



# **Research and Reference Service**

THE VIETNAMESE PEASANT: HIS VALUE SYSTEM

R-138-65

October, 1965

This is a research report, not a statement of Agency policy

The Vietnamese peasant lives in a small world limited by the bamboo hedge around his village. He is aware of his traditional history but his first loyalty is to his family. The peasant's spiritual world is large and alive with the spirits of nature and of all creatures who lived before, particularly his ancestors. These must be propitiated at his family and village alters with the aid of spirit specialists who guide him through life's crises. Most peasants are also at least nominally Catholic, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao or more usually Buddhist. While many resorting occasionally to the Buddhist pagoda have not always considered themselves Buddhists, Buddhist awareness has grown.

Face is all important but face concerns appearances, not truth or morality. The peasant is not a moralist and considers flexibility more important than fixed principles. Peasant aspirations have risen because of many promises made by both the Viet Cong and the government. The peasant now expects change and wants a better life.

Vietnamese life is oriented to the family which is the religious, social, economic and political unit and provides security for its members. The Vietnamese woman is very influential both in the family and in the marketplace.

The Viet Cong have devoted enormous efforts to winning the peasants who provide the bulk of their economic support and manpower. Communist propaganda is tailored to meet individual and local wants. The Viet Cong first used terrorism to create a Robin Hood image by eliminating corrupt officials. More recently terrorism has become less discriminating and harsh Viet Cong methods are increasingly alienating the peasants.

Peasants rarely see newspapers or magazines and few have radios, consequently word-of-mouth communications are important. The leading village opinion-moulders are teachers and local officials. Because his life is dull, the peasant can most easily be reached by meeting his desire for entertainment, but he prefers traditional types. He is most responsive to communications he can understand in local and personal terms.

## THE VIETNAMESE PEASANT: HIS PSYCHOLOGICAL WORLD AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATIONS

Despite rapid increases in urban population from refugees fleeing Viet Cong terrorism and the ebb and flow of battle, Viet-Nam remains preponderantly rural. Four out of five Vietnamese continue their traditional way of life close to the soil. It is mainly from these peasant masses that both the Viet Cong and the Government of the Republic of Viet-Nam draw their fighting men. The peasant too is the prime target of both Viet Cong propaganda and government information and psychological operations programs. Other significant groups, including students, intellectuals and urban workers, remain secondary. It is important, therefore, to examine this group to see what it thinks and desires and the communications pattern within this segment of the population.

### The Small World of the Peasant

The peasant's world is small, extending little beyond the cluster of hamlets forming his village. If his village has a marketplace, he has little reason to travel far. Rarely will he visit the District center, still more rarely the Province capital. He may never go to Saigon, though he may have relatives there who occasionally come home to visit.

Formerly it was said the Emperor's law ended at the bamboo hedge around the village. Within that hedge the village was almost autonomous, a self-contained little state ruled by its village council of locally named village notables. Today the village chief is usually selected by the central government and the council's powers and prestige have been eroded by French, Japanese, Viet Minh and the Diem regimes as well as by the Viet Cong. Still, the village council remains a focal point of local administration and communications. Its members also often administer communal lands that help support the local government and the village tutelary cult and aid needy orphans and widows without families.

The peasant gives little allegiance to the district, provincial or Saigon governments. Provinces and districts have been altered so often the peasant may not know their latest names. He may have a generalized allegiance toward the area in which his dialect is spoken, but this is expressed mainly as antagonism towards outsiders, such as refugees from the North.

Within his small village world, the peasant really trusts few people - his family and perhaps a few friends and neighbors. He is suspicious of strangers. From long experience he distrusts officials.

The higher the officials, the more danger they bring to him.

### Heroes and Loyalties

The peasant has little consciousness of Viet-Nam as a nation, though he is aware he is Vietnamese as distinct from his Khmer (Cambodian), Lao, Chinese, or Montagnard neighbors. From infancy he has heard tales of Viet-Nam's ancient past. He knows of Hung Vuong, legendary founder of the nation, of the Trung sisters and Le Loi who fought the Chinese, of Tran Hung Dao who defeated the Mongols and others who conquered Chams and Khmers in Viet-Nam's expansion southward from Tonkin. These stories have fed his sense of racial superiority. Even the French and American, despite their technical knowledge, he considers as crude in the niceties of human relations.

The peasant's loyalties go first to his family, then to his village and to a lesser degree to his region and his race. He has virtually no patriotism or nationalism in the western sense. For over a century, no government has given him much reason to commit himself. Yet, it is this commitment both the Viet Cong and the Government are now asking.

### Spirits, Tigers, Stars and Dragons

In contrast to his small physical world, the peasant's spiritual world looms large. This world swarms with spirits -- spirits of his ancestors and of all who lived in the past and the spirits of departed animals of land and sea, especially those dangerous in life, such as tigers. There also are the spirits of nature, of the rivers, rocks and trees and oceans which obscure the line between animate and inanimate.

All of these spirits may do good or evil and the peasant must propitiate them with offerings, ceremonies and cults that are apart from and overlap the religious sects. Most important to the peasant are the spirits of his ancestors who live with him in his house as part of his living family. They are honored and propitiated not only for their supernatural powers, but also because they are loved ones. The dead are buried and their graves must be tended, but they are not, in the full western sense, "dead and gone." The peasant thus does not, completely distinguish between the living and the dead.

The family itself is thus a little cult with the eldest male as its high priest. He must make offerings of food and wine and hold ceremonies at the family altar that dominates the main room of every home. Each generation must produce sons to tend the dead souls who otherwise must wander homeless forever. Homeless spirits are dangerous and are propitiated with offerings outside the home or village to

discourage them from entering. National and village heroes, even famous rogues, have shrines and cults. From among these each village has a tutelary spirit that is tended by village leaders as a civic duty. The dinh or communal temple housing the altar to this guardian spirit often is an important meeting place for conducting village business or social events.

Apart from the spirit world are higher cosmic influences. Each person lives under the influence of the star that was the dominant cosmic force when he was born. By consulting his horoscope in an almanac the peasant may plot his path through the conflicting cosmic forces. For a fee, village astrologers, palmists, and soothsayers will advise on the propitious time for any action. Other specialists will perform the rituals needed to bribe or manipulate the spirits and natural forces.

The peasant's mother earth, Viet-Nam, he views as a great dragon through whose veins flow natural forces. When he builds a house, constructs a kitchen or buries his dead, the peasant calls on specialists to avoid cutting the dragon's veins and to use the forces to his advantage.

#### Happiness in Harmony

To the peasant, happiness, good fortune and health result from a balance of all physical, spiritual and cosmic forces. Sickness may result from an imbalance or from the flight of one of the three souls and nine spirits inhabiting his body. To restore his health he may resort to both Chinese drugs and modern medicines or he may call on sorcerers and magicians to exorcise evil forces and call back the erring souls or spirits. Any or all methods may be used if they can be afforded.

Harmony is the source of good. When physical, spiritual and cosmic forces are harmoniously balanced, all is well. Evil, bad health, natural, economic or political disorders all result from lack of harmony. In human conduct, therefore, the peasant seeks the "middle path" of Confucius, a harmonious middle way between all extremes of conduct.

#### Catholics, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Buddhists

No accurate religious census is likely to be taken soon in Viet-Nam. A typical peasant may at various times resort to Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian or animist rites and practices. He considers these mutually complementary, not conflicting. Relatively few peasants fully identify themselves with one sect to the exclusion of the others, except for Catholics, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. In the mountains some 900,000 tribesmen remain largely animist, uninfluenced by the more

sophisticated practices of the ethnic Vietnamese who live almost entirely below the 300 foot altitude level.

Christianity, mainly Catholicism, now has over 1½ million adherents of whom 40% are refugees from the North. Most are scattered in villages all over Viet-Nam. Many villages are entirely Catholic and some migrated en masse with their priests from the North. Christianity requires its adherents to shun traditional religious rituals. Yet, many local practices have found accommodation. Village tutelary spirits become appropriate saints. The ancestor altar dominating the peasants main, or perhaps only, room becomes a Catholic shrine where prayers may be said for the dead.

The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, each claiming over one million followers, are split into several sub-sects. Both developed in Viet-Nam and are highly eclectic. Cao Dai mixes elements of Christianity and the religions of China and India. Hoa Hao is a local revelation of Hinayana Buddhism.

The bulk of the peasant population, about 80%, are claimed by Buddhist leaders as adherents of Buddhism. This claim might be disputed by many peasants who do not call themselves Buddhists merely because they occasionally seek Buddha's aid in a crisis. Apart from the Hoa Hao, those practicing Buddhist rites may be divided between the ethnic Khmers who are devotees of Hinayana (Theravada) Buddhism (also practiced in neighboring Cambodia, Laos and Thailand) and the ethnic Vietnamese who follow several loosely organized versions of the Chinese-influenced Mahayana Buddhism.

Popular awareness of Buddhism increased particularly with its injection into politics under Diem. Many Buddhist leaders then believed Catholics were favored by the Diem government. At the same time there has been a general resurgence of Buddhism as a national force. Beginning in the cities, particularly in Hue, Buddhist awareness has spread slowly as monks with new training and political consciousness moved out into village pagodas. Since each pagoda is autonomous, there is no clear way for villagers to screen the monks who come to serve their needs. Consequently, Viet Cong posing as monks occasionally infiltrate the pagodas. The Catholics, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao have been more aware of Viet Cong goals and thus more resistant to infiltration.

#### Face, Morality and Flexibility

Face is important to the peasant as to all East Asians. Face involves maintaining appearances, but is more complicated and important in the East than in the West. The landlord may exploit his tenants, the official his public charges, and the village merchant all who come

into his power, but no man should totally destroy another. In an argument or civil suit, a victory must not be pressed to the point where all face is lost. A compromise acceptable to both sides is the ideal solution. Where face is lost there can be no harmony and harmony is more important than abstract principles of justice. The peasant sees many shades between black and white and between right and wrong.

Face concerns appearances, not truth. The villager admires successful lying, clever dissimulation, obliqueness of expression more than frankness. He may lose face by telling a truth that hurts and gain face by a pleasant lie. A big lie may gain face by its brashness. The Communists are not necessarily discredited by exaggerated claims of the planes they shoot down or Americans they kill. They may gain face since even the Americans admit they are losing men and planes.

Truth is relative. The peasant's answer to a direct question, especially when asked by an official, will aim to satisfy or please the inquirer. He expects this to be anticipated, however, with questions posed accordingly. Thus, the "truth" must be encircled with a camouflage of irrelevant questions that will avoid loss of face if the truth is distasteful.

The peasant is not a moralist. He rarely will take an unyielding stand on principle. Flexibility, suppleness, "bending with the wind," he admires more than firmness. He does not lose face by changing sides since consistency is not expected. Desertion is not treachery when personal or family interests are at stake. Honesty may be the best policy but strict honesty is a virtue for saints, not ordinary mortals. The peasant prefers honest officials but is grateful if their graft is not too great. He admires clever dishonesty and views strict honesty as a little stupid. Yet, while accepting graft in public office as normal, the peasant usually will be honest in personal relations with persons he knows well.

#### Hopes and Aspirations

In the past the peasant's aspirations were neither high nor complex. He wanted to be left alone to till his fields, to live his traditional life and venerate his ancestors. But, increasingly he is less easily satisfied. Viet Cong and government propaganda have led him to expect more. He wants land, a better home, more material comforts, education for his children and social and legal justice.

While basically conservative, he has grown accustomed to change. Most delta lands have gone under cultivation in the past century. Hundreds of villages have been founded only a few decades ago and thousands of hamlets have been resettled during the recent war years. Moreover, nearly 900,000 people are refugees from the North and other

hundreds of thousands are currently refugees from Viet Cong terrorism. Thus, millions of peasants have learned to accept new ways in new places and resistance to technical innovations has been lowered.

The peasant is practical. Despite the world of spirits he propitiates, he is vitally concerned with earthy things. He wants a better life and will accept aid in getting it, but too often both the Viet Cong and government officials have lied to him and he resents it. Now he believes mainly what he sees.

### The Family and Social Mobility

Vietnamese society is family-oriented and essentially classless. The peasant sees his interests in terms of his family. Social levels exist, but they are not fixed and there is genuine social mobility. A single extended family may cut across all social levels. Vietnamese history tells many stories of poor peasant boys who became high officials.

Rich absentee landlords live a world apart in Saigon, but within the village differences between the life of the poor and the more prosperous are small. There is a gradual shading from the simple woven bamboo hut of the farm laborer through the more substantial houses of the tenant farmer or small land owner to the small landlord's solid house, perhaps with a tile roof. Working in the field in shorts or black pajama-like suits, the peasants look alike, though in the evening the more prosperous may wear a garment of better material. Despite Communist propaganda, normally there is little friction between the peasant and the landlord.

Held together by the ancestor cult, the family is the social, economic and political unit. Family allegiance supersedes all other calls. The family must care for its own sick and indigent. Conversely, when one member prospers, he is expected to help his family rise with him. The family rather than the individual is the administrative unit of the government. Traditionally the eldest male held nearly absolute power his family's internal affairs. This power has diminished, but Vietnamese law still treats the family as a unit in many matters.

### The Peasant's Wife

Technically subservient to the will of their fathers or their husbands, Vietnamese women actually enjoy a large voice in the family. In business matters, they are more aggressive than their husbands. While publicly assuming the submissive attitude society requires, the peasant woman may be the real driver of her family. She also may be an important provider through her market place activities. Most village shopkeepers are women and many build and manage considerable

businesses, while their husbands till the fields or tend to village affairs. Women also are active in small local self-help associations.

Because of their importance in peasant society, women are prime targets for information programs and psychological operations. Through the women, husbands and sons can be effectively influenced. It should not be overlooked that women often have served the Viet Cong well and women could be very useful to the Government if reached by properly directed appeals.

### The Peasant and the Viet Cong

The Viet Cong say the peasants are the sea in which the Communists swim. They have devoted enormous effort to wooing the peasants who provide the bulk of their fighting power and economic support and a large part of their cadre. Without doubt, the majority of peasants supporting the Viet Cong have little understanding of communism, but they are devoted to what they understand its cause to be.

Viet Cong propaganda has been highly effective, mainly because it is aimed to fulfill the peasants needs and desires. Also, it has been highly localized in appeal and delivery. The peasant is promised land and in some areas is given the land of absentee landlords. Viet Cong propaganda cadre live among the people and go from house to house talking to each resident to persuade them to support the Viet Cong cause. Viet Cong terrorism is used as the ultimate persuader - to eliminate the recalcitrant opponent, the grafting official or the official who serves the government too well, and to convince the undecided.

At first, the terrorists assassinated notoriously bad officials and so gained a Robin Hood type of image. The Communists capitalized on government errors, such as its failure to repay the costs of forced resettlement or to provide promised clinics and other services. They successfully contrasted the misconduct of government officials and troops with their own tighter discipline and more scrupulous treatment of the peasant. Only gradually as they gained firmer control of areas and moved into larger scale war did the Viet Cong expose their true face as harsh masters. As Viet Cong needs grew, and with them their confidence in victory, so did their demands on the peasant. Now their taxes may be over 50% of the crop and every peasant boy faces conscription. Roads to market towns are cut and local prices skyrocket from shortages and from Viet Cong assessments. Increasingly Viet Cong terrorism has extended to senseless wholesale murder of women and children by bombings of buses and even churches.

These trends have gradually alienated the peasants. At most, only a small percentage were ever fully committed, the others going along passively because they had no choice and no adequate alternative in the

Diem government. Now, hundreds of thousands of peasants in all parts of the country are fleeing into government-held areas. Often they move to escape a Communist yoke they have found more onerous than the worst misgovernment under Diem. Many are only fleeing from possible bombing or shelling by the government, yet the Viet Cong frequently are blamed for inviting this destruction by using the villages as bases. But the mass flight of peasants from the Viet Cong does not mean they are committing themselves to the government. The greatest majority of people will go to whichever side they believe will give them a better deal. Increasingly this appears to be the government. Commitment in the western sense should not be expected. It will come only after a long educational process and possibly only with a new generation.

What is being achieved as a result of the peasant's experiences and the government information programs is growing awareness by the peasant that what the government is doing and can do for him is better than any deal he will receive from the Viet Cong. This is done pragmatically. Many things are being done for the peasant, but he does not become aware of them automatically in terms of personal benefits. These improvements need to be explained to the peasant in the right context or he will take them for granted. On occasions the Viet Cong have even taken credit for government improvements when the government's publicity was inadequate. However, field experience shows that when the peasant is made fully aware of all his government is doing, Viet Cong propaganda is undercut and Viet Cong morale is depressed.

#### Communication Among the Peasantry

The average peasant rarely sees newspapers or magazines. Most cannot read or read only with difficulty. However, those who read and receive papers and magazines are important in spreading news. There are few private radios, although many hamlets have received community receivers. Anyone with a radio is also a news disseminator.

Since illiteracy is commonplace, the peasant expects to receive most information through informal word-of-mouth channels. The grape-vine grows fast and rumors or news spreads orally with unbelievable speed. Among the news spreaders are the horsecart drivers, peddlers and others moving about the countryside.

Especially important for opinion-moulding are the teachers, local officials, and older people with local prestige stemming from their education and wisdom. The latter group may include the village councillors who also help distribute government propaganda and collect information on local affairs and individuals. While the government has increased its efforts to communicate with the villages and hamlets through paid information personnel, their quality and effectiveness remains low. The village councillors still carry more prestige as

information-purveyors and opinion-moulders. Because of this influence, they have been made special targets for Viet Cong terrorism.

Under the Diem government, the people were divided into five-family groups to promote "mutual cooperation" and "communal solidarity." These were used to disseminate news and government orders. Each group also served as a local assembly and was used to organize government demonstrations or meetings. While no longer required, the structure still exists in many areas and serves the communications process among the peasants.

Since the peasant's life is dull, he is starved for entertainment. He can be reached most readily by filling this want. He will always watch a movie, though he prefers those with entertainment content geared to his interests. He likes war movies, perhaps because he can identify with them. He enjoys traditional plays and music, but musical taste varies in different parts of the country. Theatrical and musical performances are most effective when localized. The peasant will listen to Saigon troupes and their modernized fare, but he prefers the traditional. Singing and playing musical instruments are popular pastimes the Communists have made use of extensively by giving a propaganda content to all their songs at group gatherings.

Visual materials for the peasant will be most effective when the message clearly concerns the peasant's interests and the illustration tells the story without requiring the use of text. Any text used must be simple. Vietnamese taste in colors should prevail, though they may seem odd to western eyes. Traditions must be carefully observed in selection of color and design, and for this local guidance is needed. Colors have symbolic appeal. Red stands for good fortune and happiness, yellow, the former imperial color symbolizes dignity and fidelity while green is unlucky and should be avoided.

The peasant will always be most responsive to communications touching upon his personal needs or the needs of his family. He is not susceptible to abstract appeals to democracy, patriotism, nationalism, etc., about which he knows little or does not feel personally. Appeals must be immediate, tangible, and easily understood. Above all they must be correct and honest if credibility is to be maintained.