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Multiple Reactions to Land Confiscations in a Hanoi Peri-urban Village

Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh*

This article examines the impact of urban expansion on a peri-urban village of Hanoi. It seeks to understand how villagers reacted to the decision by Hanoi city to take their agricultural land for urban projects. By exploring the forms of land protest adopted in this community and the diverse factors that shaped reactions in this particular case, the article contributes to the literature on responses to land confiscation in Vietnam and elsewhere. The paper shows a community divided over recent land confiscations and the complexity of the politics of resistance in land disputes in modern-day Vietnam.

Keywords: urbanization, rural transformation, land appropriation, land protest, Vietnam

In the decades since the economic reforms of the 1980s, Vietnam's urban and rural landscapes have changed dramatically as the country experiences a rapid rise of industrialization and modernization. For many years, an invisible urbanization had been taking place in rural areas based on intensified agriculture, expansion and development of handicrafts, and migration for employment by farming households (DiGregorio 2011). With the urban development strategy launched in the 1990s of "infilling and expansion," urbanization by "administrative integration," and the expansion of industrial parks, many new urban areas and industrial zones have been established in what once were primarily wet-rice-growing peripheries of major cities such as Hanoi. By applying the state's right to allocate and appropriate land for the purpose of "national defense, security, national interest, public interest, and economic development," local governments have reallocated agricultural land to developers. The government has negotiated with farming households in project areas and compensated the households for the reallocated land on a fixed-rate basis. From 2001 to 2005 the state appropriated 366,400 hectares of agricultural land; by 2010 the total rose to roughly 745,000 hectares, affecting some nine million farming people, or about 10 percent of the country's population (Kerkvliet 2014, 20). In Hanoi alone, from

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2000 to 2004 the city converted 5,496 hectares of land for 957 projects; this had critical consequences for the living and working conditions of 138,291 households, among them 41,000 classified as agricultural households (Hồng Minh 2005). In that context, rural communities, especially peri-urban villages, have been facing both opportunities and challenges to develop and better themselves.

Research on urbanization in Vietnam has highlighted a set of problems that have become manifest as the urbanization process extends into the peri-urban landscape. These problems include land degradation, chaotic land use practices, growing income inequalities, dispossessed farmers unable to find jobs in the urban economy, and land disputes (Nguyen Duy Thang 2004; Tran Duc Vien *et al.* 2005; Vu Hong Phong 2006; Trần Thị Hồng Yến 2013; Labbé 2014; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2014). Inspired by violent standoffs between farmers and the local government during land disputes in 2012,¹⁾ some studies on land protests in Vietnam have explored disputes in rural settings by focusing on factors that instigate conflict, and the modes and contexts in which it occurs (Gillespie 2014; Kerkvliet 2014; Taylor 2014). While those works identify patterns in how and why recent land-related protests arose and analyze the discourses that guide and control disputes, they do not capture all the complexities of land disputes. The main reason is these studies focus more on the political implications of land conflicts than on land protests in a social context. In these studies, land protests are shown as dispossessed farmers' responses to land expropriations, which do not reflect the complexity of rural communities' reactions; nor do the studies examine all the processes by which the disputes have been formed and transformed.

To date, little attention has focused on the important issue of internal village conflicts over land confiscations for urbanization. In her case study in a Hanoi peri-urban village named Hoa Muc, Danielle Labbé (2011) describes the reaction of people in that village during several periods of land grabs. The case study examines the role of elderly people in opposing the local government's project to build a cultural house in front of the village communal house. The study gives some indication of the social division among villagers and suggests the complication of the politics of resistance in contemporary Vietnam. Nevertheless, more can be said about the complexity of local reactions to land expropriation in the current era.

This article shows how both urbanization and land conflict bring to light differences among villagers' reactions to land confiscation in a peri-urban village of Hanoi. Drawing

1) In 2012 the fish farmer Đoàn Văn Vuon and his brothers in Hải Phòng city laid homemade mines and discharged shotguns against the police who came to confiscate their farmland. The same year, hundreds of farmers in Văn Giang District, Hưng Yên Province, faced security agents and police in a violent confrontation to keep their land from appropriation for urban expansion.

upon recent fieldwork, the study seeks to understand how villagers of different ages, genders, and occupations have reacted to the decision of Hanoi city authorities to take their agricultural land for urban projects. It provides an in-depth anthropological study of the dynamics of the land appropriation process and the responses of farmers faced by great changes in land use and livelihoods. The study shows how and why the community has been divided over land confiscations, which has been exacerbated by villagers' protests. It demonstrates that despite most farming households not wanting to lose their agricultural land or accept low compensation, not all of them participated in the land protest. Illustrating the contestatory nature of land conflicts in contemporary Vietnam, this paper aims to bring more evidence to the complexity of the politics of resistance in land disputes in today's Vietnam. Like Labbé (2011) and Benedict Kerkvliet (2014), I try to contribute to the literature on responses to land confiscation in Vietnam and elsewhere by investigating forms of land protest in this community besides the "rightful resistance" (O'Brien 1996) approach and uncovering the diverse factors that shaped those reactions in this particular case.

Rightful Resistance Theory and Land Protests in Vietnam

Over the last three decades, Southeast Asian countries have experienced a dramatic change in land use and social relations around land. Economic growth, industrialization, and urbanization have led to the conversion of large amounts of agricultural land to urban use as well as various commercial and industrial purposes (Hall *et al.* 2011, 1). In India, during the last decade Special Economic Zones have become centers of "land wars" as farmers across the country have resisted the state's use of eminent domain to transfer their land. In the case of China, between 1987 and 2003 urban expansion transformed 10 million to 12 million hectares, about one-tenth of the country's total area, from agricultural to non-agricultural uses. Together, between 1990 and 2007, farmland conversion and inner-city redevelopment displaced between 60 million and 75 million people in both urban and rural areas (Hsing 2010, 2). Throughout the region, this urban expansion seemed to be based on the logic of dispossession (Hsing 2010; Levien 2012) or the "powers of exclusion" (Hall *et al.* 2011), which triggered increasingly explosive and widespread social unrest.

While reactions to land grabs have occurred in various countries in the region, significant explorations and discussions on the nature of this phenomenon concentrate mostly on China, where the number of land protests has been increasing since the late 1990s. In that context, the theory of rightful resistance, which was first explained by

Kevin O'Brien (1996) and later elaborated by Kevin J. O'Brien and Li Lianjiang (2006), has been influential. According to this theory, rightful resistance is a form of popular contention against the state in which groups of weak peasants use nonviolent methods, make use of institutionalized channels to press their claims locally, and then entreat higher-level officials to help. The nature of rightful resistance is peaceful; however, rightful resisters actively seek the attention of the elites, and their protests are public and open. People make use of the state's own laws, policies, or rhetoric in framing their protests.

Vietnam for a long time has been a fertile land for studies on peasant resistance in which theories of moral economy, the rational peasant, or the power of the weak²⁾ are introduced or elaborated. Against a background of increasing land disputes in recent times, scholarly works on protests over land in rural Vietnam undergoing urban expansion "have moved beyond the everyday resistance model, which used to be fruitful to study politics in rural Vietnam, to focus on a contestatory mode of politics" (Taylor 2014, 4). Labbé applied a rightful resistance approach to examine resistance to land redevelopment projects and found that "groups of villagers relied on a strategy of 'rightful resistance' embedded in the official discourse of deference, inasmuch as they based their claims on official policies and ethical pronouncements by the Vietnamese party-state itself" (Labbé 2011, 453). The core of resisters' discourse of rightful resistance to preserve their village communal house is "a sense of place and of social justice drawn from history, geography and tradition. People claim for their right to safeguard values they hold in common" (*ibid.*). In another recent investigation drawing upon more than 60 case studies of land dispute in Vietnam, Kerkvliet (2014) found that the predominant pattern for how Vietnamese today protest about land issues resonates with rightful resistance theory. In this form of resistance, "people in the same community peacefully demand that national officials make local authorities abide by the law" (Kerkvliet 2014, 26). However, some Vietnamese villagers' demonstrations do not fit this pattern and theory, such as when "angry villagers have collaborated with land protesters in other parts of the nation, and their protests, despite usually being non-violent, have not always been so" (*ibid.*, 40). According to the author, in most cases the reason why people's protest exceeds rightful resistance theory is that "Vietnamese people frequently challenge existing laws pertinent to their grievances and assert rights that go beyond those officially recognized" (*ibid.*, 21). For instance, some people refuse to surrender their land-use rights based on the notion that it is unjust to take land against the will of families who have served the Vietnamese nation (Kerkvliet 2014).

2) See Scott (1976); Popkin (1979); Kerkvliet (2005).

In this study, I also apply rightful resistance theory to analyze why and how Lua villagers protest. Like Kerkvliet (2014), I find that the reasons Lua people reacted and did not accept land appropriation at the beginning go beyond the explanation provided by rightful resistance theory. Since the collective village protest ended, some villagers have been continuing their own protest, which sometimes has involved violence, as they have tried to resist the local government's decisions. By examining the protest in process, I found that activists in the village community used some tactics that commonly have been associated with Vietnam's tradition of peasant revolutionary politics to mobilize their co-villagers to join their protest activities or to exert more pressure on local authorities to support their claim or meet their demands. Like Labbé (2011), I found that the village community was divided during the protest; but I will elaborate in more detail how the land confiscation impacted on the cohesiveness of this community. The paper aims to make a deeper contribution to what is already known about the reaction of local Vietnamese to land appropriation in a context of rapid urbanization.

Research Method and Research Site

This paper is drawn from field research conducted in Lua³⁾ village in 2014. The research was carried out using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. For the quantitative component, 200 household questionnaires were surveyed to determine the socioeconomic situations of households. Information was collected on landownership and transfer, other personal and productive assets, income, and consumption expenditure. In this article, the quantitative survey results are not presented and are used only to understand the social context of the village. For the qualitative component, which represents the core of this paper, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals in the village. Half of these individuals were identified from the quantitative questionnaires, while the remainder were selected to ensure a broad representation of the village by age, gender, educational background, occupation, marital status, and economic status. The interview included open-ended questions on informants' personal information and their families' socioeconomic situation. Villagers were free to share their opinions, feelings, and thoughts on urbanization and land appropriation. In order to gain an understanding of the villagers' reaction to land appropriation, we posed questions on this topic to some villagers who we believed played an important role or were directly involved in the protest, including both ordinary villagers and local authorities. Based on

3) This is a pseudonym to protect my informants.

information provided by respondents, we tried to meet and interview other villagers who were involved in the incidents. Questions were raised on the responses of people and their participation in the village protest.

Located to the west of Hanoi, Lụa village is well known for its craft tradition. Despite experiencing various administrative changes in the late colonial and revolutionary periods, prior to 2006 Lụa village belonged to one of the lowest administrative units (a commune) of Hoài Đức District, Hà Tây Province.⁴⁾ Rice cultivation and silk weaving were the two main livelihoods of villagers for as long as can be remembered. After the August revolution of 1945, traditional weaving died out.

Immediately after the decollectivization of local agriculture in the late 1980s, Lụa people diversified their economic activities, aided by their close geographical position to Hanoi. Prior to 2009, approximately 70 percent of over 2,000 households in the village were agricultural households that also engaged in petty trade, hired labor, food processing, or small service industries. Thirty percent of households were non-agricultural. The majority of these were traders at markets in the city as well as entrepreneurs who owned weaving and cloth dying workshops in the village. The remainder ran a variety of businesses ranging from wood workshops to garment workshops, tobacco trade, food shops, and the like. The dynamics of Lụa village trade can be seen as a continuation of the craft village tradition. It is possible to say that the 30 percent trading and craft households were also ranked as wealthy people in the village. The other 70 percent of households had a relatively stable livelihood created by intensifying their cash crops, peach tree flowers, and petty trade. Compared to other surrounding villages, Lụa was considered one of the well-off villages in the region and one that had the internal capability to develop itself.

Under the urban growth policy in the region, on March 1, 2006 the commune to which Lụa village belonged was assigned to Hà Đông town (Hà Tây Province). In June 2009, soon after Hà Tây merged with Hanoi city, Lụa village became an urban administrative unit belonging to Hà Đông District. Given its convenient location, Hà Đông District urbanized rapidly: between 2005 and 2010, new roads and housing projects were quickly implemented. Two major roads were opened and cut through Lụa village in 2006 and 2007.

In 2008, the local government developed a plan to take most of the village land for new urban projects. Accordingly, more than 300 hectares of agricultural land in Lụa and another village in the same ward (more than 90 percent of the total agricultural land of Lụa) were appropriated for 13 projects. The biggest project was Ha Dong New Urban

4) In 2008 Hà Tây was merged into Hanoi city after 17 years of being a province.

Centre⁵⁾ (Khu Đô thị mới), which has an area of 197 hectares. It consists of a service complex, a shopping center, hotels, offices, high-end housing, and a hospital. Besides these, there are several other housing projects and one international school.

The Village Protest

Although Lụa villagers had realized for some years that urbanization of their communities was inevitable, many of them were quite shocked when it actually happened. In 2006, when a major road opened and cut Lụa village in two, some households lost their cultivated land to the road expansion, but nobody protested. People accepted the compensation even though it was lower than that paid to villagers later for other mega projects,⁶⁾ because they understood it as a public works project that served the needs of the state for building infrastructure.

In early 2008, there was a rumor that most of the village land would be appropriated for road construction and housing projects with a compensation of about VND86 million per *sào* (about USD4,000 for 360 m²) plus 10 percent of the reclassified land, referred to as “service land.”⁷⁾ An old farmer in the village recalled his feeling at that time:

“I felt dizzy at the rumor. I myself had 13.7 *thước*⁸⁾ [314 m²]. My children had their own portions. If I lost all the land, I would receive about VND80 million plus about 18 m² service land. But to have that 18 m² I would have to pay almost VND40 million for infrastructure fees. If I had no more land to grow peach trees, how would I earn a living? Each year, on average, I need over VND10 million for my own expenditure. With VND40 million left, I could live for three years. After that I might have to sell the 18 m² service land to live on. As I am old, who would give me work? I was really dizzy.” (Mr. Ngô, 60 years old)

Hiền, a 40-year-old man in the village, recalled a similar sentiment: “When I heard about the land appropriation, I could not sleep for several nights. I was lying here, thinking and worrying about what I would do after losing the land.”

In this atmosphere of apprehension, villagers grouped together to discuss the rumor. At first people thought that their land was going to be taken for state projects, so they mostly discussed compensation. Later, they discovered that it was to be taken by private

5) This is a pseudonym. However, the main developer of this project is the Nam Cường group.

6) At that time the compensation was VND47 million per *sào*, around half the amount people received from mega projects later.

7) In addition to financial compensation, the province also allows farmers to retain 10 percent of the reclassified land, referred to as service land, for use or sale.

8) One *thước* equals 24 m².

companies and corporations. People discussed the state's compensation policies (Kim 2011) at length: the government would give back 10 percent of service land plus VND201,600 per square meter and financial compensation for lost income from crops.⁹ Compensation was also to be offered for job training services. Villagers received VND86 million (more than USD4,000 in 2008) per *sào* (360 m²) in compensation. They began comparing Lụa to their neighboring village of Ngòi,¹⁰ where for the same project VND97 million per *sào* was paid. Ngòi village was already a ward of Hà Đông town, while Lụa village, being part of a larger commune, was still a rural village commune in a peri-urban environment. The land values of urban and rural areas were thus considered different.

In the eyes of the state authorities, standard levels of compensation, based on location and land area, are calculated on the principle that farmers have only usage rights, not property rights, over land (Asia Foundation *et al.* 2014). However, Lụa villagers wanted a higher amount of compensation—not only because their land was adjacent to Ngòi village, but, as they pointed out, Ngòi's rice land was less valuable than the land that Lụa villagers were using to produce cash crops. The village is known as the “peach tree village” for its peach trees and flowers (*đào*), which generate high incomes (SGGP Special Report 2008), especially during the Tết season. This comparison of land value is common in other rural communities where farmers intensify some high-value crops, such as Van Giang (Kerkvliet 2014, 35).

Another bone of contention was that in Lụa village just 6.2 percent of land was offered as compensation in the form of service land (*đất dịch vụ*) instead of the 10 percent that was given elsewhere.¹¹ For reasons that remain unclear, the road construction was counted as urban infrastructure and its 3.8 percent was deducted from the promised 10 percent. Concrete offers to provide jobs as replacement for the loss of land remained vague. From March 2008 onward, many villagers gathered at different places in the village to discuss matters. They decided not to cede agricultural land to the project in return for compensation.

Like the predominant pattern of land protest in Vietnam, Lụa people started their

9) At that time the compensation for Agricultural Land Use Rights in the village of Phú Điền in 2007 was as follows (Nguyen Van Suu 2009). A total of VND171,000 could be obtained per square meter: agricultural land use rights, VND108,000; vegetables and other annual fruit on the land, VND35,000; compensation for changing jobs, VND25,000; reward for acting quickly, VND3,000.

10) This is a pseudonym.

11) According to Nguyen Van Suu (2009), the compensation increased as farmers felt that prior to the negotiations they could show that cash crops and perennial trees were already planted. The expression is *ăn đền bù* (eat the compensation). Suu gives the example of villagers who doubled their compensation by changing from vegetables and other annual fruit such as rice and morning glory (*rau muống*), to annual crops such as willows (*liễu*) and guava (*ổi*).

protest by collectively complaining to local authorities in the pattern of rightful resistance (*ibid.*, 26). Meetings were held in each hamlet, in which most representatives of households expressed their disagreement on land appropriation. Reports of these meetings were sent to the local government. In these events, the community was already divided. Most villagers wanted to retain the land so as to maintain their livelihood, while some agreed to leave but only in exchange for fair compensation. Local authorities, Communist Party members, and people from families benefiting from the preferential treatment policy¹²⁾ (*gia đình chính sách*)—who accepted the land appropriation—often remained loyal to state policies.

Besides holding official meetings and submitting petitions, villagers sometimes publicly reacted to sudden events relating to land appropriation. Whilst their actions were usually non-violent, on some occasions angry people crossed the threshold. For instance, on March 14, 2008, many people came to the rice fields to drive away district committee staff who were mapping the village's land area. Villagers even destroyed some machines belonging to the Nam Cường company that were being used to build the project manager's house. On March 17, 2008, a thousand villagers came to the People's Committee office after an announcement regarding land appropriation was made on the commune's public broadcast system. Deliberations took place between the local authorities and a delegation of three villagers who were assigned as representatives. The answers provided by the local authorities did not satisfy the villagers, so they kept returning to the offices to protest. Villagers accused local cadres of receiving money from the estate developing company, which was investing in the area, to sell their land. Some villagers even said local cadres had "sold people" (*bán đưng dân*) for the enterprise. There was widespread mistrust among the protesters about the involvement of local party cadres in the affair. Rumors that commune leaders had been promised better land—and offered gifts and even outright bribes—became the talk of the day. Protesters threw bricks, stones, and even feces at the houses of key leaders of the commune, such as the secretary of the Party, two vice chairmen, and the head of the land administration department. As the chairman was seriously ill at the time, one of the vice chairmen was believed to have had the most important role in the land-taking decision. Protesters burned incense and established a kind of altar table in front of his home's gate (this meant that in their eyes,

12) These are families that benefited from government policies. Families that contributed to the 1945 revolution and the several wars that Vietnam engaged in (martyrs and wounded soldiers as well as other contributors) receive preferential treatment from state policies (in the form of a monthly salary, gifts during special occasions, etc.). During the land appropriation, these families were the first to follow the land-taking policy of the local government given their status and relationship with the government.

he had died).

Behind rightful resistance methods to press their claims, such as sending petitions and questioning local cadres, Lua resisters understood that their protest could be successful only if they could prevent local cadres and opponents in the village from receiving compensation. It is interesting that in this situation, some tactics that protesters used and the atmosphere of protesting that villagers recalled are often depicted in Vietnamese peasant revolutions of the old days. Drums were used widely in this period of protest as a sign to call for participation of villagers in significant events. Sometimes the protesters organized drum beating to protest. A delegation of about a hundred people marched around the village with a big drum, then stopped at the house of one key leader and beat the drum constantly from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. From March to May 2008, almost every day, from morning till night, many villagers—especially elderly and disabled people—were mobilized to surround the office building in protest, to question and criticize local cadres. People criticized and scolded local cadres behind their backs but also to their faces, both inside and outside the meetings. With the exception of key leaders who attended the office daily, most of the personnel of the social organizations in the commune were unable to work for several months. If any social organization held a meeting to implement any activity higher-level authorities requested of them, villagers took over the meeting to focus on the land compensation question. Local government was paralyzed through the entire year of 2008. Whilst resisters did not break the law by removing and taking over the power of local government, their actions disturbed and caused difficulties for local authorities.

People were very interested in the details of the protests (*phong trào đấu tranh*) (even if they did not call them by that name). In the evening, groups met at some points of the village road or at villagers' houses. Each month, every hamlet had several meetings held by the head of the hamlet or by people themselves. Active protesters from other hamlets were able to participate in these meetings to get an update on the situation or raise their questions. On normal days, people continued to surround the People's Committee building. On days the commune had a meeting or received a visit from high-level authorities, villagers informed each other and called for the participation of the crowd. People used slogans such as "No taking land when people have not agreed," "Long live the Vietnamese Communist Party," and "Long live Ho Chi Minh." These are still the most popular mobilizational slogans used by the Vietnamese Communist Party and the state. People used these aspects of the state's rhetoric to show that they still believed in and followed the Party while claiming their rights.

The most significant event occurred when a high-ranking leader of Hà Tây Province came to work at the village on April 30, 2008. Thousands of Lua villagers surrounded

the office of the People's Committee to question the provincial authority. After being detained for over a day, the leader in question could leave the village only after promising that the project would commence if the majority of villagers agreed, and that jobs would be provided for people after their land was taken. The impetus of the villagers in land protests was so great that sometimes people actually felt that they could succeed in keeping their land.

After the local government had been questioned for some months, the protest extended to the provincial capital, Ha Dong, and even to Hanoi. Hundreds of villagers went several times to Hà Đông town and Hanoi to submit petitions. Every week, on the day the city received people's petitions, a group of villagers consisting of several dozen people went to question and argue about their affairs. On special occasions, when it was necessary to mobilize the crowd, the delegation would phone people at the village to come to town to join them. On June 11, 2008, hundreds of villagers went to the office of the Provincial Party in Hà Đông town to protest. As protesters clashed with police, five people were arrested. Two of them were later jailed for two years. From June 2008 to the end of 2009, the protest of Lụa villagers was described as "some days quiet, some days effervescent" in both the village and the city.

One of the main reasons Lụa villagers could keep the protest going for over a year was the situation of being "caught in between" local cadres (Pham 2004). In early 2009 a new chairman was sent to the village from Hà Đông town to replace the previous chairman, who had died due to cancer. With the more direct and stronger leadership from the district level, local government in the village was reinforced. All leaders and Party members at the village came to a consensus to give up land, even though some of them did not agree or sympathize with the villagers. Therefore, in the first half of 2009, local cadres were the first to give up their land and receive compensation. However, since villagers were still protesting, most of them did it discreetly or even in secret.

Meanwhile, the estate company also applied tactics to divide villagers and induce them to accept compensation. From October to December 2009 some strangers, posing as brokers, came to the village to buy service land despite villagers having not yet been given any such land as compensation, and the decision of the city on service land for local people having not yet been issued. Thus, people called this transaction of buying and selling service land "steam" (*dịch vụ hơi*). Later on, Lụa villagers thought that those strangers were being sent by the Nam Cường company to induce them to accept compensation. They first came to poor families, especially those whose offspring were involved in gambling and had debts. They paid a high price, ranging from VND500 million to 600 million for a portion of service land (about 18 m²). This large amount of money caused some villagers to give land, receive compensation, and sell their service land. As

the local government saw the change in a number of villagers, local authorities asked for permission from the city to implement the service land policy in the village. By the end of 2009, some villagers had sporadically opted to receive money. This caused tension in certain families because some wives did not want to receive money but their husbands, under pressure or due to advice, decided to do it. In some cases, the father did not want to accept money but his son went to receive it.

By the end of 2009, there was an announcement that the government would pay only during a one-week period, and if people did not present themselves the money would be transferred to the state's treasury, where it eventually could be claimed. This was not an exceptional event, because the same strategy was used in other villages around Hà Đông (e.g., in Đồng Mai commune). There were also suggestions that anyone who accepted compensation would receive the allocated service land in a good location. All these factors caused villagers to join a crowd to demand money from the hamlet's chief. The village collective protest ended. Many villagers recalled the situation as a "broken battle" (*vỡ trận*).

It apparently worked, because by 2010 only 36 households had not yet accepted money. These people, mostly women, continued their protest together with over 200 households in their neighboring village. However, the 36 protesting households were divided into two groups. One group consisted of 30 households in Lụa village who called themselves the "red T-shirt group" (*phie áo đỏ*). They reduced their demands to 10 percent service land (instead of the 6.2 percent that their co-villagers had accepted). Meanwhile, six other households joined with protesters in the neighboring village, named the "white T-shirt group" (*phie áo trắng*), and maintained their demand to not lose their land at all. As at the time of writing, these protesters are still sending petitions to different government offices, and visiting offices in Hanoi once a week. They have even established blogs on the Internet and call themselves the "Lụa land lost peasants." In addition, they are always prepared to fight with the local government whenever the ward organizes a coercive land takeover of one among those households. Their fights sometimes are recorded and posted on the Internet, shown as "social dramas" to outsiders.

A Divided Community

According to many interviewees, right from beginning, around 50 percent of villagers were very concerned about their livelihood if they lost their land. This group of people did not want their land to be taken away. About 25 percent of people wanted their land to be appropriated. These were mainly old people and people no longer practicing agri-

culture. Most of them wanted the compensation for savings, paying debts, or investing in non-farm work. The remaining 25 percent of people were unsure. Many of them were already engaged in trading or other non-agricultural activities. For them, it was not a matter of accepting land compensation or continuing to cultivate crops. Their interest in the compensation scheme was minimal. Some of them were farmers. They also wanted to keep the land but were not interested in protesting or any collective activity. From this group's point of view, they let local government and the majority in the village make whatever decision they wanted regarding the land. They kept quiet when most of the villagers expressed their uneasiness over the compensation scheme.

Villagers who had participated in the protest referred to what happened as a "struggle movement to preserve land" (*phong trào đấu tranh giữ đất*). Meanwhile, other villagers called it a "protesting faction." According to villagers who considered themselves in between, right after the land-taking decision was announced, the "protesting faction" (*phe đấu tranh*) was formed. It went against the local government faction (*phe chính quyền*), which comprised local authorities and people who supported the land appropriation. As the impetus of the first faction was stronger at the beginning, about 60 percent of households looked favorably on the protest. It is significant that this number included both villagers who participated directly in the protest activities and those who supported the protest but did not show up. Interview results also reveal that some villagers had no land to keep but also participated in the land protest. Several respondents believed that some of their co-villagers just responded to the land protest for their own aims, such as to show their discontent to the local cadres. In reality, only about 10 percent of households in the village were active protesters. They were enthusiastic about all activities of the movement. The 36 households that are still protesting belong to this number. Some of them were enthusiastic and referred to as "people prepared for the fight" in the first days. Some small enterprises in the village that were built on agricultural land that might have been cleared for the project also supported financing the protest.

The movement in each hamlet¹³⁾ was different. People in Quang Minh, Hoàng Văn Thụ, and Hòa Bình hamlets were more enthusiastic about the protest than people in Vĩnh Quang, Quyết Tâm, and Đoàn Kết hamlets. Villagers explained that the main reason for

13) Traditionally, Vietnamese villages were divided into subdivisions or hamlets (Kleinen 1999, 14). These were neighborhood organizations. Men aged over 18 had to join them to fulfill their obligation to the community as well as enjoy communal activities. In the old days, Lụa village had 20 hamlets. The (Sino-Vietnamese) names of the hamlets were taken from directions as seen within the village. Each hamlet had a head of hamlet. After the 1945 revolution the village was divided into 10 hamlets with new names that have revolutionary meanings.

this difference was that people in Quang Minh, Hoàng Văn Thụ, and Hòa Bình had intensified their cash crops long before. Those villagers' land was worth more to them in value and sources of livelihood than it would have been had the land been used mainly for rice crops. At the time of land appropriation, most of the peach tree area of the village was cultivated by those hamlets, while the other hamlets grew mainly rice, which produced less income than cash crops. Also, people in Vinh Quang, Quyết Tâm, and Đoàn Kết preferred to practice petty trade or other economic activities rather than engage in intensive cash crop farming. In the case of Vinh Quang hamlet, many households had already sold their use rights to other villagers or outsiders in order to obtain spending money or to build new houses. As a result, almost no reaction occurred in this hamlet. People in this hamlet were the first to receive compensation.

During the protests, women and old people were the most active participants. This was similar to other land disputes in Vietnam, given that women are the most concerned about their families' interests while men are more hesitant to confront the police or government (Nguyen Thi Thanh Binh 2010; Nguyễn Thị Tình 2013). Young people were not interested in land appropriation since they did not have to worry about their families' livelihood, and agriculture is no longer an occupational choice for many.

When recalling their participation in the protest, many villagers said that with the exception of the 10 percent households enthusiastic about the protest (including the 36 households that are still protesting), most of them just participated in meetings and big events at the village and several times went to town to submit petitions and protest. They were hesitant to protest in town. One reason was it took up time; the other was that some of them felt embarrassed to protest there.

"I felt embarrassed when sitting in the park in Hanoi to protest, as people around looked at us curiously. Someone even criticized us for making trouble." (Mrs. Giang, 50 years old, Quang Minh hamlet)

"Whenever people called each other and me to go to town, I just said 'Yes, yes'. But I just stood at my house's gate, waited for everyone to pass, and then went back into the house and went to work. Once, I went to Ha Dong with people, but I just stood far away. I felt hesitant to be a protester." (Mr. Hiền, 40 years old, Quang Minh hamlet)

However, many people did respond to the protest by contributing money for the delegation's lunch or helping families who had protesters in jail (on several occasions, each time about 100 or several hundred thousand đồng). Understanding that the movement aimed to represent the common interest, many households tried to contribute something toward it.

“I have two brothers and one sister all living in this hamlet. I myself and my two brothers no longer do agriculture. We are busy with business outside the village. My parents are retired cadres, so they could not join the protest [state officials are not allowed to go against the state and Party’s policies]. Only my eldest sister is staying at home to do agriculture. Therefore, she had to be the representative of the family to join the movement.” (Mr. Hải, 39 years old, Quang Minh hamlet)

Sometimes people decided to join the protest because they had empathy (*nể nang*) for other villagers. Someone commented that women in the village called each other to join the protest, like in other group events. This means that relatives or friends often called each other to join them. Thus, some women joined in the protest due to their respect for friends or relatives.

“Those who stood up often had relatives, friends enticing each other to become part of a faction. If I did not join, I felt sorry for that (*ngại*).” (Mrs. Hồng, 42 years old, Hòa Bình hamlet)

In fact, enthusiastic protesters were often sharp-tongued and critical. They tended to criticize and complain about those who did not go to meetings or submit petitions. In some hamlets, enthusiastic protesters even issued a resolution (*ngợi quyết*)¹⁴ of the hamlet to those villagers who would not join the protest or accept compensation, saying that they could no longer count on support when their families encountered difficulties due to funerals. That was the reason why many villagers, with the exception of cadre members’ families or people working for the government, tried to show their participation.

“When someone at the hamlet came back from the meeting or protest, passed my house, and saw me at home, she would say: How can you always stay at home while people go to the meeting? You cannot receive land that people claim back from the project. My husband also told me sometimes: ‘You should go, otherwise my ears will get hurt because of people complaining about our family’s absence’. We just followed the crowd.” (Mrs. Giang, 50 years old, Quang Minh hamlet)

During times of protest, villagers were divided and rifts developed in relationships between villagers and cadres as well as among villagers themselves. When attending weddings, funerals, or formal meetings, or socially in tea shops, people often argued with each other over land appropriation. As the protest faction gained the upper hand, anyone expressing their opinion by saying things such as “Land belongs to the state; people should take the money; it is better not doing agriculture anymore” would readily be criticized by others.

14) This is a revolutionary term as decisions of the Communist Party were often made through collective meetings and thus needed to be implemented.

In the village market or at wedding parties, people in the hamlet enthusiastic over land protest would publicly criticize people from other hamlets who had not joined the protest. Relatives of local cadres also criticized or even questioned them about corruption relating to their support for land taking, either openly or behind their backs. There was a story circulating in the village at that time: The chairman of the commune who signed the agreement for land appropriation attended a wedding party. When he had just sat down at a table, people at that table stood up and left, openly embarrassing him. The mother-in-law of a village authority cadre also suspected her son-in-law of accepting bribes from some companies involved in the taking of land. One active female protester even criticized and scolded her brother-in-law who was deputy secretary of the Commune Communist Party. This broke their relationship. One elderly man in Lua village commented:

“The protesters only scold local authorities, but the relationship among villagers was no longer like before. This can be referred to as ‘stories of society’, ‘quarrel outside society’, or ‘a difference of opinion’, but the consequence was that people in the village kept a distance from each other, became isolated from each other.” (Mr. Du, 78 years old)

Nowadays, some years after the protest, relationships among villagers have mostly returned to normal—but in some cases the rift has not healed. Especially for those 36 households who continue their protest, the relationship with local authorities is not harmonious. In spite of threatening these households with social exclusion, most of the other Lua villagers have accepted their right to protest. They still maintain social exchanges with them during weddings or funerals. However, the protesters themselves feel they are different, and they are frustrated. It is clear that most of the protesting households are living in old, small houses, as they have not accepted compensation. For some families, their economic situation has worsened, since they spend more time and money on attempting to claim their rights. The critical attitude of local authorities and some villagers to these protesters makes them hesitant to join communal activities, especially those organized by the local government. This feeling of alienation in the village community has pushed them to seek support and cooperation from outside. No one knows exactly who supports them, but their knowledge on law has improved. On their Internet blog, it is easy to see their meetings and cooperation with land protesters in other communities.

Conclusion

What happened in Lua village was a spontaneous response to the government's land appropriation policy. About half the villagers tried to hold the line by declaring they were determined to keep the land. Once a few people in the early days said they were "prepared for the fight," others joined the struggle. There was no leader. The protesters relied on their own resources. They did not seek assistance from intellectuals, lawyers, or others who knew the law better than they did. Their strength was in their numbers and their ability to argue and quarrel with local authorities and anyone who opposed them. They were strong enough to give pause to local cadres and some opponents. In the end, however, they could not prevail.

However, the protest dynamics were more complicated than outsiders can imagine. Their reason for protesting was not only rooted in the fear of losing land (and consequently their livelihood) but also a principle of fairness in compensation. The compensation in their village, the residents insisted, should be consistent with the amount paid to people in surrounding villages and with the real value of the land being taken from them. Second, it was not a clear or comprehensive policy. The project took over 90 percent of people's land. Some people have not lost one square meter of land, but they suffered from changes in the land situation in the area affected by the irrigation system. Meanwhile, they have no money from compensation, like other villagers, to improve their lives.

Although about half the Lua villagers shared these arguments and concerns, others did not or had other doubts about the protest efforts. Like most villages in Vietnam, Lua was not homogeneous on this land issue or other matters (Kleinen 1999). The government's land confiscation efforts brought about different reactions among residents, depending in large part on their occupations and social groups. Residents who depended on agriculture and petty trade were the most vulnerable in that process. However, farmers in hamlets with a tradition of agricultural intensification reacted more strongly than others—not only because they wanted to maintain their livelihood but also because of their stronger character. Therefore, it is significant to emphasize that it was not a protest by the Lua village community. Urbanization and land appropriation were not a tragedy for all villagers (Labbé 2015).

We can see many similarities in the pattern of the Lua village protest and recent land protests elsewhere in Vietnam. During the first two years, people just complained to local authorities and then sent petitions to higher levels. They claimed local officials abused their authority and were corrupt. They also claimed that local government and enterprises took land without consulting their views and without considering the impact on their livelihoods. Such actions, villagers contended, went against state regulations

governing land use reallocation. The protests in Lua were also largely peaceful. Like the predominant pattern of many contemporary land disputes in Vietnam, these reasons and grounds for collective protest in Lua village resonate with rightful resistance theory (Kerkvliet 2014). Yet, like other land protests in Vietnam in recent years, Lua villagers went further by rejecting the state's authority to unilaterally claim their cultivated land. They did it by showing their disagreement on land appropriation, demanding to retain the land to maintain their livelihood, or not allowing the taking of land when most people had not agreed. Their appeals to retain their farmland or get better compensation were based mostly on moral sentiments and unwritten norms about justice and fairness, and sometimes on the contribution and services that local villagers had provided to the country (Taylor 2014, 4).

Moreover, going beyond what we know about rightful resistance methods, in the case of Lua village we can see the application of traditional Vietnamese patterns of rural protest. The beating of the drum, a symbol of traditional community strength, was done by enthusiastic protesters to mobilize people and send an intimidating message to local authorities. Many villagers recalled what happened as a "movement," recalling the rhetoric of revolutionary mobilization campaigns. Other tactics and slogans reminiscent of village-based resistance during the revolutionary period, such as referring to the protests as a "struggle" or a "battle" or the issuing of village "resolutions," were applied in the protest. As factions formed in the village, several villagers even disrespectfully referred to local authorities as a "faction." Some protesters, especially in the 36 households who continue to oppose the government project, violently confronted the police. When villagers' emotions were running high, people dared to criticize, abuse, and even terrorize local cadres. Although protesters had no aim to take over the local authority, their demonstrations paralyzed local government for a short period. Together the findings from Lua village illustrate the internal dynamics of a village protest and the complexity of the politics of resistance in contemporary Vietnam.

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