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THE NEW
COUNTRYSIDE AND
THE POCKET OF
THE PEOPLE:
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ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
LOCAL DEVELOPMENT
AND SOCIAL
ASPIRATIONS IN
VIETNAM

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The New Countryside and the Pocket of the People: narratives of entrepreneurship, local development and social aspirations in Vietnam¹

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Abstract

Three decades after the economic reform that abandoned socialist central planning for a market economy, the Vietnamese state has been accelerating its modernising efforts. In 2009, a so-called New Countryside Programme was initiated to mobilise resources for developing a modern and ‘civilised’ countryside. While it brought together various existing development schemes, the programme’s logics and practices indicate a new direction in rural development ideology. Although the state continues to practice political control and moral guidance, there is a shift away from direct intervention to enabling local people and communities to be responsible for their development. This paper uses narratives constructed from long-term ethnographic fieldwork with a migrant, waste-trading community in northern Vietnam to examine how the scheme works out in practice. They suggest that the state actively capitalises on people’s mobility and entrepreneurial capacity through long-standing tools of socialist mobilisation. Local people are sceptical of the state’s agenda, but find in it a social space in which to locate their social aspirations and the meanings of their actions. There are, however, limits to their strategies and aspirations, and thus to the goals of the New Countryside Programme itself, limits that are rooted in the uncertainties and anxieties of Vietnam’s political economy today.

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Introduction

On the veranda of his towering road-side house, Thu was chopping up the last stems of lemon grass next to a pile of about fifty rabbits that had been pre-roasted in rice-straw fire, ready to be cooked into a variety of dishes for the wedding order they had received. He said to me affirmatively: “This commune is twenty years ahead of the neighbouring commune in terms of infrastructure!”³ We had been talking about his Green Spring commune and the high standard of its houses, schools, and roads.

“It is all because we have gone out to do all this kind of stuff and exposed ourselves to the outside world and know their ways of living. Now that people can make money, it is easy for the commune [government] to mobilise money from them for these roads and so on. You know, the countryside can only be new if people’s pockets are full [last sentence: *Túi dân có đầy thì nông thôn mới mới được*].”

His last sentence referred to the state programme of Building the New Countryside (*Chương trình Mục tiêu quốc gia xây dựng nông thôn mới*), which aims to improve local infrastructure, productive resources, and social services in rural Vietnam. His commune had done well under the scheme and became one of the few in the province to be first selected as examples of the new countryside. The result, however, has not been due to the programme’s interventions, but to the income generated from local people’s migrant livelihoods, notably in urban waste trading. This is rather ironic, as rural migrants have been predominantly constructed as hindrances to and residues of development.

In the mid-1980s, Vietnam shifted to a marketised economy through a series of pro-market reforms (*đổi mới*) after four decades of state socialism. As central planning and state subsidy were largely abolished, the reforms formally opened the way for privatisation, restructuring, and global integration, although the Communist party state remains in power. Since then, there has been growing industrialisation and urbanisation, processes that prompt large sections of the rural populations to migrate to urban and industrial centres for work in factories, urban services, and self-employment. Post-reform development for years had been focused around large urban centres at the cost of rural areas until recently, when perceived threats to social stability originating from the countryside have led the party-state to divert more attention to what is happening to rural economy and society. In the same ways that the urban renewal agenda is premised on a state-led vision of modernity and social order (Harms 2016), the New Countryside programme represents the state’s attempt to modernise the countryside while educating rural people to become certain kinds of citizens. While it promotes internal strength (*nội lực*) as the driving forces of development, much of what Green Spring Commune has achieved would not have taken place without the labour mobility of local people.

Underlying to Thu’s narrative of local development is a taken-for-granted fact: the level of investment in local infrastructure, productive ventures, and consumption has been largely enabled by local people’s long-term engagement in the urban waste trade. Waste-trading is a stigmatised form of migrant work on account of its association with garbage and dirt (Nguyen 2016), something Thu hints at with “doing all this stuff”. Despite the precarious conditions of urban waste-trading, local people have turned urban waste into a source of viable income for many and significant wealth accumulation for others (*ibid.*). This has allowed the commune administration to easily mobilise resources for its

³ All direct quotations are my translation from original transcriptions.

various projects, even before the New Countryside programme was started in 2009, which explains Thu's statement that "the countryside can only be new if people's pockets are full". Thu and his wife, Ngoan, both in their mid-thirties, had been for years operating an urban waste depot before returning three years ago, investing their savings in a mid-sized rabbit farm. They are not the only ones – in contrast to most other local people, who stay in the urban waste trade well into their 60s or 70s, there is now a small trend of younger people returning for similar productive ventures.

This paper tells the story of people like Thu and Ngoan, who had made it out in the city as waste traders, now returning to take advantage of the opportunities created by the continuing departure of their fellow villagers. These people, often with young families, seek to build a life with aspirations that transcend the rural-urban distinction and the valuation of the rural as inherently the backwater of development, all the while maintaining their translocal outlook. Elsewhere, I have shown that local people have long engaged in a process of translocal householding that spans the city and the country, adjusting their family life to shifting urban livelihood opportunities in the market economy (Nguyen 2014). This paper places locally based productive ventures by returning waste traders in the same process, showing that they are coupled with class-based aspirations framed by a state-sponsored notion of human development. As with urban waste-trading, however, there are limits to such ventures, and thus to their social aspirations, due to the volatility of market conditions and the uncertainty of the urban waste trade.

The fieldwork for this paper was carried out in Hanoi, the capital city, and in Spring District, a rural district in the Red River Delta about 140km from Hanoi, from August 2011 to July 2012. In 2015, I conducted two months of follow-up research during which I also visited migrant households from the district in Ho Chi Minh City. The study employed a mixed methods approach with qualitative emphasis. A household survey was conducted among 300 households in Spring District to gain an understanding of the local patterns of mobility and migrant livelihoods. During the fieldwork, I stayed with two host families in the district and was able to connect with their migrant family members, relatives, and neighbours in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The opportunity to observe the interactions and behaviour of the same people in different social spaces of the city and the country allowed me to identify important translocal dynamics of social performativity and connectivity that are central to local life.

The paper is structured around three narratives: 1) Green Spring Commune and how the urban waste trade has shaped its development; 2) Thu and his wife, former waste traders who took up commercial livestock farming; and 3) another couple who operates an intensive farm while forming a cooperative of mechanised farming. Their productive undertakings and the uncertainties that they are confronted with suggest the self-enterprising nature of local development and how mobility has become entrenched in local livelihoods. I shall place these narratives in the context of the Vietnamese state's shifting rural development ideologies. I show that particular dynamics of place making in the local life worlds both play into and disparage state development agendas, driving local development in unexpected ways, as scholars have written about other Southeast Asian contexts (Rigg and Vandergeest 2012).

The New Countryside: a shifting approach to local development

The national programme of ‘Building the New Countryside’ was initiated in 2009, modelled after the Chinese programme of The New Socialist Countryside. In China, the programme was started in 2006⁴ to improve the status quo of ‘rural society, agriculture, and the peasantry’, a trio of problem areas that had been invoking anxiety among the political and social elite about a looming crisis resulting from their degeneration (Jacka 2013). Early analysis of the Chinese programme suggests that while programme goals might be similar in both countries, the operative logics and local practices are different. The Chinese programme seems to feature stronger state coordination and provision of resources alongside greater coerciveness in enforcing certain measures such as concentrated housing, at times reminiscent of the socialist villagisation in Tanzania in the 1970s (Ahlers and Schubert 2009; Robin 2009; Long et al. 2010; Schneider 2014). Although the Vietnam programme is proclaimed by the state as a more concerted effort than the previously narrowly defined projects, it relies on local mobilisation of resources and the state assumes a largely enabling role. According to the decision by the prime minister initiating this programme, its goal is to modernise the countryside through comprehensive measures to develop infrastructure, social services, and cultural practices:

“To build a new countryside with a gradually modernised socio-economic infrastructure, appropriate economic and productive structure; linking agriculture with rapidly developing industries and services; linking rural development to planned urbanisation, maintaining a rural society that is democratic, stable, and rich in the nation’s cultural identity; protecting the environment, maintaining security and social order; steadily improving the people’s material and spiritual life under socialist orientation.”⁵

There is a set of 19 major criteria for assessment, such as proper local planning, built-road coverage, electricity and water supply, sufficient schools, cultural and postal facilities, housing standards, ratio of poor households, ratio of cultured villages, rate of secondary school graduation or of people buying health insurance. A rural commune is rated as a New Countryside commune if it fulfils at least 14 criteria, as Green Spring does. Fulfilling these criteria requires not only local people’s contributions of money and labour, but also the upholding of moral attitudes such as self-reliance and awareness of law and order. Accordingly, one should lead morally acceptable lives and work hard to earn a good income, while preparing for future risks through appropriate forms of insurance.

Rather than just joining disparate programmes, the New Countryside programme signals a new direction in the development agenda of the Vietnamese party state. Until the 1990s, rural development had been alternately focused on collectivisation, state-led modernisation and intensification of agriculture. The socialist state had been the main investor and supporter of these agendas; rural populations were supposed to be the recipients and beneficiaries of state programmes and services – the state were responsible for their development. Following *đổi mới*, the massive migration of rural people in search of urban and industrial livelihoods has been accompanied by a shift in rural development ideologies. The state no longer directs and provides resources for centrally planned

⁴ Detailed information available online at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/20/content_11436582.htm, accessed on 24 August 2016

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

goals, but merely supports the fulfilment of responsibilities by local people and communities by unleashing their entrepreneurial potentials. Whereas local participation was encouraged in the implementation of the state development programmes before, the overriding message of the New Countryside programme is that local communities and people should own and thus be responsible for their development.

That said, the programme indicates that, like the Chinese state, the Vietnamese state continues to be the mobilising state that it has always been throughout, a state adept at political communication (Bakken 2000; Malarney 2007). If emulative campaigns (*phong trào thi đua*) among localities had long been in the party-state's toolkits for promoting production (MacLean 2013), they are now taken to task with responsabilising people and communities for their development. 'Internal strength' (*nội lực*) and 'socialisation' (*xã hội hóa* – in the sense of being under the responsibility of the whole society) are the main keywords for local development and welfare provision (Nguyen n.d.). The idea is that local communities should strive to develop themselves through mobilising local resources, and their efforts will be publicly recognised by the state. Instead of relying on the allocated resources and the directions from the state, localities are supposed to compete for the recognition of their capacity for development. While the funding for the main infrastructure items partly comes from the provincial government, depending on the resources of the province, a large part is mobilised from local people, organisations, and businesses. The central government has funds to reward the high achievers with funds to build particular items of infrastructure on their development plans. The introduction of financial rewards and grants to high-performers adds a new dimension to the socialist technique of using exemplary individuals and communities to mobilise labour and resources.

Such an approach, I argue, fit seamlessly with a post-reform governing approach that combines modernisation goals with social stability, self-reliance with loyalty to the party. These goals are undergirded by neo-liberal notions of the self-made individual, the self-enterprising household and the self-developing community, which however operate under the moral and political guidance of the party state (Zhang and Ong 2008; Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012). Local people like Thu are aware of the underlying dynamics of such a programme, as expressed in his ironic rendering of the New Countryside, an irony that Hans Steinmüller (2011) also identifies in local people's perception of the similar Chinese programme. Recent media reports about the programme suggest that many localities have become heavily indebted in the process. While critiques are being voiced about local people being unable to meet the mobilisation targets, local funds being embezzled and misused, local states being overstrained, the programme remains evaluated as a suitable development pathway for the countryside.⁶ As we shall see in Green Spring, the programme is not merely a "face project" of the government (ibid.: 25), for whom "the will to improve", to use Tania Li's formulation (2007) – disguises an anxious intent to retain power. It is also a 'value project' of the local people, in the words of David Graeber (2001: 17). Through local processes, it comes to constitute a social space for them to locate the meanings of their actions, even though these actions might not be what are expected of them by the party state. What they do and mean sometimes incidentally becomes the very irony they identify in these attempted exercises of power by the state.

⁶ See various titles at <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/tieudiem/con-no-nong-thon-moi-va-nhung-gia-tri-bi-bat-nhot-340545.html> (The debtors of the New Countryside and values that are taken hostage); <http://hanoimoi.com.vn/Tin-tuc/Kinh-te/851085/xay-dung-nong-thon-moi-hon-40-so-xa-chim-trong-no> (Building the new countryside: 40 percent of the communes drowned in debts); <http://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/doithoai/chuong-trinh-nong-thon-moi-bo-mat-thay-doi-nhung-no-15-ngan-ty-dong-340582.html> (Building the New Countryside: a new face by indebted with 15,000 billion dong), accessed on 30 November 2016.

Green Spring Commune: building the new countryside from urban waste

Green Spring, with more than 7000 people in eighteen hamlets, is one of the nineteen communes of Spring District, a district in the Red River Delta with about 180,000 people. Half a century ago, it was only a village and the district used to be a commune.⁷ In 2013, Green Spring was rated as a new-countryside commune. According to a commune report, more than 70 per cent of its population have bought voluntary health insurance, all the local houses meet the national standards, the annual per-capita income is high above the national average, everyone is employed, and only three per cent of the households are classified as poor. Also, the neighbourhoods are ‘safe and cultured’, meaning that families are ‘happy, neighbourhoods are harmonious’, and there are neither many crimes nor any ‘social evils’ (such as gambling or drug addiction). Farming land has been consolidated quickly, making large-scale farming easier, enabling people to invest in mechanisation and contract farming for a private company (which rents hundreds of hectares in the whole province and elsewhere to farm commercial rice seeds). Above all, in comparison to its surrounding communes, Green Spring has high-quality inter-village roads, kindergarten and school facilities, village culture houses, and no temporary houses – many of the houses in the commune are impressive villas. Yet, much of this superior infrastructure had been in place well before the New Countryside programme was initiated in 2009, largely thanks to the income from the urban waste trade.

Leaders in the commune administration like to showcase its latest public building, an impressive culture house that had been built with the award money the commune received when winning the new-countryside title in the first run. They liked to tell visitors about how smooth the process of land consolidation had been because of the cooperative spirit of local people ‘who do not nit-pick too much over little land’, and taking them to visit production models. If one stays a bit longer and frequents their offices for a while, they would mention, in a somewhat lowered voice, that local people have this particular occupation of trading waste (*buôn đồng nát*), as if it were some interesting side fact. One official said to me: “Green Spring people actually have no profession [*chẳng có nghề nông gì cả*] and that’s why they had to take up waste trading.” The official was speaking from the view of the state, for whom rural development must, to some extent, be based on a certain kind of traditional skills and place-based credentials – there is a nationwide strategy in developing handicraft villages as a way of creating local employment. Yet, in Green Spring, everyone, including the commune official above, is well aware of how vital urban waste is for local livelihoods.

In northern cities nowadays, one easily encounters waste traders from Spring District. A director of the Hanoi Sanitation Company under the colonial government came from Green Spring village then, and his patronage led to the recruitment of his fellow villagers into the company (DiGregorio 1994). Their family members came along, picking rags on the municipal dumps and later establishing themselves a niche in the waste trade. Their operations persisted throughout the following central planning period under state socialism, capitalising on material shortage then, albeit on a small scale. Since *đổi mới*, the previously small clusters of waste traders from the village have grown into large networks including people from other places in the delta. The urban waste trade now employs

⁷ In the Vietnamese administrative system, the commune is the lowest formal administrative unit in a hierarchy comprising the national, provincial, district, and commune levels. A commune is further divided into villages or hamlets whose governance structure is semi-formal, with the village/hamlet leaders working on a primarily voluntary basis.

thousands of households who operate waste depots and waste transport vehicles, tens of thousands of itinerant traders, the majority of whom are rural migrants (Mitchell 2008, 2009; Nguyen 2016). Spring District, however, has the strongest networks of transporters, waste depot operators, and itinerant waste traders.

Spring District people primarily work as itinerant junk traders or operate urban waste depots. If itinerant junk trading is individual work that requires little investment, operating a waste depot is dependent on the capacity to raise funds, find profitable locations, and cultivate diverse relationships to the waste economy, ultimately a household venture. As people in the other communes of Spring District continue to practice a mixture of itinerant trading, agriculture production, and other forms of migrant labour, the household economy of Green Spring has been taken over by depot operation, largely replacing agriculture. According to the household survey, more than 40 per cent of Green Spring households are operating urban waste depots and/or own a waste transport vehicle – a much larger proportion than in their neighbouring commune of Red Spring, where more people work as itinerant junk traders. In Green Spring, it is common to find extended families in which the households of all siblings are operating a waste depot in the cities. As soon as a couple is married, the family would seek to set one up for them, making sure that the young couple received pre-marital training in a family depot for some time.

Despite the fluctuations in the global waste market and the precariousness of migrant waste work, the material gain it has generated in the commune has been remarkable. Rows of newly built villas are common sights in the commune, many of which are left vacant all year round, until the owners come back from the cities for the New Year holiday or family events. Hundreds of households own mini-trucks that cost 15–20,000€ It is not only the infrastructure and productive assets that make Green Spring stand out in comparison to other rural communes in the Red River Delta. Lifestyle and consumption here are visibly urbanised. Thu and Ngoan may look shabby in their work clothes on the farm, but they own a three-story house, with individual rooms, modern kitchen and bathroom, running hot water, and wooden furniture, including a set of wooden armchairs worth more than 1000€ When the couple is on its motorbike, in their better clothes, with their son sitting in the middle, they look not much different from urban middle-class couples on the streets of Hanoi. In our conversations, people mentioned going on a trip to the beach or regional scenic sights, showing photos of the whole family in bathing suits or posing in front of these sights. As Thu, they like to talk about how their experiences with the outside world have changed their way of thinking. One informant said to me that people in her commune are the first in the region to embrace cremation after the province set up a crematory. According to her, this indicates their “adoption of civilised practices” out of an openness that results from years of “being exposed to the ways of the civilised world”, as Thu also said once, adding that one cannot stick to the old ways forever.

This narrative of local development contrasts with stories from people in the neighbouring communes about Green Spring, stories that construct waste traders as somewhat immoral – the exposure to waste is generally seen as bodily and morally polluting. As much as the ‘village outsiders’ are impressed with the wealth accumulated through Green Spring people’s extensive waste depot operations, the counter-narrative is that Green Spring people are ill-educated; their overzealous pursuit of money has come at the cost of degrading themselves and neglecting their children. Spoiled by money, so the infamy, Green Spring children not only perform badly in school, but also take up a whole range of ‘social evils’ such as drug abuse, internet game addiction, and gang fighting. Some

informants in the neighbouring commune of Red Spring could go on tirades about the aggressiveness of youngsters in Green Spring. In their description, the village paths there are roamed by drug addicts and gangsters who undeservingly live in villas that their parents had built from money tainted by the stigma of waste. This view of Green Spring is also shared by officials and educators, who take the lower number of children entering higher secondary schools and colleges as an indication of its severe social problems. “They make a lot of money, yes, but a whole generation is lost!” exclaimed the headmaster of a local school, who believed that the development of Green Spring is ‘*rỗng*’ (empty), because there are so few people with academic achievements.

After long stays in both Green Spring and Red Spring, I found that Green Spring’s social problems were exaggerated. While there might be less young adults going on to higher education and incidents of drug addiction are not uncommon, it is difficult to conclude that its young people are more ‘spoiled’ than elsewhere. Drug use is not necessarily a bigger problem here than in other places, while young people in Green Spring commune often leave school early to join their parents in the urban waste depot to learn the trade and become able to set up for themselves at an early age. Not unlike the way Paul Willis speaks of young working-class men ‘learning to labour’, or socialised into working-class mentality and values (1977), many young people in Green Spring are socialised into learning to trade waste. This aptitude clashes with the idea that the ultimate goal of a person ought to be higher education, a dominant view of personhood that the Vietnamese state endorses, which reaches back into the Confucian tradition of valuing the literati over other social categories.

In Green Spring nowadays, however, it is common that the very young parents who had opted for waste trading at a young age now desire for their children to obtain higher education, despite the declining value of the college degree. It is partly because of this desire, partly because the stigma of waste haunts as long as they remain in the trade that Thu and Ngoan and some others decide to shift from urban waste trading to agricultural production. Theirs, however, is not a simple return to farming, but a reinvention of the entrepreneurship they had exercised in the urban waste trade and a revaluation of rural spaces vis-à-vis the marginalisation they had experienced in the city. Although their household strategies and aspirations fit into the narratives of the New Countryside to a certain extent, they are entrenched with uncertainties and limitations while being hardly viable for many others.

Story of Thu and Ngoan: the poetry of rabbit meat

A fearless and savvy man, Thu is the husband of Ngoan, a strong, hard-working and quiet woman. The couple has one son aged five and two daughters aged eleven and thirteen. Both had worked as itinerant junk traders before they started a waste depot in Nam Dinh city and operated it for eight years until they decided to return three years ago. Their three children had been living with Ngoan’s mother in the house they built on the land that they were able to buy at auction when the commune decided to convert the farmland on either side of the main road leading to the commune centre into residential land. Although the children had always joined their parents in the city during the summer holidays, the grandmother had felt overstrained by the tasks of caring for their youngest son, then only two years old, and the two girls, who were becoming ‘impossible to manage’ in the absence of their parents.

Ngoan and Thu often stressed that they had reunited the family in one place for the sake of their children. Since their parents came back, the teenage girls became less rowdy and seemed to do better in school, according to their grandmother: “the girls are very afraid of their father and are now very

well-behaved and well-disciplined, unlike when they were living with me.” Since they returned, Thu said, he no longer had to watch out for the right hour to leave (a wrong hour could bring misfortune). On the monthly occasions he drove between their home and their urban depot before, he had often feared that he would have an accident on the chaotic highway so that his children would become defenceless without him (*bơ vơ*). Yet, their decision to return was also related to other issues underlying their existence in the city. “Gosh, how they look down on us! With visible contempt,” Ngoan said, “they consider us as nothing, calling us *mày* [derogatory term for ‘you’], this bitch or that bitch. They would never say “Hi sister or niece, please come in; I’d like to sell you something.” To which Thu added: “Well, this occupation is the lowest in society. But we had to consider it part of the deal, and brace the battle (*cố mà chiến đấu*).” Yet, sometimes he had wondered if it made sense to continue: “One has only one life to live – why would one want to do this forever, being away from children and family, living in the dark corners of the city.”

They used the savings that were left after building their house to invest in a rabbit farm on their former residential land further away from the commune centre. It was the first time that they raised rabbits and it took initial losses (the rabbits kept dying in the first year) to learn about their habits, diseases, and growth features. As rabbit meat had become a favoured delicacy, they started supplying live rabbits and meat to local weddings or anniversaries or specialty restaurants in the district town. My field notes have an entry titled ‘The poetry of rabbit meat’. I had come back from an interview one afternoon and saw the whole family sitting together on the veranda preparing the meat to cook for a large order (my host family lived next door). The teenage girls were chipping away happily as they worked filling up the huge pot with thin slices of meat and spices; the parents looking obviously pleased with the order, joking around with each other. The specialty dishes they offered to weddings and anniversaries such as herb-roasted rabbit meat fetched about 8€/per plate for six – if the wedding had about 100 tables, an order could turn around a significant amount. During the wedding months, the whole family was busy and the teenage girls were recruited whole afternoons for the work – Thu’s mother also helped with the slaughter and pre-roasting. In the low season, they catered more to restaurants further away or to death anniversaries.

On average, their monthly turnover is more than 30 million VND (about 1,300€). The processed meat on offer is neatly packaged in white foam boxes on which there is a red business card with a drawing of a fat rabbit together with their contacts, and a line stating that their rabbits are of New Zealand descent, a rare kind with gemstone-like eyes. The couple was thinking about setting up a restaurant serving their specialty dishes, taking advantage of their road-side location. All in all, their operation of the farm-food business displayed brimming confidence when I last visited. The ways in which the couple conducted their social and business life in the village indicated sovereignty over their social environment (something that their poorer neighbour Ms Mai saw as arrogance).

While Ngoan contrasted their life favourably with the time they had been in the city, she once told me that rabbit keeping was labour-intensive and they had to work even harder now than in the urban waste depot, with which they in fact could make better money. Asked if they would ever resume urban waste trading, she said if her eldest daughter made it into the university in some years, they would surely accompany her and set up a waste depot in Hanoi. She did not see any major obstacle to that plan:

“We have a profession [*nghê*, she means waste trading] – we know the ins and outs of it. It is not so difficult for us to find a place and make a living with it. The most important thing for us is to accompany the children, that is, if they get into the University. Nowadays, the children get to learn about things very early. Without us around them, it is very risky. They would take up bad things very quickly.”

Both Thu and Ngoan had a lower secondary education until Grade 8 before they went into the waste trade in the mid-1990s, then as itinerant traders – they had left for the city with a single goal: to make enough money to set up a family. The aspirations that they were having for their children indicated changes not only to their economic conditions, but also, I argue, a classed sense of self that referenced both the state-sponsored model of personhood centred on modern human capitals and the cultural value of formal learning. Interestingly, the fall-back position of their dream was none other than the recourse to urban waste, something that state officials would dismiss as a sort of non-profession not fitting the ideal of employment in the new economy, something people do because they possess no skills. Yet, for Green Spring people, like Thu and Ngoan, waste work is not a contingent occupation – it has become a profession that requires a depth of knowledge and skills that they could deploy when necessary. This notwithstanding, the profession is considered only as a means to the education that aims precisely to liberate their children from an association with waste. The pitfalls of this aspiration are manifold: to make it to the university alone is not easy, but even if their children do, the likelihood of finding a ‘white-collar’ job is becoming smaller – the number of unemployed university graduates is rising fast. Some adult children of waste traders I met have opened street-side restaurants or taken up factory employment after college, occupations that do not require the long years of higher education. Yet, that possibility does not seem to render such aspirations less valid for many.

Thu and Ngoan’s decision to go into rabbit farming was part of a micro-trend of former waste traders returning to focus on specialty livestock farming, hoping to tap into the growing demand for various kinds of specialty meat. In the district, these former waste traders were investing in farming crocodiles, hedgehogs, quails, snakes, and the like. The idea of creating or participating in niche markets for certain kinds of specialty products in order to gain a large profit margin is attractive, especially to younger people. Their hope is to retain a comparable level of income to what they make in the urban waste trade while living in the countryside. The initial investment is often quite significant, so it would not be possible without the savings from urban waste work. Yet, Thu and Ngoan had been lucky so far that the local preference for rabbit meat had not waned, as is often the case with new specialties. Others have been less successful: the prices of hedgehogs and crocodile meat, for instance, went down significantly sometime after they were introduced, incurring significant losses for many. People have to find out themselves about the technical requirements of keeping new livestock, while marketing largely takes place through personal networks. Meanwhile, the market price for certain products is distorted by temporary surges in demand created by Chinese traders who buy in large quantities at a certain time. It thus remains to be seen whether Thu and Ngoan will continue to do as well with their rabbits.

Story of Xuân and Đại: love of the land

“If you love the land, it will love you back!” Xuân said when showing me around her ten acre farm on the edge of the commune that included a fish pond, grass land, orchids, and rows of sheds where they kept cattle, pigs, poultry, and dogs for sale. They had rented the land from the commune administration on a long-term contract – few people had wanted to rent it because of its remote location, about several kilometres away from the residential area, making it difficult to supervise. The couple practically lived on the farm, going back to their house in the village only on the weekend or whenever necessary, as their two sons, aged 6 and 11, lived with the paternal grandparents. I first met Xuân and Đại in 2012. In their mid-thirties, they both were extremely hard-working – their faces and hands dark and wizened from farm work. Đại had an instinctive attachment to land and believed in farming as the way forward for the countryside to develop: “If everyone works in the city, who plants the rice for us to eat?” He kept plotting to rent more farmland without letting his wife know, which enraged her and created much tension between the two. Xuân spoke about this with open frustration, but she herself seemed also affected by her husband’s passion for land and farming.

Although Xuân appeared to be the dominant one, talking most of the time and ordering Đại around, it was him who made the decision to return to farming in 2007 after several years of operating a waste depot in Hai Phong city. At the time, Xuân did not take such a great liking to the land – it was only her husband who had always dreamt of coming back. In the mid-1990s, she had followed her mother to work as an itinerant junk trader in Hanoi and after getting married, the couple had set up a waste depot together. Like many people of her generation, she had actually never had to do farm work, as the economy of her parents’ household had long been focused on urban waste trading. They had been making good money with their waste depot in Hai Phong, and she had wanted to continue until they had saved up a substantial amount. But Đại had been talking incessantly of returning – Xuân said he had this “strange” attachment to land and to the homeland; he craved working on the land, always thinking up plans of going back and setting up a flower farm, an orchid, a cattle farm. Every day, he had commented how great it would be to be able to live in the home village and work the land. “In the end, I gave in. What can one do against such a passion?”

In the beginning, things were not as romantic as Đại had imagined them to be when he was working at their urban depot – weighing, sorting, and packing up recyclable waste every day. With their savings, they were able to buy the farmland at an auction and purchase initial inputs, but everything had to be learnt anew. The idea of the flower farm was not easy to realise because there was not much of a market for flowers locally, so they settled first on livestock. Lacking market information, they had sold the first herd of cattle at a low price when the prices shot up significantly. Without experience, they had not known that the goats they tried keeping would wander around and somehow often end up on the roof of the neighbours’ houses. They gave up after spending too much time gathering the active animals. Then there were problems with diseases that they could not solve. They felt defeated and thought about giving up; at some point in 2010, they almost sold the farm to someone to return to the waste trade. Xuân said: “Then we stood on the dike looking down on the farm, looking at the green bushes of bananas bearing fruits and the fertile pond, and we could not bring ourselves to do it. We had worked so much on the land, and it became difficult to leave it.” She added that although the income was not as good as waste trading, what they gained was the proximity to their children –

should they leave, it would be difficult to bring them along while the grandparents could not manage them now that they were growing older.

Over time, however, things stabilised and regular income trickled in from the pigs, the cows, and the fish as well as the ornamental trees and fruit trees of all sorts that they had planted. During one of my visits to the farm, they sold 400kg of chicken at 80,000 VND per kilogram, which they had kept for more than three months. The fish fetched them 40–50 million a half year, and the other animals up to a hundred million a year. Their annual income from the farm amounted then to 250–300 million VND, more than 10,000€ that is, unless they ran into major problems with animal diseases or price fluctuations. Their farm was prided on by the local government as a productive example and the commune administration often sent visitors to learn from their farm as a model of agricultural production in the New Countryside.

The other part of their story is connected to three other couples, their relatives and village friends, who had also left urban waste. In the year when they were thinking about quitting the farm, these other couples came back and proposed to pool together money for purchasing a tractor and a harvester to work the land that had been left uncultivated by fellow villagers who were working in the urban waste trade, temporarily abandoning rice farming altogether. Per-capital farmland in the commune, as elsewhere in the Red River Delta, is about 360 square metres (one *sào*), and the land is not tradable by law. What these couples did was to borrow the land from the migrating households, who were happy not to have to pay the maintenance fees. Each couple was thus able to piece together about one hectare to farm, which was made easier with the land consolidation under the New Countryside programme⁸. The machines made it possible to farm on this scale, but required a different method of preparing the field: broadcasting (*gieo sạ*) rather than transplanting as before.

In addition to farming their own land, they also offered the service of their machines to others who also did large-scale farming, but were not yet able to purchase machines. The price for harvesting one acre is about 2,000,000 VND, which took a machine operated by three people two hours to finish. The shared venture is similar to that of a small cooperative for which there was detailed and transparent accounting, with clear rules about equal contribution of labour and benefit sharing. For their own harvest, they had to hire day labourers coming from the neighbouring province of Thai Binh. When I visited the commune again in 2015, the group together had three harvesters; the couples operated two of the machines themselves and hired four people to work on the remaining one. By then, there were more households doing large-scale farming, and more people were buying machines. Xuân mentioned that two households, which had been using their machinery service to farm 15 acres jointly purchased a harvester that year, depriving them of a significant order. The increased competition had prompted them to look beyond their district for customers.

In 2015, these couples seemed more settled in their productive ventures. Each ten acres of paddy they farmed fetched 16–17 tons of rice per crop (two crops a year). The turnover for each of these households from farming alone was about 6,000–9,000€ per year and the income generated from their machines ranged up to 10,000€ per year. Once I asked them if the combined income from farming and machine hire was comparable to that from operating an urban waste depot, the answer was that waste trading could be much more profitable. If they had good connections to businesses and factories, they

⁸ The consolidation involves rezoning of the fields, building intra-field roads, taking out a small proportion of farmland for public works, industrial development and residential land. Among others, this puts the scattered plots of a household together.

could make up to a billion VND (more than 40,000€) a year. Yet, none of them had the intention of returning to the urban waste trade. Dương, Đại's sister, a 34-year-old woman with two children, said:

“At home we now make less money, but the air is better and life is lot more relaxing. We are also more sovereign [*tự chủ*] over what we do, not having to worry about finding a long-term rental place in the city or dealing with the uncertainties [*bấp bênh*] of the waste trade. Then we can be with the children and have time to educate them, which is much more difficult to do when operating an urban waste depot.”

As the head of the hamlet's Youth Union, Dương had received an award from the province for being a productive example for rural female youth who also maintained a harmonious family with children performing well in school. She was, in the language of emulative campaigns, ‘a representative face of the New Countryside.’

Unlike in the city, where they keep a low profile to trade waste, the sovereignty over the social space of their home village allows them to pursue the consumption and lifestyles practiced by the urban middle class and reinvent their rural identity. During my last visit, Xuân and Đại were building their house, a dream house that fit his attachment to the land well, built in the traditional style with a tiled roof, open plan and wooden pillars, yet with all the modern amenities, built-in toilet and kitchen. Xuân proudly showed me around the construction site, explaining what they were going to do with the new house, pointing to where the children and their friends could sit and play, where they were planning to display a set of antique wooden furniture (*sập gụ, tủ chè*), in the style favoured in the past by wealthy rural people, yet with an en-suite bathroom. She mentioned that her children had felt embarrassed living in a tiny house, and they felt that it was the right time to build a house, although it was only for the children to occupy most of the time, as they would continue to spend their days on the farm. Her sons were doing well in school, Xuân said, adding that they would do anything to support their education, as they would be able to advance. “We have lacked grey matter [*chất xám* – she was referring to education] in our life,” she said, “and our children should try to gain some of it and make it out to be better than their parents.”

During a joint meal, Xuân and Dương told me about their recent trip to the Bái Đính pagoda, a resort-pagoda complex in the neighbouring province. They had hired a bus together with twenty other people from the village to visit the pagoda; they said these sight-seeing tours had become normal for them. As Dương's mother said they had to go to the pagodas to pray for the smooth operation of their business, Dương turned to me and said: “Actually, now that we are still young and in good health and are able to enjoy it, we need to travel to know about places [*biết đó biết đây*]. Otherwise, we'll not be able to do anything when we get older and weaker.” It struck me then how middle-class their aspirations were: higher education, leisure, and consuming modern technologies – aspirations that a generation ago were still beyond reach, and not normally associated with Green Spring people, who were said to let the pursuit of money ruin their lives. Yet, such articulations must be understood in relation to the experiences they had had as waste traders, experiences of being dirty outsiders who upset urban order and civility through their occupation with waste, something that earns them money but not the respect of urban people.

Value, Entrepreneurship and Local Development

Constructing the countryside as a counter-space to the dislocations of migrant lives, some people in Spring District have turned their waste-generated earnings and attachment to the land into thriving agricultural enterprises in the home place. Through such meanings and actions, they have set in motion a revaluation of the countryside, which has often been viewed as the harbinger of backwardness and underdevelopment. The state might celebrate this as a success of the New Countryside programme, but such a revaluation is first of all the outcome of people's disenchantment with migrant lives in the cities, where they remain discriminated against socially and institutionally. Whatever is proclaimed about internal strengths, their experiences with and earnings from urban waste trading are instrumental for their local productive ventures and their contribution to local development. In the meantime, this small group of people have already amassed the opportunities opened up by the absence of the land owners and the recent land consolidation. Others wanting to do the same will find it much more difficult to acquire sufficient land for a profitable farm. Furthermore, prices of agricultural products are no less fluctuating than those of the waste they had traded in the city – and over these they have little control. As such, their productive ventures, prided on by the local government as models of how a new countryside should turn out, might – over the long term – be curtailed by limited resources and uncertain market outcomes.

In *The Will to Improve*, Tania Li (2007) suggests that the expressed intention of the state and other actors to improve lives masks the structural inequalities that these actors partake in creating through institutional practices and the construction of peasants as the backward Other (see also High 2014). The Green Spring rural entrepreneurs' actions defy the categorisation of peasants as passive actors waiting to be developed by external powers – they have taken advantage of available opportunities to proactively improve their lives and position themselves vis-à-vis the state agenda. But there are limits to what they can do, given the structures of opportunities they find themselves in, structures that are immersed in uncertain market conditions, institutional obstacles, and social exclusion. The heavy indebtedness resulting from overzealous New Countryside construction elsewhere suggests limits to self-reliance and self-determination. The Vietnamese party state's will to improve, although of lesser coerciveness than in similar past and present contexts (Robin 2009, Schneider 2014), does not seem to match its *responsibility for* what needs to be done.

On Borneo's rural economy, Michael Dove (2011) writes that small-holding households commonly practice a combination of capitalist cash-crop farming and subsistence farming, one more prone to global market fluctuations, the other more protected. In the migration literature, it is commonly assumed that the village and subsistence farming represent havens of security, on which people can fall back in case migrant livelihoods fail. But in the political economy of Vietnam today, nothing is secure. For these Green Spring households, the migrant waste trade has become a fall-back position, but more because of the anxiety about failure in their agricultural enterprises rather than because waste trading is secure (see Nguyen 2016). The uncertainties indeed reverberate across the city and the countryside as spaces of livelihoods and social mobility. In telling the stories of the few people who have temporarily succeeded, I do not want to romanticise. For everybody who succeeds, there are others who do not; for those who succeed, the fear of failing is imminent. What I wanted to show is that the post-reform state has tapped into this entrepreneurial repertoire for realising its current approach to local development that centres on self-responsibility and self-reliance. Here, we can see

the politics of value in which the state not only seeks to appropriate the value created by the people's actions, but also to define what value actually is for its developmental agenda (Graeber 2001). This agenda is not unknown to local people; these savvy villagers are well aware that the state vision of local development can only go so far as their individualised strategies can. Yet, their own value projects, while building on specific ideas of the good life, social aspirations and idiosyncratic personal attachments, also draw on state visions. Ideas of modernity and civility articulated through programmes such as the 'New Countryside Programme' do have some appeal to them. Villagers like Thu do not question the new countryside as a desirable goal, despite their awareness that they are being made accountable for sustaining it.

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