridge lines are covered with mature secondary forest with a slight degree of canopy differentiation. Most slopes are covered with swiddens or recently fallowed plots covered with grasses, herbs, and scattered patches of bamboo and small trees. Valley crotches and storm drainage courses have largely been left surrounded by woody vegetation and secondary forest, though in some cases these patches have been scorched by fires escaping from the swiddens. Near-slopes and hillocks in non-protected areas surrounding the hamlet have

mostly been cleared for the planting of cassava swiddens or tree gardens, with very little fallow land. In a few limited areas, *Imperata* covers the lower hillocks and isolated patches of *Imperata* occur even on distant hillslopes. The valley bottom is covered with wet rice fields.

Most of the residents of Tat hamlet belong to the Da Bac Tay ethnic minority group. There are 5 households (out of a total of 91) that are classified as ethnically Muong or Kinh. In most of these households one of the spouses is a Tay from the hamlet. There are also a number of Kinh, mostly school teachers, who are temporary residents in the hamlet and who live in quarters provided by the government.

The Tay are the largest of Vietnam's minority populations. Referred to as Tho⁴⁾ in French ethnologies from the colonial period [e.g., Abadie 1924], the Tay speak a language belonging to the T'ai language family that is widely spread across mainland Southeast Asia. The Tay, who numbered 1,190,342 according to the 1989 census enumeration [Central Census Steering Committee 1991: 66] are concentrated in the provinces of Ha Giang, Tuyen Quang, Cao Bang, Lang Son, Bac Kan, and Thai Nguyen in the central and northeastern parts of the NMR.⁵⁾

The Tay of Tat hamlet, however, are culturally and linguistically quite distinct from the main body of Tay. They belong to a smaller, geographically isolated Tay population of approximately 17,000 individuals found only in Hoa Binh province, primarily in Da Bac district. During the colonial period this population was referred to as Da Bac Tho and now is sometimes called Da Bac Tay. Some Vietnamese ethnologists [Chu Thai Son and Nguyen Chi Huyen 1974] believe that the Da Bac Tay are closely related to the White Thai but people in Tat hamlet who have visited Mai Chau, a White Thai community to the northwest near the border with Son La Province, deny that their cultures are similar and say that they cannot understand the White Thai language.

The actual origins of the Tay of Tat hamlet are obscure but elderly informants say that the hamlet was settled a little over a hundred years ago when a small group of people belonging to the Xa clan from Son La joined with other people already living in the general area to form Tat hamlet. According to one account, Xa Dao Thanh, the leader of the Xa clan, married Lo Thi Lun of nearby Doan Ket village. Both clans signed a contract called "Ka Hua" (Silver-hair paper)

4) In Vietnamese, *tho* means "earth, land, or ground" [Nguyen Dinh Hoa 1966: 476]. Several older informants in Tat hamlet said that they had referred to themselves as Tho until the 1960s when they were instructed by government officials to use Tay instead. This change was justified on the grounds that "Tho" had pejorative connotations. People in Tat hamlet do not think that this was true with regard to "Tho" and elderly people still employ this word in casual conversation when referring to traditional aspects of their culture. The term is also employed in a somewhat negative sense, however, to refer to individuals that are perceived as being old fashioned or behaving in a feudalistic manner.

5) Although they constitute the largest of Vietnam's more than 50 minority ethnic groups, the Tay are, from an ethnological standpoint, one of the least well known. In contrast to the Thai of the northwestern mountains [McAlister 1967], the Tay were not a major focus of ethnological research during the French colonial era (Abadie [1924] offers perhaps the most detailed account). Only in 1992 was the first relatively comprehensive Vietnamese language ethnography of the Tay published [Be Viet Dang *et al.* 1992].

sometime at the end of the nineteenth century. This story is told to explain why most households in Tat hamlet belong to the Xa and Lo clans.

According to records of the Village Family Planning Clinic, in September, 1998, Tat hamlet had a population of 432 persons divided into 91 households while in 1993 there were 389 persons in 69 households. Thus, in five years, the population of the hamlet increased by 43 persons, an annual increase rate of more than 3 percent. The number of households has increased even more dramatically with 22 new households forming in five years. Formation of new households, even more than increase in number of individuals, places heavy pressure on natural resources to supply materials for building new houses and to provide land for new fields.

In late 1998 the population density of Tat hamlet was 59 persons per km². No reliable statistics are available for earlier periods but one informant recalls that there were only 7 households in the valley in the mid-1950s when he was a young boy. Assuming 7 members per household, the hamlet's population would have been about 50 persons representing a mean density of approximately 10 persons per km².

The economy of Tat hamlet is still largely subsistence oriented although in recent years there has been increasing involvement in the cash economy. There is no market in the hamlet or in Tan Minh village. The nearest market is at Cao Son, about 12 km away from Tat. The closest large daily market is in the district capital at Tu Ly. Some products, notably bamboo shoots and other forest products, are collected by shopkeepers and sent out to market on buses or logging trucks. Traders from China have even appeared in the hamlet on occasion to buy a variety of wild medicinal plants. Corn, cassava roots, and canna are sold in bulk either to local middlemen or to traders from outside the village. Cattle and buffalo are sold to Kinh traders who come to the mountains to purchase animals for use in the delta where traction animals are always in short supply.

There are several small shops in the hamlet. Most are operated by Kinh. Their stock is limited to flashlight batteries, cigarettes and matches, detergent, noodles, beer, alcohol, and candies. A larger, better stocked shop was opened by the provincial trading company in 1996 and a pharmacy was opened in 1998. Women with fruit to sell simply walk through the hamlet looking for customers for their pineapple or jackfruit.

Production is almost entirely organized on a household basis. Although most household production is for subsistence purposes, and the trade in commodities very limited, the economy is already strongly market-oriented. Farmers report a pressing need to obtain cash, particularly in recent years since the local government began to collect taxes in cash rather than paddy. Informants readily cite prices for different locally produced commodities including livestock, paddy, and fruit. It is lack of physical access to markets, and the scarcity of marketable commodities, rather than any sort of traditional "anti-market mentality" that limits participation in trade.

For as far back as any informants can remember, The Tay of Tat hamlet have been "composite swidders" [Rambo 1998]. The defining characteristic of composite swiddening is that households simultaneously manage both permanent wet rice fields in the valley bottoms,

shifting swidden fields on the hillslopes, and exploit wild resources of the forest. Similar composite systems are found among the Muong of northern Vietnam [Cuisinier 1948], the Shan of Burma and northern Thailand [Durrenberger 1981], the Hani of Xishuangbanna Prefecture in Southwestern China (Pei Shengji: pers comm), and the Ifugao [Dove 1983] of the Cordillera in the Philippines.

A typical household manages a complex agroecosystem. Key subsystems include wet rice fields, home garden, fish pond, livestock, tree gardens, rice swiddens, and cassava, corn, and canna swiddens. Fallow swiddens and secondary forest are also exploited to a limited extent. The distinctive characteristic of this type of agroecosystem is that swiddening comprises an integral component. It is not a gradually vanishing survival of an earlier, more primitive pure swiddening adaptation that is the process of being replaced by more advanced irrigated farming. Neither is swiddening present as a recent response to rapid population growth that has exceeded the carrying capacity of the wet rice fields and forced people to expand their farming onto the forested slopes. Instead, composite swidders such as the Tay have practiced both wet rice farming and swidden agriculture together as an integrated system of subsistence for a very long time, certainly for generations and probably for centuries. In the case of Tat hamlet, elderly informants reported that their parents had told them that they had employed both systems when they first began to settle the valley at least one hundred years ago. At that time, the entire area was covered by primary forest and there was no scarcity of land on which to make paddy fields in the valley bottoms. One man recalled that in the mid-1950s, when he was a boy, there were only seven households in the valley so there was plenty of land available for anyone who wanted to exploit it. The area of paddy fields was much smaller than it is now and good forest land was abundant and free for the taking. It would thus have been possible for households to have only cultivated paddy fields or only cleared swiddens, but none are reported to have done so. Evidently, there are survival advantages in maintaining a more diversified agroecosystem.

Gender, and to a lesser extent age, are the main differentiating factors in the internal social organization of Tat hamlet. Ethnicity is important in its external relations. In public affairs there is a well marked sexual division of labor. All leading positions in administrative bodies and mass organizations, with the sole exception of the Women's Union, are held by males. Only men speak in public meetings.

Within the household economy there is a clear but not wholly rigid sexual division of labor. Men do the land preparation in the paddy fields. Both men and women carry manure from the houses to the paddies. Men are responsible for clearing and burning the swiddens. Men uproot rice seedlings from the nurseries and help to carry them to the paddy fields. Women transplant seedlings into the paddies and plant seed in the swiddens using dibble sticks. Weeding is mainly a female responsibility. Harvesting of the rice is done primarily by the women while the men carry the grain from the fields to store in the houses. Threshing is done by the women who trample the bundles of rice with their feet to release the grain from the heads. Thanks to the water powered rice mills that are owned by almost every household, the women are freed of the necessity of spending several hours every

day pounding paddy in a mortar and pestle, a task that falls heavily on women of many mountain minorities in Indochina.

Both men and women cut bamboo poles and drag them to the road for sale to passing trucks. Illegal logging is done entirely by young men. Bamboo shoots and wild vegetables are mainly collected by women. Women cut most of the firewood in the swiddens and secondary forest and carry it to the houses but men bring down an occasional large log. Buffalo are tended by young men or boys but smaller livestock are cared for by women and girls. Most domestic tasks are done by females. Cooking, cleaning of the house and compound, and washing and mending of clothes are done by women and girls. Members of both sexes care for infants although toddlers are most often carried by their older sisters. Men weave baskets for household use and for sale. In the past, when cotton was grown in the swiddens, women wove cloth. Women are responsible for collection of produce of the home garden and marketing of the fruit. Except at peak labor demand times in harrowing the paddy fields, women probably have a considerably heavier work schedule than men. Collection of firewood is an especially heavy burden on women.

The household is the basic unit of social organization in Tat hamlet. It is responsible for organization of labor, management and use of resources, and accumulation and allocation of wealth. Multigenerational extended family households are the ideal. These are made up of the aged parents, their unmarried sons and daughters, and one or more married sons and their wives and children. In fact, almost three-quarters of households in Tat hamlet are of the nuclear type although in some cases a widowed parent will live together with their youngest married child. Traditionally, a newly married couple resided for a period ranging from a few months to several years with the bride's parents while accumulating the resources to establish an independent household. Kinship is patrilineal. There are four exogamous clans: Xa, Lo, Luong, and Ha. Marriage between members of the same clan is considered inappropriate, but nevertheless occurs occasionally. Approximately 85 percent of marriages in the hamlet are clan exogamous, however. The clans have no social functions other than regulation of marriage.

Historical Changes in the Social Organization of Tat Hamlet

The social organization of Tat hamlet is not "traditional" in the sense often attributed by ethnologists to indigenous peoples in upland Southeast Asia [McCaskill and Kampe 1997]. In contrast to other ethnic groups in the Northwestern mountains such as the H'Mong and Dao, the Da Bac Tay of Tat hamlet have always been members of a dependent "peasant" society rather than belonging to an autonomous "tribal" society. The hamlet has always been subject to powerful external forces that have dictated the form of its internal structure. Undoubtedly, this historical experience has greatly influenced the character of local social institutions and limited the emergence of communal capacity for resource management.

During the more than one hundred years since it was first settled, Tat hamlet has passed through four historical periods, each characterized by a different pattern of social

organization. These periods are the feudal period, the Resistance War period, the cooperative period, and the current period in which the household is the key unit for management of land and natural resources. In each of these periods the balance of power between the individual households, local community governance institutions, and extra-local governance institutions has varied with consequent differences in the way in which resources have been managed.

The Feudal Period

From 1885 until 1945 Tat hamlet was part of the French protectorate of Tonkin which was one of the five component “states” of French Indochina. The French did not impose a uniform administrative system on Tonkin. In the Red River Delta, the administrative system of the Vietnamese state was largely left in place although at the provincial and district levels of government the Vietnamese mandarins worked under the direct supervision of French civilian administrators. In the northwestern mountains, however, active military resistance to French occupation continued into the twentieth century and French administrative presence did not extend beyond the main towns. A more indirect system of rule, working through powerful native chiefs, was established in areas that had been semi-autonomous Thai and Muong principalities in the precolonial period [Rambo 1997]. Tat hamlet was no exception and, until the end of the French colonial period, it was a tributary unit in a larger feudal social formation ruled by Muong overlords.⁶⁾ This regime was referred to as the *lang dao* system. In this pyramidal administrative system, the present day districts of Da Bac and Mai Chau formed the single feudal domain (*chau*) of Mai Da. The hereditary ruler of Mai Da, who bore the title of *tri chau* was Dinh Cong Quyen.

The *chau* of Mai Da was made up of several *lang*. The *lang* was an area equivalent in size to a modern district. Under the *lang* were several *muong* each equivalent in size to a modern village (*xa*) or group of villages (*cum xa*), and beneath each *muong* were several *xom* or hamlets.

Tat hamlet was a tributary *xom* of the *lang* ruled by a *lang dao* named Dinh Cong Phu who was a member of the Muong ethnic group. He controlled his domain from his “capital” in Ben Diem on the south bank of the Da River near Cho Bo (the administrative center of Da Bac district until it was submerged by the Hoa Binh reservoir and the government offices relocated to Tu Ly). Different informants used different titles to refer to the Muong overlord including *quan lang*, *lang dao*, *tho lang*, and *quan hoi*. *Quan hoi* is the most commonly used term, however, and will be employed in the rest of this account. This terminology distinguishes the Tay of Da Bac from the main body of Tay in the north who refer to their hereditary leaders as *tho ti*. The *tho ti* were reportedly the descendants of Vietnamese mandarins who had intermarried

6) Only relatively elderly people in Tat hamlet have had direct experience of the feudal regime and their memories are not very clear about this period which came to an end in the early 1950s. This section is a reconstruction based on interviews with several different informants. There was considerable disagreement on many specific points but most informants shared a common image of the overall form of the feudal regime and there was unanimity about the poverty and harshness of the life of commoners in Ban Tat during this period.

with Tay women [Abadie 1924].

Dinh Cong Phu had inherited his position from his father who had also served as *quan hoi* for the French colonial authorities. The first son of the lord's first wife normally inherited the title. Dinh Cong Phu is remembered as loud-voiced and a very strong man who could fight with a big buffalo. He had a violent temper and would beat any commoner who offended him. One 82 year old man in Tat hamlet still has a scar on his leg from where the *quan hoi* struck him with a stick in a fit of anger. Another informant reports that his 17 year-old elder brother was killed by Dinh Cong Phu. Commoners, referred to as *dan den* (black people), had to bow and hold their hands together in front of their faces when encountering the *quan hoi*. They had to preface every sentence with the respectful particle *da* when addressing him. The *quan hoi* was a member of the Muong ethnic group but also spoke Kinh and Tay. He lived in a very large house on stilts with six or seven rooms. He also had a brick house inherited from his father. He had several wives (some informants said six wives, others seven, one said nine) of Kinh, Muong, Tay, and Dao origin. Each wife had her own house separated from the lord's house by half a km or so. The *quan hoi* could force any pretty girl who caught his fancy to become his wife without paying bride price or having a formal wedding. No women from Tat hamlet or neighboring hamlets were taken as "wives" by Dinh Cong Phu.

The *quan hoi* ruled his domain through appointed subordinate officials. Living in his house were four administrative officials who carried out his instructions. In descending order of power they were the Cai Nhat, Cai Nhi, Cai Ba and Cai Tu. These officials used conscript soldiers (*linh*) to carry instructions to lower ranking officials in the villages and hamlets telling them how many subjects to send to perform corvée labor for the *quan hoi*. Two soldiers were recruited from every hamlet by the local officials. Sometimes the *quan hoi* would order a strong young man who came to his attention to join his force. The soldiers had a poor life but if they gained favor with the *quan hoi* they might be given buffalo or cattle. Those who performed their duties well might be selected to become one of the *cai*.

The next lower level of administration of Dinh Cong Phu's feudal domain was the *muong* (a unit resembling an administrative village that included several hamlets or *xom*). It was headed by the *dao muong* who was appointed by the *quan hoi*. This was a non-hereditary position. Tat hamlet was under the authority of Mr. Om, the *dao muong* who lived in Dieu Noi. The *dao muong* was assisted by an official called *ong xa*. Each year five people from Tat hamlet had to do corvée labor for three days for the *dao muong*. Informants are unclear as to what functions the *dao muong* performed within the feudal system.

Beneath the *muong* was the *xom* or hamlet. Each hamlet was headed by a *dao xom*. The *dao xom* was selected by the residents of the hamlet and confirmed in his position by the *quan hoi* who sent an official (the *cai*) from his headquarters to announce the appointment of a new *dao xom* in a public meeting. The position was usually inherited by the eldest son of the former *dao xom* but, if he was not considered suitable by the people, someone else could be appointed. The *dao xom* was expected to speak well, have prestige in the eyes of the people, and have the means to feed visiting nobles. A *dao xom* who failed to do his job properly could be replaced. The *dao*

xom of Tat hamlet was quite wealthy with one hectare of paddy land and many buffalo. One person from every house in the hamlet had to work for one day each year cultivating his field. The *dao xom* killed a buffalo and gave a feast to reward these workers. On the anniversary days of their parent's deaths, the villagers had to present gifts to the *dao xom* and the *dao muong*. The *dao xom* had an assistant called *ong xa* whose main responsibility was to go to the houses of people selected by the *dao xom* to do corvée to inform them to report for work. The *ong xa* took his meals every day at the house of the *dao xom*.

The main responsibility of the *dao xom* was to ensure that the commoners paid tribute to the *quan hoi* in the form of corvée labor. The *quan hoi* sent a *cai* or a soldier to the hamlet to tell the *dao xom* how many workers were required to report for duty in the next corvée cycle. The *dao xom* selected who would go from among the commoners. In theory each male 15 years of age and older had to perform one period of corvée each year but in practice many villagers only went a few times in their lives. Widows whose children were old enough to stay alone also had to do corvée. The *dao xom* was exempt from corvée and the *ong xa* only had to perform corvée if the hamlet was short of its quota of workers. If a person were too old or sick to work he had to pay for a substitute. If a person failed to report for corvée the *quan hoi* would send soldiers to take away any valuables from his house. The *dao xom* would also be punished by the *quan hoi* if he failed to provide enough workers for the corvée.

There were two forms of corvée: *lam phu* and *lam phien*. *Lam phu* involved spending one month doing heavy labor for the *quan hoi* in his capital village. The workers had to clear and cultivate his paddy and swidden fields, collect firewood and bamboo for his house, do construction work, and watch his herds of buffalo. Workers were called to do *lam phu* only as labor was needed. *Lam phien* involved a 20 day tour working as a servant in the houses of the *quan hoi* and his wives. At any one time there were 10 people performing *lam phien*. According to one informant the people doing *lam phien* had to bring their own rice to eat. Those doing *lam phu* did not bring rice with them but had to forage for food in the forest because they received no support from the *quan hoi*. Other informants recall that the *quan hoi* provided the workers with food but it was of very poor quality, just three small tea cups of banana roots mixed with a little rice. If, at the end of their tour their replacements had not arrived they had to remain in service until they did. In any one year villagers had to perform either *lam phu* or *lam phien* but not both.

The commoners in Tat hamlet did not have to pay the *quan hoi* taxes on their harvest in rice. This probably reflected the remoteness of their hamlet which made transporting rice to his granary uneconomic.⁷⁾ Registered adult males were supposed to pay an annual head tax of eight silver dong but many people evaded this tax. People were also required to pay other kinds of tribute in kind to their overlord. For example, successful hunters were supposed to

7) According to one generalized ethnological description of the Tay, commoners in settlements located close to the residence of the noble were required to cultivate special fields in their village that were reserved for support of his household while subjects living in more distant settlements were required to come to the noble's village to perform corvée service instead [Vien Dan Toc Hoc 1978: 187].

present the *quan hoi* with a choice cut of any large wild animals that they trapped or shot with their crossbows (commoners were not allowed to own firearms which were exclusively reserved to the nobles). They also had to present a share of any wild honey they collected in the forest to his wives. They were not required, however, to give a share of fish to the nobles.

During each Tet lunar new year, the *dao xom* of Tat hamlet collected 3 liters of alcohol, 1 kg of rice, and a sticky rice cake (*banh chung*) from each household and took these along with valuable gifts of forest products such as squirrels, porcupines, and bear gall bladders to present to the *quan hoi*. He would be invited together with all of the other hamlet leaders from the domain to eat together with the *quan hoi*. If the gifts he brought pleased the *quan hoi* he might be rewarded with the higher title of “Dao Nhat.”

The feudal regime was concerned primarily with extracting labor power from the village. It did not attempt to regulate land use or tax agricultural production. Exploitation of forest resources was also largely unregulated. Villagers could freely fell large timber trees for construction of houses. Management of land was in the hands of individual households. Whichever household first cleared a low-lying area and constructed a wet rice field there was acknowledged by all others to have permanent rights to that plot. Households could clear swiddens wherever they chose to in the forest. They had control over the plot only as long as they planted crops on it, however, but retained no special rights to it after it was fallowed. Wild plants and animals could be collected freely by anyone in the forest. Because of the remoteness of the hamlet from large population centers and the lack of road access, outsiders were not interested in exploiting its resources and the colonial state showed no interest in its affairs. There was no nearby market so people who needed to buy or sell anything had to walk across the steep mountains for one whole day to the market in Phu Tho province. They usually sold roots collected from the forest, mainly the *cu nau* tuber (a type of wild yam) used as dye stuff and the *re vo* bark that was chewed with betel. Thirty kg of wild yams bought from 40 to 60 kg of rice. Population density was very low and unused land and forest abundant, so competition for resources among villagers was low and the need for regulatory institutions minimal.

The Resistance War Period

In 1945, the Japanese army seized control of Vietnam from the French and Japanese troops occupied the main strategic points in the mountain region. Informants in nearby Ban Enh recall that they were ordered to plant kenaf in their paddy fields by Japanese soldiers. The period of Japanese control was too brief to have any major direct effects on the lives of people in Tat hamlet although, by shattering the colonial administrative system, it opened the way for the Viet Minh-led forces of national liberation to establish their own control of the mountains.

The French colonial regime operating through the feudal *lang dao* system was a parasitic system that employed force to extract labor and tribute from the commoners of Tat hamlet but provided no real services in return. It is thus hardly surprising that during the long war of resistance against the French (1947–54) the people in Tat hamlet sided with the Viet

Minh. The whole of Da Bac district became a resistance base area. The *quan hoi* fled to Hoa Binh town where he served as an advisor to the short-lived Muong Autonomous Zone established by the French as part of their divide and rule strategy of setting the ethnic minorities against the Kinh. His son, Dinh Cong Doc, however, joined the Viet Minh and served as a combattant in the resistance forces in Son La as did the son of the *dao xom* of Tat hamlet.

Viet Minh cadre organized a guerrilla force in Tat hamlet. Although no major battles were fought there, the people suffered badly during the long war. In 1945 a French column passed through Tat hamlet. Local people were forced to carry rice for the French soldiers. Two young men who fainted from hunger and fatigue on the long trek were thrown into a stream and left to die. After they regained consciousness they asked a Muong for directions to return to their hamlet. In 1947, French soldiers returned and burned the hamlet. They killed two men, one a Tay, the other a Kinh. The Tay was Ong Dao Dac who was the *dao muong* serving under Dinh Cong Phu. Because he was riding a horse and carrying a gun the French mistook him for a Viet Minh cadre. They stabbed him and cut out his liver. The inhabitants then evacuated to Suoi Muong and Co Nom away from the main trail.

In 1948 another French column passed through Tat hamlet and ambushed a high ranking Viet Minh cadre. Afraid that the French forces would attack the area again the people built small houses scattered in the forest where the elderly and children stayed. They also dispersed their rice granaries in the forest. Theft of rice became a problem and it was during this period that the Tay abandoned their former custom of storing rice in separate granaries and began keeping it inside their houses, a practice that continues today. The greatest fear was of aircraft. The hamlet was never bombed but people recall observation planes (which they refer to as “old woman planes”) flying overhead. They say that Tu Ly and Phu Tho were bombed in 1951 and 1952.

After the final victory of the revolutionary forces in 1954 the large rice field belonging to the *dao xom* was confiscated and distributed to other families. During the land reform of 1956 the former *dao xom* was sent to live in the neighboring Dao hamlet of Ban Yen for one year. His son and daughter-in-law accompanied him. The son, who had served in the resistance forces, was later rehabilitated and became a high level cadre in the district.

The Cooperative Period

The cooperative period was divided into two phases, a period from 1957 to 1959 when the villagers were encouraged to join a mutual aid team (*to doi cong*), and a period from 1959 until the mid 1980s when Tat hamlet was a full fledged cooperative (*hop tac xa*).

The mutual aid team in Tat hamlet was organized in 1957 when cadre from the district and the hamlet began mobilizing the villagers to participate. People who had no links with the former feudal and colonial regime were picked by the cadre to serve as leaders of the team and confirmed in office by an election in which villagers raised their hands. All 17 households then in Tat hamlet joined the mutual aid team.

The mutual aid team had a leader (*to truong*), vice leader (*pho to truong*) and secretary (*thu*

ky). The team leader was responsible for overseeing productive activities and trying to improve living conditions in the hamlet. The vice-leader was responsible for overseeing daily productive activity, particularly in the paddy fields. The secretary recorded all labor contributions by members, taking into account their health and physical capacity and whether the work done was light or heavy to ensure that contributions were counted with equitability.

Before each planting season, each household requested whatever assistance it needed from the team. The leader held a meeting to allocate labor, deciding which household was to be helped first, which helped last. Poor households and households lacking a sufficient number of workers were given preference. The leader then allocated work accordingly with the unanimous consent of the team. The team then worked on the land of each household in turn. People who could not work hard or who were incapable of work had to pay paddy or corn to the team in return for its assistance. The team leader decided on the amount to be paid after discussing this with all team members.

At this time Tat hamlet had about 12 ha of paddy fields. Only local varieties of rice were grown and yields were low. Approximately half of the households suffered from food shortages. They had to clear swiddens and dig wild roots in the forest to get sufficient food. Better off households were encouraged by the mutual aid team to make interest free loans of grain to households suffering from hunger.

The forest was still very dense with many large trees. Wild animals were abundant and troops of monkeys destroyed corn in the more distant fields. No one was responsible for managing the forest which was considered an "open access resource" and everyone was free to cut trees and collect forest products, hunt wild animals, and clear swiddens as they pleased.

At the beginning of 1959 the mutual aid team was converted into a cooperative (*hop tac xa*). All paddy fields, buffalo and cattle, and plows and harrows were collectivized. Initially only 20 out of the approximately 25 households then living in the hamlet joined the cooperative. Households owning several head of livestock were reluctant to join and have their animals become common property but after a mobilization campaign all joined the cooperative.

A cadre proposed the names of seven individuals to become leaders of the cooperative and from this list the members elected five: the chairman, vice-chairman, accountant, and two members of the administrative committee. Initially, the cooperative had a single production brigade (*doi san xuat*) which was led by the former leader of the mutual aid team. Later it was divided into two brigades based on the location of member's houses but livestock were borrowed back and forth between the brigades depending on need. The two brigades contributed 20 percent of the rice and corn each produced to a common cooperative fund that was used to purchase additional livestock and agricultural implements and pay for collective meetings. In 1967 the cooperative was reorganized into three production brigades but later reverted to having two brigades.

Paddy fields were worked collectively, cattle and buffalo managed by the cooperative, and large agricultural tools treated as common property. Buffalo and cattle were allowed to range

freely. Individuals responsible for herding them received 1 labor point per animal per day. Usually 1 herder looked after 10 animals. Ten labor points per animal were awarded on days when the buffalo were used for harrowing. Members of the youth association enthusiastically collected manure because they received 3 kg of paddy for every 100 kg of manure.

The harvest was divided among cooperative members according to the number of work points they had accumulated. Individuals who worked hard were supposed to receive more points than those who did not. Cheating to get extra work points was widespread.⁸⁾ Informants talk with some glee and no evident disapproval of women who would split the rattan ties used to bind the bundles of seedlings into two in order to claim that they had transplanted a greater number of bundles than they actually had. Although these individuals may have seen themselves as tricking the cooperative they were in reality taking food away from their neighbors.

The leader of the production brigade recorded each individual's labor points on a daily basis and submitted the record to the cooperative's accountant after each harvest. The accountant divided the total harvest by the total number of points accumulated by all cooperative members to determine the value of one point. The value was very low, with one point valued at approximately 30 to 50 grams of paddy. One informant recalls that the household with the maximum number of points received only 300 kg of paddy for one crop. This would represent less than 200 kg of rice, which would not be nearly enough grain to feed a household of six or seven people for six months.

In the attempt to increase rice production, labor was mobilized to build new terraced fields but many were subsequently abandoned because of lack of sufficient irrigation water. The cooperative also directed people to plant tree gardens of *Livingstonia* palms to provide thatching for house roofs.

Because many households lacked food for four to six months a year they relied on forest resources to make up the short fall. Many people collected wild yams (*cu nau*) in the forest to sell in Yen Lang market in Phu Tho. A load of yams sold for only 1 dong, but 1 dong would purchase 20 kg of rice. At that time cash was used only to buy rice and clothing. No one bought kerosene but instead everyone used resin collected from forest trees for lighting.

Use of the forest was unregulated and individuals could exploit it as they chose. To produce additional food every household cleared swiddens in the forest and kept all of the produce for their own use with no contribution to the cooperative. Beginning in the late 1950s, elimination of shifting cultivation had become a national policy objective, but in Tat hamlet

8) Of course, cheating was also a problem in cooperatives in Kinh hamlets in the Red River Delta but there social institutions evolved to control this problem. For example, several households would be assigned responsibility for caring for a single buffalo with each family in turn feeding the animal for a set period of time. Given the time and energy needed to collect fodder in the densely populated delta, it was expected that each household would try to economize by short weighting the food ration it provided. This was avoided by the practice of all of the households gathering at the stable at feeding time to watch the fodder being weighed.

people continued to quietly engage in the practice and no one made any serious effort to control or stop them. In 1978 government cadre announced a new program in which anyone who wanted to clear swiddens was permitted to do so but in turn was required to plant *Styrax* trees (*bo de*) after harvesting the rice, in an agroforestry system resembling the Taungya system of colonial Burma. Later, the same system was applied to planting of tea in the swiddens. For this work, the State paid people 192 dong/ha or about 35 kg of rice/ha (the official price of rice at that time was 45 dong/10 kg). Not surprisingly, the villagers began clearing more swiddens, destroying a large area of forest in the process, since they gained the double benefit of having a larger rice harvest and receiving cash from the government for planting trees.

Known by the villagers as the “regime of the gong” (*che do keng*) after the large brass gong that was beaten to call people to collective work in the fields, the time when the hamlet was managed as a cooperative is remembered today with mixed feelings. Some informants recall that it was enjoyable to work together in large groups with young men and women taking advantage of the many opportunities for flirting and courtship that this offered. Other informants, mainly older women, blame the spread of gambling among men on the numerous times when they sat around with nothing else to occupy them while waiting for instructions before starting work. But all informants agree that productivity was low and hunger a constant problem during the cooperative period. No one expresses any desire to return to those difficult days.

The Household Management Period

During the latter part of the 1980s, the management role of the cooperative was gradually downgraded as the collectivized economy was replaced by the household economy. The collective labor regime was abandoned and rights to paddy fields assigned to individual households. Initially, households worked the land and retained whatever share of the harvest exceeded a fixed amount that they had contracted to supply to the cooperative. Later, the contract system was replaced by the current system in which households retain all of their harvest from the paddies except the relatively small share they pay to the State in the form of agricultural land taxes. Households are also supposed to make annual contributions to support the work of the cooperative and the hamlet administrative system. Although the unwieldy and inefficient production brigades have been disbanded, the organization of labor retains a semi-collective character as the customary institutions of inter-household labor exchange are still employed to mobilize additional workers during land preparation, transplanting, and harvesting of the paddies.

Contemporary Social Organization of Resource Management in Tat Hamlet

In recent years, management of resources has become more complicated and now involves the cooperative and local government, the State and its specialized agencies, as well as the individual households. The cooperative has retained control over some forest land but most

land has been allocated to individual households. The State plays an increasingly visible role in forest management by imposing legal restrictions on resource exploitation, supervising allocation of forest lands to households, and collecting taxes on land and resources. The households make their decisions about resource management within this institutional context.

The Role of the Cooperative and Hamlet Government in Resource Management

Although it no longer plays an important direct role in the management of labor and distribution of agricultural production on the basis of labor points, the cooperative retains important functions in regulating land use, taxation, and maintenance of social order. All households in the hamlet must belong to the cooperative in order to live in Tat hamlet. If someone not native to Tat hamlet wants to come to live there he must be accepted as a member of the cooperative in order to stay. Every household member age 18 or older has the right to vote in cooperative elections. The cooperative in its present form has six officers, a chairman, a vice chairman, an accountant, a treasurer, and two control cadre (*can bo kiem tra*). The chairman is elected for a two year term by members of the cooperative. His election must be confirmed by the Village People's Committee. The chairman is supposed to receive an allowance of 50–60 kg of paddy per harvest, paid out of a fund collected from contributions made by all member households in the cooperative. Because of poor harvests in recent years only 25 households have made any contributions so that the chairman has not received his full allowance.

The cooperative is coterminous with the hamlet government and informants rarely distinguish between the two although they are formally separate organizations. The hamlet has a headman (*truong ban*) who is assisted by an administrative committee composed of the leaders of the local mass organizations and the security and militia units. The headman receives a salary of VND 40,000 per month, half paid by the Village People's Committee and half contributed by the district government. Administrative Committee members do not receive a regular salary but receive a share of the paddy contributed by cooperative members each year. In fact, many households in Tat hamlet fail to make any contribution so that only a few tens of kg of paddy are collected each year. Thus, administrative committee members are essentially unpaid volunteers.

The Hamlet Headman and the Cooperative Chairman share a number of responsibilities including:

- Taking part in important social functions such as funerals and weddings
- Dealing with fights and conflicts among neighbors. The hamlet headman accompanies the security unit to the scene, serves as a peacemaker, and decides on appropriate punishment.
- Collecting contributions to the cooperative fund
- Attending meetings of the Village People's Committee
- Allocating payments to households of funds received from the 327 Program for protecting forest lands. (In theory each household is to receive VND 47,000 per ha per year from the 327 Program but in 1997 the cooperative received only enough funds for 16 households so the Chairman had

to divide this amount evenly among 79 households.)

- Overseeing management of lands remaining under the control of the cooperative.

The cooperative retains control of 55 ha of hill slope land divided into four tracts. Two plots of brush and grass covered slope land at Co Nom (20 ha) and Suoi Muong (10 ha) are reserved for households to clear swiddens. Two tracts of old secondary forest totalling 25 ha are also protected by the cooperative although hamlet residents are allowed to collect bamboo shoots and cut bamboo stems there.

Until recently the two tracts reserved for swiddening were used in an alternating cycle of approximately four years with one tract being cultivated while the other was in fallow. After the cooperative announced that a tract was open for cultivation households were free to pick their own plots to clear for swiddens. Once they selected their plot the household would erect simple bamboo markers on its boundaries to let others know that the plot was already taken. After clearing the field they could farm it until the cooperative decided that it was time to return the tract to fallow at which time they would clear a new field in the newly reopened alternate tract. They retained no residual rights in the abandoned field. Since the beginning of the 1990s the alternating system has broken down under the pressure of growing population and resulting shortage of land for swiddening. Households now maintain swiddens simultaneously in both tracts. A household may periodically fallow a plot but retains control over it and may reclear it whenever it is ready to be planted again.

The cooperative also attempts to protect remaining mature forest in the two tracts under its direct control as well as in areas designated by the District Forest Protection Office as protected watershed forest. Households are permitted to collect bamboo shoots and cut bamboo stems in these areas but clearance of swiddens is forbidden. Households that clear swiddens inside protected areas are subject to fines and are required to replant trees on the illegally cleared plots but are allowed to cultivate the land for two or three years first. The fines are quite low (800 VND/m²) and many land hungry households are willing to risk the penalty since there is a good chance they will not be caught if they clear their plot in an area not visible from the road. In the last several years, illegal cutting of swiddens and destruction of forest by fires escaping from burning swiddens has been on the increase but the cooperative and hamlet leaders feel powerless to control these activities.⁹⁾

The Role of the State in Resource Management

The State exerts a strong influence on resource management in Tat hamlet through a variety of direct mechanisms including imposition of legal regulations, formal allocation of land rights, taxation, and provision of public services and construction of infrastructure, as well as the indirect impact of its activities elsewhere such as the in-migration of people into the hamlet who

9) Although encroachment on protected forestland frequently occurs, villagers are quick to admit that there would be no forest left at all if it were not for the efforts of the cooperative and the State to protect it.

were displaced by the construction of the Hoa Binh reservoir.

Legal Regulations and Enforcement

In principle, use of resources in Tat hamlet, as everywhere in Vietnam, is regulated by uniform national laws enforced by State agencies such as the Forest Protection Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Forestry cadre from the district have prepared a land use map for Tan Minh village identifying areas of protected forests. Logging and swiddening are totally banned in these areas. In areas that are not classified as protected forest, trees may be cut by members of the hamlet for purposes of building or repair of their houses but not for sale. They are supposed to obtain permission to cut a certain number of trees from the Village People's Committee and pay the natural resources tax to the district on this timber. In 1998 one informant who had just completed building a new house using timber from the forest said that he had paid tax of VND 100,000.

A low-level forest protection cadre is assigned by the district to the village to oversee forest protection but enforcement of regulations on land use is the responsibility of the Village People's Committee and the cooperative and hamlet leaders. Given the lack of means and will on the part of the authorities to enforce forestry regulations, many young men engage in illegal logging to earn cash. Households also clear swiddens in protected areas with little fear of being punished. The hamlet authorities are aware that such infractions are occurring but say that they cannot stop them because people are hungry and have no choice but to break the laws.

Allocation of Forest Land to Households

Most forestland has now been allocated to households. Some forested hill slope land was assigned to households to manage even during the cooperative period, with one informant reporting that her family had been given control of a plot of regenerating secondary forest near her house in 1975. Palm tree gardens planted by the cooperative were transferred to households at the same time as the paddy land was placed under their control. Allocation of remaining forest lands and issuance of "red books" to households is still in progress.

Forest lands have been allocated to households by two different district offices, the Forestry Office and the Land Office. In the early 1990s the Forestry Office allocated approximately 100 ha of protected forest lands on hill tops to households. The households are expected to protect the forest on the plots assigned to them but not to cut timber or clear swiddens. The Forestry Office has issued certificates to these households but does not pay them for protecting the forest. Later, the Land Office allocated about 100 ha of hill slope land to households under the 327 Program and subsequently issued "red book" to recipient households. These lands are supposed to be kept under forest but are in fact frequently cleared for swiddens. According to the hamlet headman each household was supposed to receive two plots, one for protection and one for cultivation.

The land allocation has been imperfectly implemented in Tat hamlet. At the western end

of the hamlet plots allocated by the Forestry Office and the Land Office overlapped so that in some cases the same plot was assigned to two different families, each of which received a certificate or “red book” for it. A more serious problem resulted from the failure of the Land Department cadre to make an actual map or ground survey of plots allocated under the 327 Program. Rather than climbing the steep slopes to survey the fields they stayed at the road and asked people to point out which plots they wanted. Households were subsequently issued red books which showed the outline of their plot but not its actual location on the landscape. In May 1998 the Land Office cadre returned to the hamlet to show people the base map on which the location of household plots was marked. The new hamlet land map was beautifully drawn but, unfortunately, largely inaccurate. Few of the plots assigned to households were in the correct location. One informant told us that her family had controlled the land behind the waterfall next to her house for more than 35 years but this plot had been assigned to a household located across the valley while the plots shown on the map as being assigned to her in reality belonged to other households. The Land Office cadre asked to take back the red books to correct them but the people refused to surrender their books, since they did not trust the cadre to correctly rectify the errors. One unfortunate consequence of this administrative mistake was that many people began to rapidly cut trees on their plots since they feared that their rights to this land would not be recognized officially. Given their historical experience of frequent changes in land tenure policies this seemingly short-sighted response cannot be dismissed as being wholly irrational.¹⁰⁾

Taxation

The State actively seeks to regulate resource exploitation in order to protect the environment in Tat hamlet but at the same time it profits from resource exploitation by means of a variety of land and resource taxes. Although taxation is used in many countries as a policy lever to influence the way in which resources are used (e.g., the oil depreciation allowances in the American tax code that are designed to stimulate exploration for new petroleum reserves and the “carbon tax” being used in the EU to reduce fossil fuel consumption to fight global warming), Vietnamese land and resource taxes appear to be intended only to generate revenue for the State.

The villagers are subject to a variety of State taxes collected by the Intervillage Tax Station which is located next to the People’s Committee office. The Tax Station has five staff. The

10) Although, according to current institutional economic theory, assigning households tenure to forestland should lead to more careful management, in practice the matter is more complicated, especially in situations where people have experienced repeated shifts in land tenure regimes. Peter Riggs (personal communication) reports that in southwestern China farmers associate times of rapid deforestation with what they call the “three 8s.” These are 1958, when villagers were forced to cut trees to supply fuel for the backyard iron furnaces mandated by “the great leap forward,” 1968, when the “Cultural Revolution” led to a temporary breakdown in administrative control in the countryside, and 1978, when forest plots were allocated to households to manage. Fearing that their plots would be taken away again when the next shift in policy occurred, farmers immediately cut any trees of value.

head is employed by Tan Minh village but the other staff are assigned there by the district tax office. All staff are paid by the district.

Six kinds of tax are collected in Tat hamlet:

Agricultural land tax: Paddy land in Tat hamlet is classified into three categories in descending order of productivity. Category 4 is taxed at 28 kg of paddy/1,000 m²/year. Category 5 is taxed at 18 kg of paddy and category 6 at 5 kg of paddy/1,000 m²/year. The tax is calculated in paddy but paid in cash. The amount depends on the market price of paddy. According to the record book at the Tax Office, in the first 6 months of 1997 households in Tat hamlet paid 2,447 kg of paddy in agricultural land tax. At that time paddy was valued at 1,400 VND/kg. About 10 households had failed to pay any tax that year. They are permitted a one year grace period but can lose their land if they still fail to pay. Late payments are calculated at VND 1,700/kg of paddy so there is a significant penalty for late payment.

Mixed garden tax: Swiddens are now classified as being “mixed gardens” and are taxed at the rate of 8 kg of paddy/1,000 m². In the first 6 months of 1997 households in Tat hamlet had paid 301.8 kg of paddy in this tax. In view of the fact that the area cultivated in swiddens is vastly larger than the area of paddy land, there would appear to be widespread evasion of this tax.

Residential land tax: House sites and surrounding home gardens are taxed at the rate of 8 kg of paddy per 1,000 m² of land. A total of 428.6 kg of paddy had been collected from Tat hamlet households in the first 6 months of 1997.

Natural resource use tax: This tax is collected on products extracted from the forest including timber, firewood, bamboo and bamboo shoots. Only forest products that are sold are subject to taxation. Different rates are charged on the value of different forest resources. Timber is taxed at a 40 percent rate, pulpwood at 20 percent, bamboo and bamboo shoots at 10 percent, and firewood at 5 percent. No records were available for the taxes actually collected on these products in Tat hamlet.

Slaughter fee for livestock: A fee of VND 30,000 per head of cattle and VND 25,000 per pig is collected for any livestock that are slaughtered to sell the meat. Smaller livestock (e.g., goats, chickens) are not taxed. In the first 6 months of 1997 4 cattle and 16 pigs had been subject to this tax.

Business tax: A tax of 4 percent is collected on the sales volume of shops. In the first 6 months of 1997 a total of VND 1,668,000 was collected from shops in Tat hamlet.

Provision of Public Services and Construction of Infrastructure

In recent years State investment in mountain area development has increased dramatically, including in Tat hamlet. Public services and infrastructure are largely funded out of the State budget. These expenditures are heavily subsidized from the central budget since the amount of taxes collected in Tat hamlet represent only a small fraction of government expenditures in the

hamlet. The health clinic and the school, despite charging fees, are heavily subsidized by the State. Salaries of hamlet and village officials and leaders of mass organizations are also provided by the State budget. This represents a not inconsiderable inflow of cash into the economy of the hamlet.

One of the largest State investments in recent years has been the construction of a power line that passes through the hamlet on its way from the Hoa Binh hydropower generator to the more remote villages in the western part of Da Bac district. Construction of the power line has had no discernable effect on the lives of people in Tat hamlet because only the People's Committee office is connected to it. In order to use electricity from the line each household would have to spend several million VND to connect to the line and then, on top of that, pay a monthly usage fee. Given the prevalence of microhydropower generators which supply free electricity to most households there is little incentive to make use of the central system.

Another major State investment has been the recently completed up-grading of the road that connects the hamlet to the district to all weather status. This has greatly increased the accessibility of the hamlet. Several trucks and buses pass through every day providing a relatively cheap and convenient way of moving people and goods to and from the lowlands. Improved access to markets has greatly increased the intensity of exploitation of forest resources as people seek to obtain cash to buy food and consumer goods. When the harvests are bad, as they have been in several recent years, this pressure is increased as people desperately search the forests for anything that can be sold to obtain cash needed to buy rice. This has had a very negative impact on biodiversity as timber and medicinal plants are exploited at well beyond sustainable levels. From the perspective of the villagers, however, improvement of access to the market is seen as wholly positive. As one informant remarked, "now when there is a bad harvest we can collect bamboo and sell it to buy rice whereas before all we could do was to dig wild roots from the forest in order to survive."

The State has also encouraged people in Tat hamlet to participate in a variety of tree planting projects. In the early 1960s, President Ho Chi Minh encouraged people in the mountains to plant *Melia* trees. The people in Tat hamlet did not understand why this was necessary since at that time they still had plenty of natural forest but complied anyway. Later, the District Chairman actively promoted planting of *Aleurites montana* (candlenut) trees that yield tung oil. Many farmers planted groves of these trees but have difficulty in disposing of the crop because the market is limited. Shops in the hamlet purchase the seeds for VND 1,000/kg. In 1989–90, eucalyptus planting was promoted by the World Food Program (PAM) which provided seedlings and gave farmers 370 kg of rice for each hectare planted (out of which they had to pay the program 50 kg for transportation fees for the seedlings). The trees have grown well but there is no market for the wood. In any case, farmers say they no longer plant eucalyptus because it is bad for the soil but they did not know that at the time they planted it.

Indirect Effects of State Actions

Construction of the Hoa Binh dam, one of the largest State projects in northern Vietnam,

displaced thousands of households from their homes in the valleys flooded by the reservoir. Three households relocated to Tat hamlet thus increasing already heavy pressure on land and resources in the hamlet.

The Role of the Household in Resource Management

Although the role played by the cooperative and the State cannot be ignored, it is individual households that make most decisions about resource management in Tat hamlet today. Increasingly, their decisions are driven by the imperatives of involvement in the market economy but they are still predominantly subsistence-oriented rather than seeking to accumulate capital. Having enough to eat is the first priority and their use of resources is largely determined by that very immediate goal.

Each household is a largely autonomous unit of production, consumption, and capital accumulation. Like peasant households everywhere in the developing world, the major objective of each Tay household is to reproduce itself (the successful raising of children who in turn form autonomous households modeled after those of their parents), not accumulation of investment capital and striving for upward social mobility.

Although a limited amount of sharing of food and other goods occurs among different households, especially those linked by kinship relations, each household is essentially a self-contained economic unit. Its success or failure in the game of life is wholly dependent on the skill and willingness to work of its members. There is no social safety net to catch households that fall into poverty as a consequence of bad luck (illness, natural disaster) or personal shortcomings (laziness, gambling or drinking). The margin between success and failure is very narrow and the slightest perturbation can undo many years of hard work and careful accumulation of household wealth.¹¹⁾

Unlike Kinh communities in the Red River Delta that maintain institutional mechanisms (e.g., the cooperative social fund) for assisting households that encounter misfortune,

11) One household with which we are familiar went from being one of the wealthiest to one of the poorest in the hamlet in less than five years after the male head of household died unexpectedly. As a retired cadre he had received a substantial pension but this terminated after his death. His widow was left to raise two teenagers, a son and a daughter, and to care for her 80 year old mother. Unfortunately, the son, freed of paternal guidance, contributed little to the maintenance of the family and squandered its resources on drinking and gambling. He married and after a short period of bride service at his in-law's house brought his new wife to live with his mother. The new daughter-in-law was a willing worker but quickly became pregnant so added little to the labor power of the family. She gave birth to two children in two years and only recently has begun to be able to work full-time in the fields. The daughter did her best to assist her mother until she became engaged and had to devote much of her effort to accumulating her dowry. Then she married and left the house to live with her husband's family. The female head-of-household, a woman already in her 50s, became the sole supporter of a family with six mouths to feed. She worked incredibly hard but her crops were devastated for three years running by unusually severe outbreaks of pests and bad weather. Thus, bad luck combined with the personal failings of one of its members undermined the economic status of this household. From visit to visit we watched with sadness as its standard of living declined into a state of extreme poverty.

particularly those headed by elderly widows, Tat hamlet has no community-wide social welfare institutions. Asked who they would turn to for help in the event of disaster, 88 percent of the 42 households we interviewed replied that they would seek help from close relatives. Only 1 household would seek help from unrelated friends or neighbors.

Not only are households in Tat hamlet wholly self-reliant but they must constantly be on guard to protect their assets from depredations by fellow villagers. Theft is a constant concern and loss of crops and livestock common. One poor widow was eagerly anticipating harvesting the ginger in her swidden which would provide some much needed cash to buy food for her hungry household. A few days before she planned to harvest the ginger the entire crop was stolen from her field during the night. She was convinced that the thieves were fellow villagers which is highly probable since no outsiders would be able to follow the poorly marked mountain trails to her swidden in the dark. As harvest time approaches, many families assign a member to sleep in a field hut in their swidden, in order to protect the harvest from predators, both four and two-legged.

Informants also express considerable concern about their ability to protect the forest plots assigned to their care. Despite the fact that land has been allocated to households, many villagers still view the forest as an open access resource where they feel free to appropriate anything of value that they happen to find. On one occasion an informant terminated an interview in mid-course to go and check his plot when he heard the sound of axes in the forest near his land. Lack of security is a major constraint on investing in tree planting on plots located far way from the settlement where protection is difficult.

Destruction of tree seedlings by livestock left free by neighbors to forage in the forest is another concern. One poor farmer in the neighboring hamlet of Ban Enh complained bitterly of how his newly planted tea garden had been trampled by buffalo belonging to "rich families."

Some cooperation does occur between households but under rigidly defined conditions. Neighbors make contributions of food, alcohol, and cash for weddings and funerals in the expectation that their donations will be reciprocated when they in turn must host such events. Families that need to replace the palm leaf thatched roof of their house, a task that must be done every ten years or so, invite 10 or 15 households in their labor exchange group to help in this difficult task. The host family provides one half of the 300 leaves needed to complete the job while the remainder are brought by the helpers. Each household sends one member to work for one day and also contributes rice and alcohol while the host family provides meat for a feast to reward the workers.

Much of the work of cultivation of paddy fields is done by means of labor exchange groups involving members of several different households. Fields are harrowed by teams of men using several buffalo at once. Transplanting is done by groups of 10 or a dozen women. Swiddens are sometimes planted by large groups of 50 or 60 people. In that case, the host household provides a meal to the workers. No meals are provided for helpers in the paddy field labor exchange work. Rules for reciprocity in labor exchange are strict and a household owes one labor day to every individual from whom it receives assistance. A household that fails to fulfill

its obligations can easily be sanctioned by refusal of others to provide help when it needs it. Thus, the existence of labor exchange practices should not be seen as providing evidence for a strong sense of solidarity in the hamlet.

Allocation of community resources is not always done in a fair and unbiased manner. Holders of positions of authority can and do take advantage of their power to divert resources to themselves. On one occasion an office holder kept all of the most valuable varieties of fruit tree seedlings that were donated to the hamlet and only distributed the inferior varieties to the other households. A poor individual in a neighboring hamlet complained that 327 Program funds were only given to a few wealthy households including the vice chairman of the cooperative. Although distribution of 327 funds in Tat hamlet has been done much more fairly, people nevertheless suspect that some of the money has been misappropriated. Regardless of the actual honesty of office holders it is assumed by their neighbors that they use their positions to benefit themselves and their families, which is a natural assumption in any society characterized by the ethos of amoral familism.

Conclusions

Tat hamlet can be characterized as being a loosely structured community. One might even say that it is a settlement but not a true community. The sense of solidarity among its component households is poorly developed and it has few effective institutions to organize collective action to achieve community aims. The household is the maximal unit in which trust among members is strong and altruistic behavior expectable. Relations among unrelated households are rarely close and spontaneous cooperation among them infrequent. Social capital is scarce, people have little sense of trust in the honesty and integrity of their fellow villagers, and community-level institutions for organizing corporate actions are rudimentary or wholly missing. In many particulars, the situation of Tat hamlet is comparable to that of the southern Italian village of Montegrano where the sociologist Edward G. Banfield formulated his concept of “amoral familism” [Banfield 1958] to describe a society where the absence of trust in social institutions other than the family severely limits the ability of villagers to cooperate to achieve collective goals.

Of course, as in all peasant societies, some inter-household cooperation occurs in the form of labor exchange groups. Seeing groups of people joking together as they harrow the fields or transplant the rice seedlings can give the impression to the casual observer that people in Tat are highly cooperative. But such mutual aid is always given under closely controlled conditions that ensure that participants meet their mutual obligations or suffer the sanction of exclusion from future exchanges.

The complex relationship between social organization and resource management has changed repeatedly over the course of the history of Tat hamlet. Within a single lifetime the hamlet has experienced three radically different forms of social organization. These systems share only the common characteristic of having been essentially imposed by forces outside of the

local community. The absence of locally evolved institutions for collective action — the essential mechanisms for implementing community-based resource management — has been the one constant across several decades of rapid social change. Management structures above the household level have always been imposed from outside and decision-making authority wielded by the local agents of external powers, whether the *dao xom* of the feudal regime, the production brigade leaders of the cooperative period, or the Forestry Office cadre of the present period. The villagers themselves have never developed any community institutions for effective collective management of resources. Instead, resource management is left almost entirely in the hands of individual households. A situation of virtually unchecked competition among households for scarce resources is the norm and continuing degradation of the environment its consequence.

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