Article

Journal of Environment & Development
2020, Vol. 29(2) 171–195
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DOI: 10.1177/1070496520905625
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Environmental Protection in the Hands of the State: Authoritarian Environmentalism and Popular Perceptions in Vietnam

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Abstract

Vietnam's uncompromising economic growth priorities under Communist Party leadership have left environmental degradation and loss of biodiversity in its wake, and the country is in many respects at a critical threshold. Even so, recent debate has emphasized that state or "authoritarian" environmentalism may have political advantages in determined and coordinated environmental response, although the downside may be a denial of personal responsibility and low public awareness. Building on a series of field studies in rural and highland Vietnam, this article puts everyday environmental perceptions and practices into the perspective of long-term authoritarian governance. It explores the resulting hierarchization of state–society relations and fragmentation of social forces, in which environmental action, responsibility, and ethics primarily emanate from the state sphere. It argues that authoritarianism has contributed to a critical disjuncture between shared norms and the objective conditions of the biophysical environment, as comprehensive state dominance hampers autonomous value change in society.

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Keywords
Vietnam, state environmentalism, authoritarianism, rural development, popular perceptions

This article examines to what extent autocratic rule can be said to imprint itself on popular views and perceptions of the biophysical domain, including the sense of responsibility for a healthy environment. Today, Vietnam's environmental emergencies relate to degradation, loss of habitats and biodiversity, and a range of pollution issues. As in most countries in the region, emerging state environmentalism addresses these emergencies by means of a complex array of environmental and climate strategies, programs, and initiatives. Yet common environmental "awareness" or "values" are seen to react only sluggishly to these challenges, and the overriding priorities among the broader segments of the population are continued economic growth and material gains.

However, rather than viewing environmental perceptions as shaped by top-down technocratic governance and asymmetrical state–society relations, the article deliberates on the long-term interaction between state and popular perspectives at the level of shared culture. It argues that key aspects of a materialist popular culture and a prevalent anthropocentric outlook are integrated into Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) ideology but have been stifled in the party-state's centralistic policies and uncompromising economic growth priorities. In effect, authoritarianism has contributed to a critical disjuncture between shared norms and the objective conditions of biophysical environment, resulting in cultural-environmental disaggregation (e.g., Jamieson, Cuc, & Rambo, 1998). Thus, we may ask if long-term authoritarian governance has concentrated responsibility with state institutions to such an extent that it has not only served as a driver for environmental utilitarianism at a broader societal level but has also come to discredit divergent outlooks and obstruct autonomous processes of change.

The article synthesises a broad material on rural environmental practices and attitudes, collected through three interdisciplinary research projects on climate change adaptation, water disasters, and forest management in Vietnam between 2009 and 2018 (including Ha Tinh, Nghe An, Quang Binh, and Quang Nam Provinces on the northern to central coast and Lao Cai Province in the northwest).[1] In addition to socioeconomic household surveys (average 150 households) in each province, the material includes hundreds of individual household interviews, countless interviews with officials of all levels of governance, ethnographic fieldwork observations, and everyday conversation.

Authoritarian Environmentalism: Defining Features and Debates

Authoritarian environmentalism (AE) grew out of criticism of ineffectiveness in environmental governance in Western democracies and was thus initially conceived as an alternative generic model (Beeson, 2010; Roberts & Parks, 2007; Shearman & Smith, 2007). AE has been debated as a potentially viable form of environmental governance with greater measures of power, resoluteness, and unconditionality to generate better environmental outcomes, particularly in relation to climate change (Beeson, 2010; Gilley, 2012; Li, 2018). With a higher degree of state autonomy and clearer command structures, the AE model was attributed a relative advantage in its ability to compel citizens and businesses to comply with strict environmental regulations (Eaton & Kostka, 2014).

However, as an antithesis to the challenging of democratic and participatory approaches to environmental governance, a growing body of literature has used the AE model as a starting point for a critical evaluation of environmental governance in real-life authoritarian and postauthoritarian countries, which increasingly adopt environmental policies to bolster state legitimacy. Focusing on China as the epitome of authoritarian governance, studies have shown the doubtful consequences of a response to climate change that builds exclusively on technocratic and regulatory discourse with little reference to society (Gilley, 2012), the adverse effects of the short time horizons of appointed local officials in China (Eaton & Kostka, 2014), and a considerable discrepancy between strong target-based policies and weak outcomes (Li, 2018), even fostering a "command without control" situation (Kostka, 2016). Other studies have indicated that authoritarian fragmentation and complex policy processes at the local level allow considerable space for neoliberal interests (e.g., Lo, 2015) and weaknesses in horizontal coordination (Eaton & Kostka, 2018). As suggested by Beeson (2010, 2018), recent studies may confirm a spiral of authoritarian self-intensification when the AE model is confronted with socioenvironmental emergencies (Ahlers & Shen, 2018; Chen & Lees, 2018; Lo, 2015, p. 158; Mao & Zhang, 2018).[2] The more that is at stake for government in environmental conditions that may foster social destabilization, the harsher and more exclusively authoritarian are the means of government (Ahlers & Shen, 2018, p. 301); presumably, a distinct paradigm of recentralized environmental governance is on the rise under Xi Jinping (Chen & Lees, 2018).

A few studies have examined the consequences of the AE model in other Asian states, demonstrating, for instance, Singapore's transition to a "garden city" being accompanied by a distinctly utilitarian discourse on nature (Han, 2017), South Korea's authoritarian path dependency effecting executive dominance and a limited space for societal participation (Han, 2015), and Thailand's and Myanmar's military governments offering fluctuating conditions for

environmental nongovernmental organizations (Simpson & Smits, 2018). To date, no studies have applied the AE framework to Vietnam, and the present article seeks to begin filling the gap.

Key Questions

A key question is how the overall political conditions for participation are reflected in public sentiments and environmental mobilization across the state–society boundary. This article applies a bottom-up perspective to show that they are indeed connected but by no means in a simple causal relationship. Participation is a defining distinction between democratic and AE, with the latter profoundly restricting civil society participation and dialogue at the local level (e.g., Han, 2017; Kostka, 2016, p. 70; Li, 2018); however, on the ground, all environmental management regimes will have mixed features (e.g., Lo, 2015). In the authoritarian model, environmental or climate change policy formulation primarily takes place within a technocratic and societal management discourse in which public participation is relegated primarily to embracing state-produced knowledge, complying with state policies, and assisting in implementation (Ahlers & Shen, 2018, p. 316; Gilley, 2012, p. 291). Consequently, enlightened state policies combined with technological change are perceived as the primary instruments of environmental management. According to Gilley (2012), distrust in the public may restrain the AE model's capacity of rapid policy responses and top-down mobilization, as the exclusion of social actors may create a malign lock-in effect "in which low social concern makes authoritarian approaches both more necessary and more difficult" (p. 300).

While a common feature of democratic environmentalism is debate on tradeoffs between growth and environment, the AE model more consistently pledges ecological improvements as a means of continued economic growth,[3] while at the same time assurances of better environmental management have been adopted in regime legitimacy. As a backdrop to this outlook, several studies note the AE model's association with instrumentalism or utilitarianism in approaches to nature and environment (Beeson, 2010; Gilley, 2012; Han, 2015) and a bureaucratic approach to nature that favors quantification and predictability (Li, 2018). As characteristic of a range of green city developments in the region, Heejin Han (2017) shows that Singapore's transition to a "garden city" under its authoritarian developmental state tradition has resulted in a remarkable expansion of green spaces and infrastructure but has come at the expense of a technocratic and "instrumental" view of nature in which nature conservation has been relegated to the margins of environmental efforts (Han, 2017, p. 11). Moreover, when nonstate actors are merely seen as policy targets, the public has adopted a narrow understanding of nature and is only familiar with disciplined and manipulated nature (Han, 2017, p. 18). Another way of putting it is that nature and forest management are made contingent on social

management rather than attributed independent merit (e.g., McElwee, 2016, p. 5; Scott, 2009).

Comprehensive socioenvironmental systems under full state control, such as embedded in China's Ecological Civilisation program, Singapore's Garden City, or Vietnam's New Rural Development (NRD) program, thus have become hallmarks of AE. A very plausible outcome is that when state and local institutions consistently propose an asymmetric concentration on "green" economic development rather than ecological conservation, the dominant instrumental view impacts public cognition, conceivably to the point where deviating environmental perceptions are written off as political dissent. A crucial underlying factor is the state's dominant and unchallengeable position that tends to stifle spontaneous, bottom-up environmental action that may otherwise mobilize the public (Han, 2017, p. 20; Ngoc, 2017). This pulls responsibility inward toward state and nation, thus accentuating a sociocentric approach, rather than pushing it outward toward people's individual engagement with nature.

This article intends take these insights a step further and fill some gaps in the AE framework by homing in on the social consequences of the authoritarian state's adoption of an environmentalist agenda, including grand socioenvironmental management systems, as the normal and exclusive business of government. Under the current conditions, the authoritarian approach to environmentalism, on one hand, implies the conscious selection of intermediary actors between state and society to contain its transformational potential and defend key state economic interests, which inevitably drives authoritarian intensification and new controls. On the other hand, it stalls spontaneous processes of environmental value change and potentially defers an environmental turning point.

Vietnam: Ecological Challenges and Policy Environment

The relevance of the AE framework lies not only in Vietnam's historical-revolutionary affinity with China but as much in the developmental state tradition that resonates across the region, including Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (Gilley, 2014; Han, 2017; Woo-Cumings, 1999). These priorities have produced remarkable economic growth rates since the Doi Moi reforms were initiated in 1986 but at the same time have had deep and profound impacts on environmental and biodiversity protection and on social and ethnic justice. A complex of mutually exacerbating impacts from internally generated environmental degradation and externally induced climate change has confronted the country with a series of ecological emergencies.[4] Not least, the rapid transformation of highland forests and coastal zones has entailed the destruction of habitats and biodiversity, aggravated by a lack of efficient management responses (e.g., Bruun, 2012; Center for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies, Vietnam National University & World Wide Fund for

Nature, 1998; Ortmann, 2017; Sterling, Martha, & Minh, 2007; United States Agency for International Development, 2013). Air and water pollution have reached alarming levels as yet without effective measures.

Vietnamese state environmentalism takes aim at these challenges within a comprehensive political framework across the government, the National Assembly, and the Communist Party and builds on an impressive range of policy initiatives. These include the Vietnam Climate Change Strategy (CCS 2011), Vietnam Green Growth Strategy (GGS 2012–2020), National Strategy for Environmental Protection (NSEP 2012–2020), Vietnam Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation program (REDD+ 2009-), and a range of legal instruments on environmental, forest, and water protection. Vietnam's remarkable production of policy documents has been saluted by international donor organization (Schirmbeck, 2018). Yet foreign observers tend to see their application hampered by poor coherence and internal coordination, a top-down approach, and a lingering policy-implementation gap stemming from strong economic players with CPV relations, which obstructs the development of an effective environmental state (e.g., Ortmann, 2017, p. 99; United States Agency for International Development, 2013). In comparison with China, Vietnam is obviously in an earlier stage of AE implementation and national consolidation.

Both the discursive framing and the core provisions of law complexes link environmental protection to resource exploitation and underscore the belief in economic cobenefits from ecological improvements.[5] Participation from civil society organizations/nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) is assured in several networks such as the Climate Change Working Group, Vietnam Sustainable Energy Alliance, and the REDD+ network; very similar to China, environmental organizations are primarily foreign funded (e.g., Ortmann, 2017, p. 143; Stern, 2013), but an increasing array of restrictions apply. It is commonly noted that government-affiliated Vietnamese NGOs and environmental mobilizations from below interface very little, although all NGOs have contributed to an emerging urban environmental consciousness (e.g., Nguyen & Datzberger, 2018).[6]

Two opposing currents pervade environmental contestations in the public sphere. One current stems from a new urban middle class that increasingly voices their environmental concerns (Thiem, 2013). In particular, the postwar generations push to reshape state–society relations by using social media to report and debate environmental issues and to facilitate new organizing. A scale of political contestations hitherto unseen has arisen from high-profile land, pollution, and environmental corruption issues in recent years, reflecting their capacity for both spontaneous mobilization and new ideology formation. They include protests against Chinese-funded bauxite mining in the highlands, the Hanoi Trees Movement in 2015, the Formosa Ha Tinh Steel's illegal wastewater spills in 2017, and the 2018–2019 anti-Chinese protests in connection with

the granting of 99-year land leases in new economic zones. Furthermore, enduring government criticisms relate to hydropower construction programs with dubious social and environmental impact assessments, highland forest destruction, ethnic minority displacements, illegal gold mining, and endemic air, water, and soil pollution.

The pervasiveness of corruption in land, property, and business deals constitutes a common background (e.g., Gainsborough, 2010, p. 50; Hoang, 2018; World Bank [WB], 2011).[7] Yet the party's refusal to permit political liberalization has contributed to increasingly confrontational calls for transparency and accountability; many observers now see environmental issues as a major threat to regime legitimacy (e.g., Schirmbeck, 2018). Thus, an opposing trend to environmental organizing may be attributed to authoritarian self-intensification in the face of combined socioenvironmental emergencies. This trend finds expression in a rapid succession of new restrictions on public debate and regime criticism as well as in the effective marginalization of formal civil society organizations (e.g., Nguyen, Bush, & Mol, 2016). Academic freedom is limited, and university professors must adhere to party views and refrain from criticizing government policies when teaching or writing on political topics. Inevitably, civil society activism is driven toward spontaneous mass protests and nonformal organizing while at the same time being politicized (e.g., Ngoc, 2017; Nguyen & Datzberger, 2018). Some intrinsic characteristics of social organizing in Vietnam have spurred this process. The country's "mixed Confucian and Communist roots" strike through in the sense that participation in social groups tends to be distinctly state orchestrated as a means of social organization and propaganda dissemination (Dalton & Ong, 2005). According to the 2001 World Values Survey, despite high overall participation rates in society, independent environmental groups had low participation and were associated with those religious, human rights, and community groups that operate "on the margins of society" (Dalton & Ong, 2005, pp. 4–6).[8]

Rural Production and Environmental Governance

Urban political contestations evidently have spurred the CPV to tighten its grip on the rural base. Although the shackles of direct party-state control were gradually eased in the postcollective reform movement that began in 1981, a range of party-state institutions remain in place to secure rural consolidation and control. The administrative division still builds on the rural commune (reminiscent of the old production brigade and divided into a number of villages) and on the old mass organizations under the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, both of which remain a vital means of continued "socialist transition" under the NRD program (see later). The mandatory Farmers' Union has a central place in the alignment of agricultural production with political goals.

Let us descend to the typical Kinh Vietnamese lowland farming communities in Central Vietnam to examine environmental governance and its ideological premise. Vietnamese farming is essentially built on the East Asian paddy rice model with supplementary vegetable and other food-crop gardening, small livestock raising (pigs, ducks, and chickens), and whatever else may be integrated into an extremely efficient pattern of land use that exploits every possible natural resource. This is still the model universally promoted by central and local agricultural authorities, such as in regular village meetings and on village propaganda posters. Monocropping is reinforced as an effect of marketization: A 2015 decree provides a small financial support to farmers producing rice to "improve farmer incomes, maintain total area of land devoted to rice production, and increase rice exports" (GRO, 2018). Central government policy is in principle opening up to the effect that rice production strategies vary between provinces (Casse & Milhøj, 2015), yet there is still a dominant focus on rice despite many international concerns of low added value and little technological and institutional innovation (e.g., WB, 2017, p. 2). Fieldwork in the north-central provinces of Ha Tinh and Nghe An showed that paddy is still mandatory for smallholder farmers in coastal areas with adequate soil and water conditions (Bruun & Olwig, 2015). This is a key area for hybrid rice farming, promoted by state and state-owned enterprise (SOE) corporate interests and linked to Vietnam's massive rice exports. Broad interviewing conducted by the author in coastal villages revealed that farmers have to choose between two or three hybrid varieties as selected each year by provincial agricultural authorities; asked if alternative crops were permitted, farmers would vigorously deny such choice.[9]

The researched provinces include the full range of land forms, from annually flooded river deltas and coastal zones to mountain highlands, and paddy yields vary accordingly from a few to 7 tons per hectare annually. Similarly, the share of household income from paddy may vary from insignificant amounts and up to 80%. However, the predominant pattern is that the stronger the dependency on paddy, the poorer the household, because nobody can achieve more than basic subsistence from farming those diminutive land plots allocated through the standard 30-year contract (Red Book certificates) farming system.[10] Instead, local wage labor, seasonal domestic migrant labor, or long-term (2–5 years) contract labor abroad are the predominant paths to improved living standards, while others engage in local handicraft and business; only a few become "rich peasants" from acquiring extra farm land or forest plots. Although surveys showed that the share of income from farming may generally decrease, except from the poorest segment, many rural household are afraid to lose their land because farms cover subsistence needs, provide for children and the elderly, and act as a safety net against inherent insecurity and mishaps in the labor market.

Hybrid and high-yielding rice is the result of a massive research effort across Asia and is itself an expression of a sociotechnocratic approach to farming.

While yields are projected as higher, they bind farmers to the purchase of expensive seeds and exorbitant amounts of fertilizer,[11] to the effect that their actual benefit is questionable under the increasingly unpredictable weather conditions in the north-central region; harvesting two to three crops per year at the same time increases the likelihood of pests and disease. As a result, Vietnam has been stuck in the production of high-quantity, low-quality rice varieties, not least as a consequence of its reliance on purchaser SOEs with a murky reputation (e.g., Hayton, 2011, p. 33) and a simultaneous exclusion of foreign buyers and contractors. Thus, mandatory rice cropping locks peasants to the bottom level of the value chain without access to more lucrative foreign contracts for high-quality rice and alternative cash crops. Furthermore, despite nationwide climate and environmental strategies (CCS, GGS, and NSEP), technocratic governance and economic pressures on farming continuously brush aside environmental considerations, and there is rising international concern over Vietnam's agricultural model (e.g., WB, 2017). For instance, the GGS (2012–2020) aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions through the development of sustainable organic agriculture (specifically for the improved competitiveness of agricultural production), but it had little recognition in the researched provinces.

Similarly, the NSEP (2012–2020) aims to reduce environmental pollution, resource deterioration, and biodiversity degradation and lists a range of controls and penalties to that effect. Nevertheless, massive pollution of water courses cause fish depletion and contamination of water wells, particularly in periods of flooding. For instance, a broad socioeconomic survey in Quang Nam (including 166 households across 16 communes in five districts) indicated a high rate of skin ailments, cancer, and other health issues, presumably related to water pollution (Bruun, 2012). Most lowland rivers, such as the Ca and Nhat Le river systems, are overburdened with nitrates, industrial and farm chemicals, oils spills, and garbage to the extent that they are dying, and many stretches of coastline around river mouths now resemble dump sites. As a peasant in Ha Tinh who used to fish in the Ca River observed, "now you may only be lucky to catch a big fish after heavy rains, when the torrents of water carry them downstream from the mountains." Commune People's Committees have little independent decision-making authority, and ordinary villagers have little influence on their immediate environment and little encouragement to contribute to change, other than seeking to protect their own drinking water and vital assets: For most villagers, the environment is synonymous with state planning.

Most aspects of agricultural production are determined by district offices and communicated at regular village meetings, including dates for sowing, planting and harvesting, amount and timing of fertilizer, and application of pesticides. The CPV zealously guards its monopoly on organization, and only the old mass organizations are allowed to operate on a regular basis in rural areas. Public security is omnipresent, and villages are only accessible to outsiders after lengthy preparations and arduous approval procedures, including

preapproved time schedules and set questions to bureaucrats, farmers, and their households. The implications are that mainstream farming villages remain consciously and efficiently shielded against outside ideological influences and alternative visions, such as from environmental NGOs, foreigners, or religious communities (Buddhist or Catholic associations).[12] The state utilitarian discourse therefore rules uncontested; district and commune People's Committee chairmen may appreciate gifts of technology and equipment from the outside but generally expressed resentfulness of civil society interference.[13]

A three-province survey across Nghe An, Ha Tinh, and Quang Binh (332 households) indicated an increasing concern over unhealthy production techniques and the low nutritional value of hybrid rice, akin to the rising "food scare" in urban areas. Among the younger age groupings born after 1980, 58% recognized the high value of traditional knowledge and farming techniques and expressed interest in green development, while elder age groups expressed less recognition, declining to 28% among the group born before 1940 (Bruun & Luu Bich, 2018). Where circumstances allowed, some better-off farming households set aside small plots to grow organically fertilized rice for home consumption. However, rice production strategies were seen to differ considerably between provinces, and the southernmost Quang Nam and Quang Binh Provinces provided greater scope for diversification.

Monitoring and reporting on the state of the environment are performed by provincial government under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.[14] However, rural environmental management is placed under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and has a utilitarian focus primarily relating to production risks or, in cooperation with local medical stations, to human health risks. A few staff at district level are in charge of environmental and human health issues, but without an operational budget, they have little capacity to pursue the intentions of the GGC and NSEP. At commune and village levels, there are no formal institutions dedicated to environmental work, but separate funding may be allocated to small projects such as for private water filtration, securing latrines, avoiding contamination after flooding, building small garbage incinerators, and other activities. There are few commune regulations related to the environment, and those in place are often ignored due to lack of sanction and supervision. Coordination among provincial and local organizations is weak or ineffective, and conservation issues are pushed to the margins if represented at all (see further later). Similarly, public environmental campaigns do not have much visibility in rural areas; volunteers or members of the Youth Association may be assigned the work of garbage collection, road sweeping, and ditch cleaning. In general, the commune's environmental activities are too small and scattered to have other than cosmetic value, and awareness raising is absent, even in public schools. As a consequence, water courses and the environment suffer not only

from industrial and agricultural pollution but also from the everyday carelessness of villagers, fishermen, restaurants, and small businesses.

Countless household interviews revealed that economic pressures on rural production and continued rural–urban inequalities contribute to driving people away from agriculture. State ownership and a lack of long-term land tenure security severs villagers' attachment to the land and, combined with limited scope for higher value production, add to the unattractiveness of farming. On the part of farmers, there is at the same time a strikingly antirural ideology at play (e.g., Bruun & Olwig, 2015). Apart from a few remaining lineage-based villages, which may trace their history back 400 years, there is little rural romanticism or striving for living close to nature, and few strains of alternative values: Rural villages represent a rather narrow repertoire of life orientations. By contrast, the high modernist ideology of the Vietnamese state has great resonance among rural people who generally strive for a modern and essentially urban life. As a reflection of a materialist ethos and a striving for upward mobility, not much attention is devoted to aesthetics (Pham & Rambo, 2003, p. 99), and rural villages reflect a curious neglect of farmhouses and surroundings. Instead, whenever people can afford to, they will immediately build the ultimate symbol of upward mobility, the "modern house" mimicking urban French-style architecture and rising to several storeys, in many cases situated away from the old farmland and attached to urban sprawl.

Detachment from the land has even grown among the young generation. Many villages exist in a limbo with scores of restless youngsters: Brought up in a predominantly materialist ethos and molded by a high modernist educational system, which teaches technocratic solutions to social and environmental ills, they commonly wish to migrate to Hanoi, Saigon, or Australia for work or study. For instance, in the aforementioned Vo Ninh commune with 9,600 inhabitants, more than 1,000 laborers migrate internally in Vietnam while another 150 people go abroad (Buch-Hansen, Phuong Thao, & Thi Ha Thanh, 2017). In addition, a similar number of young people study outside. There is a stereotyped striving to get rich fast and to move out of the confines of the villages, expressive of a resonance between traditional "Confucian-like" values of social ascendance and modernist urban aspirations. Today, "Money is God"; as villagers would express to the author, "When people get rich they turn their backs on the village and never come back!" or "If I had the means I would run away from this village!"

The Paddy Culture and Its Transformations

The political connotations of paddy agriculture, including the rigid social and environmental management contained in grand irrigation and infrastructure works, has been an unabating topic for academic debate (Bruun, in press; Gilley, 2014; Scott, 2009). Internally too, Vietnamese paddy agriculture retains

symbolism and meanings far beyond food production. Similar to China, rice is celebrated as a gift from heaven and its cultivation techniques and associated land transformations are the historical glue of civilization as well as the basis for expansion beyond its relatively small historical core areas (Jamieson, 1995, p. 3). Wet rice has remained a solid framework of meaning, identity, and cultural pride and also occupied a central place in communist state construction for both Ho Chi Min and Mao Zedong at the outset of the present era, resulting in intensified monocropping (e.g., Smil, 1993, p. 135). Arguably, the paddy culture is a distinct socioenvironmental model that at the same time contains the seeds of its own transmutation. Confined within a heavily exploited landscape and never providing more than a basic subsistence for its growing farmer population, the model has the inherent impulse of replication and enlargement.

Under CPV leadership, large-scale land transformations to fit preconceived patterns of culture and production continue to inform rural development. For instance, under a series of government programs from the 1990s onward, practically all nonproductive forest land and natural growth in rural areas were reclassified and converted into small private acacia plantation forestry plots. Overall, more than 1 million ha have been established, half of which is smallholder plantations intended to boost household incomes as well as export earnings. Surveys showed that acacia monocropping within 5- to 7-year cycles is highly vulnerable to typhoons, which may strip entire land plots, while its long-term sustainability is questionable (Bruun & Casse, 2013; Nambiar, Harwood, & Kien, 2015).

Another environmentally transformative government program was initiated in 2001 to promote aquaculture to generate economic growth and export earnings while adapting to the increasing salinity of soils in coastal areas and river deltas (Buch-Hansen, Luu Bich, Man Quang, & Tran Ngoc, 2015; Lebel et al., 2002). With preferential taxation, supply of credit, and investment in infrastructure, Vietnam quickly rose to become a major world exporter of shrimps. Clearing mangrove forest or other vegetation for developing new economic opportunities has a broad backing in rural villages, and conversion to aquaculture quickly accelerated. With direct access to the export market, producers could bypass public authorities and SOEs and move up the value chain. In Quang Binh Province, those local people who converted paddy fields to shrimp ponds reported incomes easily five times that of paddy (shrimps sell at USD 3–5 kg compared with USD 0.25–0.30 kg for paddy rice). However, the program implied the large-scale destruction of coastal mangrove forest in the affected provinces (e.g., Bruun, 2012), which previously constituted a natural barrier to coastal erosion and flooding during typhoons. Shrimp aquaculture production proved very risky as it was dependent on a clean environment and sensitive to common diseases resulting from monoculture and was also located in areas at risk to annual flooding. Furthermore, in the Ca River Delta

separating Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces, removing the mangrove forests apparently contributed to sand dunes encroaching on cultivated land.

Characteristic of the aforementioned production activities is that in CPV planning land and forests have been essentially reduced to resources, despite an environmental situation that is still deteriorating (Ortmann, 2017). Discussions with district agricultural authorities in the research areas reflected that the issue of sustainability is attended to in the weakest possible form, meaning that biophysical hazards are primarily seen as obstacles that can be amended by enhanced technological means such as improved breeds, better technologies of cultivation, and an assortment of external inputs. The critical perspective on forest and land-use conversion that is evidently expressed in academic and internet media is shared by few policy makers (Bruun & Luu Bich, 2018; Rambo, 1995, p. 21). Criticisms on environmental grounds, such as those that are put forth by researchers, intellectuals, and domestic and foreign NGOs, are rarely reflected in political processes beyond central government and were not seen to extend to local communities, thus excluding crosscutting public debate between local producers and researchers. However, criticisms from within were often heard, such as from young agricultural staff and forest officials who claimed that current agricultural practices and shrimp farming were unsustainable or that acacia monocropping was merely being developed for the sake of the market and without proper research, thus depleting the land. But as noted to the author by a young staff member in Quang Nam, "criticism is not well received by high officials in Vietnam."

In addition to agricultural land-use changes, rural villages and their inhabitants are increasingly impacted by a range of state-led environmental interventions, including upland hydropower construction and deforestation, lowland dike building, sand mining, road construction, industrial park construction, and mass tourism development. Despite often having dramatic local impact, all such interventions have in common that they are implemented in a nonparticipatory top-down fashion without the rural population or commune People's Committees having a say in their design. They convey the message that environmental interventions are devised by the state and received by the local people, who are primarily seen as policy targets and obliged to adapt.

In particular, large-scale interventions in the form of highland deforestation and hydropower and dam construction, as well as coastal road and dike construction, impact the river systems that are vital for agriculture. In all researched provinces, farmers in household interviews reported changes, often dramatic, in seasonal flooding patterns. For instance, along the Thu Bon River in Quang Nam, farmers reported flooding levels increasing by a meter and water often rushing in at life-threatening speeds. In Bao Thang District, Lao Cai Province, farmers reported flooding levels sometimes increased by 1 to 2 m after hydropower construction. Along the river systems in Quang Binh Province, increasing

occurrences of flash floods were reported. In addition, new elevated highroad construction impacted the coastal provinces. In Nghe An and Ha Tinh Provinces, newly constructed highroads helped people to move and protect their assets during floods but at the same time exacerbated flooding in the lower lying areas and subsequently prevented the draining of water. According to aforementioned three-province survey, 53% of farmers experienced more frequent flooding (23% less), and 44% experienced more saltwater intrusion (19% less). Other side effects relate to landslides and increasing sedimentation because of delayed outflow, with negative effects on paddy fields, gardens, and canal systems; 5% of farmers saw serious degradation of their land.

Rural people's responses are obviously contingent on their political subjection and reflect an underlying perception of the natural environment as effectively owned and managed by the state. This is not to say that farmers are unaware of environmental and climate change issues. In fact, both surveys and fieldwork revealed great agricultural knowledge and a strong sense of distinction, such as between agricultural hazards related to erratic weather patterns presumably stemming from climate change and those hazards that arise from anthropogenic environmental interventions (e.g., Bruun & Luu Bich, 2018).

Rural Environmental Management and Popular Perceptions

Both in the precolonial and colonial periods, Vietnamese villages were known for their relative independence (Grossheim, 2004; Jamieson, 1995), though at the same time they were bound up in state structures through taxation, corvée labor, and conscription. However, the simultaneous push for administrative integration of villages and compliance of officials has never ceased through history (e.g., Marr, 2004, p. 48). The relentless use of communist state symbolism and Party propaganda in rural areas continues this pressure. No public meeting will evade the hammer-and-sickle-adorned national flag and the Ho Chi Min bust installed in every meeting room across the country. Endless banners, boards, placards, pictures, and loudspeaker announcements use a strong mix of materialist and emotional contents, such as in the constant flow of old and new slogans. Omnipresent party-state institutions obviously influence citizens' environmental attitudes in multiple ways, either directly through education and propaganda or indirectly through social group control.

Although diverse perceptions of nature exist, they tend to converge in anthropocentric and utilitarian views (Pham & Rambo, 2003, p. 79). Traditional Vietnamese culture favored nature as transformed according to a particular cultural model that both presupposed and implicitly generated a particular kind of ecosystem dominated by wet rice agriculture on lowland plains. What lay outside this cultured landscape never had great significance for the peasant

population, despite a huge natural biodiversity of land and forests. Neil Jamieson noted with regard to common values,

> Wilderness was feared and avoided, ignored if possible, and transformed and tamed if necessary.... Few Vietnamese valued the jungle, the mangrove swamp, or the forested hillside;...remote and exotic fauna, like jungle and swamp, lay outside their systems of meaning, beyond culture. Such things were useless, even dangerous. (1991, pp. 7–8)

A wide range of observations around forest areas (Bruun, in press; McElwee, 2016, p. 209) and hundreds of interviews among common rural households confirm the contemporary relevance of Jamieson's observations: The manipulation of nature by means of landscape and habitat conversions to serve human needs enjoys a broad consensus. Similarly, in most localities researched, there were no institutions in place to protect valuable habitats, and the primary motivation to protect forested areas was stated as to secure tourism income.

There is a noticeable degree of correspondence between the state's technocratic approach to resource management and the rationalistic wet rice agricultural model used in Vietnamese villages: Both are characterized by little concern for ecological "externalities" such biodiversity and wildlife (e.g., Van Song, 2008). For instance, rural people were observed to collect small fish, crayfish, snakes, frogs, and other small animals from irrigated fields, ponds, and canals, and the poorest village segments will collect anything down to diminutive water snails for either sale or consumption. They will collect all species to the last individual, relying on recurring flooding and largely external processes of regeneration. Larger animals such as turtles, foxes, or large birds are instantly caught or hunted down, with the result that the environment of common lowland villages is mostly stripped of wild animals. Wildlife, where available, is served in local restaurants without regard to species, and even small birds may be roasted and served as a "wild bird" delicacy. Environmental impacts of interventions are massive and nature destruction is omnipresent.

But the prevailing attitudes to resource exploitation begin to strike back. For instance, fishing communities in Ha Tinh and Nghe An report that overfishing, including illegal dynamite and electrical shock fishing, has made traditional fishing from small boats virtually impossible, hitting especially the poorer segments of fishermen. Many other instances of careless resource exploitation were recorded during fieldwork. For instance, in Truc Ly village in Vo Ninh commune, people had specialized in organizing small parties to venture into the mountains to seek out a rare species of aloe trees, worth a fortune for its etheric oils. Just a single tree would secure lifelong wealth for a household. This species is now exterminated in Vietnam, and people would venture into neighboring countries to search for remaining specimens. Many other instances were recorded, such as relating to mindless hunting of endangered species for

traditional medicine and illegal logging for classical hardwood furniture (Bruun, 2012). For instance, a new Kinh settler community in highland Quang Nam was watching a scenic pine forest nearby, owned by the state. Observing that other patches of forest in their vicinity fell victim to illegal logging, they were afraid to lose out and decided to cut the forest and divide the timber between them. As a local woman explained during interview, "everyone else cuts the forest, so we did the same. Local authority could punish one of us, but they couldn't punish us all!"

However, confined inside diminutive plots that barely provide subsistence, villagers have always fought for their livelihoods, and memories of famine are ingrained in family histories. Villagers have always engaged in occasional labor, handicrafts, businesses, aquaculture, livestock rearing, medical plant collection, hunting, fishing, and so forth, with a high degree of intervillage specialization. If villagers were not pragmatic materialists to begin with, government programs of various types since 1975 have relentlessly promoted "livelihood diversification" to combat poverty and promote growth and resilience. As a positive aspect of free-market access since the 1990s, people now engage in livestock rearing, aquaculture, fruit and peanut production, handicrafts, small industry, and in highland areas increasingly plantation forestry, in an effort to make use of every imaginable resource around the village. For instance, in the north-central provinces, a new creative sideline made possible by increasing soil salinization is the breeding of marine ragworms (*Tylorrhynchus heterochaetus*), which is a highly priced delicacy in urban areas. In effect, no resource in unused and no stone is unturned.

Crucial questions are how environmental perceptions relate to popular culture and what cultural resources are available there. It has been argued at the philosophical level that Confucianism contained many elements that facilitated the transfer to communism in East Asia (e.g., Jamieson, 1995; Needham, 1969, pp. 31–65). When "traditional culture" received its final form in the Nguyen dynasty from 1802, it was a complex mix of native, Buddhist, and neo-Confucian elements, which subsequently interacted with European culture (Jamieson, 1995, p. 11). Arguably, in accordance with "traditional" Confucian-type values, today priority is given to genealogical aims: Villagers display a strongly anthropocentric perspective on life in which the well-being of the family line takes precedence over the immediate environment that appears to have only passing significance. Traditionalist and modernist aspirations converge in materialism and the pursuit of social ascent, with life in the city, even in foreign lands, as the ultimate accomplishment (Bruun & Olwig, 2015; Pham & Rambo, 2003).[15]

NRD Program

A key instrument for developing rural areas and addressing rural–urban inequality has been the National Target Programme on NRD, a comprehensive

program for rural infrastructure, production, services, ecology, and social and political development, which shares many features with China's Ecological Civilisation program. Initiated by the CPV Central Committee in 2010 and running in two phases from 2010 to 2016 and from 2016 to 2020, the NRD perceives rural areas and agriculture as the fundamental pillars of industrialization and modernization (Nguyen, 2014). As couched in CPV rhetoric, it situates the peasantry as the fundamental force in national development and transition to socialism and defines its mission as "developing and organising the rural population's life towards civilisation and modernisation, while preserving [national] cultural identity and ecology in association with the development of cities and towns" (Nguyen & Minh, 2015). The NRD weighs five areas of development,[16] embracing a total of 19 targets/indicators (Buch-Hansen et al., 2017; WB, 2017), and aims at bringing 50% of rural communes to meet NRD standards, delivering basic life requirements and services, and increasing rural incomes (WB, 2017).

In addition to the key areas of increased production stimuli and infrastructure works, the NRD aims generally to "protect the ecological environment." In actual practice, this translates into "improving rural hygiene and environment," meaning water and sanitation, based on the fact that the majority of rural people still rely on shallow wells and that waste management is poorly developed. However, the broader environmental degradation issues are not addressed. Greater emphasis is placed on "cultural development" and "improving political organisations," which are clearly aimed at the cultural and political alignment of rural communes. Building on the dubious "mastery role" of farmers in socioeconomic development, the CPV continues a socialist development path led by the MARD and with the rural commune as the basic unit of operation. This is the lowest level of administration with the least measure of autonomy, and together with emphasis on state and political mass organizations as local partners, not much is left to ungovernable elements. The latter are conspicuously without potential for political change, while those NGOs and spontaneous forces that have given rise to recent political contestations and that may question state policy have no place in the NRD. Within such overall priorities, environmental protections are evidently relegated a contingent role rather than being aims in themselves.

During fieldwork in the north-central provinces and Lao Cai, the NRD program was seen to have its main focus on infrastructure, such as new roads, dikes and water canals, and a range of small production and livelihood diversification projects. Other visible aspects in Ha Tinh and Nghe An were loans for poor households to build "safe houses" for themselves or elevated shelters for cows and buffalo during flooding, and in some cases loans for relocating entire hamlets to higher ground, all in a combined effort with the CCS. Although nothing is handed out for free, there was common agreement among respondents in the four provinces that "rural policies" in general have a positive impact on local

livelihoods, although comments were that implementation could sometimes be better; furthermore, in many cases, the poorest households were left out due to not being able to provide a self-contribution (Bruun & Olwig, 2015). However, in particular, the obligatory construction of new "community halls" created tensions in many communes, because they were top-down initiated but bottom-up funded by mandatory payments from farmers; many complained about rough means of collecting the money.

Although "participation" forms part of the NRD program, interviewing showed that rural People's Committees primarily relegate public participation to accepting state-produced knowledge and complying with state policies under the guidance of local leaders. Decades of decentralization and "participatory development" have hardly led to collective empowerment but rather belong to the kind of interventions that act as tools to extend government control (Bruun, 2019; Ferguson, 1990; Salemink, 2006, p. 113). Meetings in the old mass organizations are seen to be one-way processes of policy and technocratic knowledge dissemination. Surveys in the north-central provinces included questions of farmers' opportunities to suggest local changes, improvements, and projects, and the answers to these were uniform: Authorities may listen, but the system does not allow even commune-level self-organizing around innovations, and commune leaderships commonly noted that they had neither the authority nor the financial means to initiate independent projects.

Not much literature addresses the NRD program's overall implications, not least due to difficulties of access. Some studies finds positive effects but a need for further studies (e.g., Nguyen & Minh, 2015), as well as problems of securing climate change adaptation (Buch-Hansen et al., 2017). An assessment by International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) concludes despite scant evidence that NRD has contributed to economic and social improvements in rural Vietnam, yet it could have been more effective, equitable, and sustainable; ultimately, it has contributed little to solving the critical challenges of rural economic transformation. The NRD has in particular responded mainly to top-down development priorities, given insufficient attention to value chain development and enterprise creation, and lacks institutional capacity and a rigorous performance monitoring system (IFAD, 2016); many of these concerns are also expressed in donor literature (e.g., WB, 2017).

Conclusion

This article has shown that long-term authoritarian governance and the implicit hierarchization of state–society relations have effected the concentration of environmental responsibility and ethics within the state sphere. CPV ideology perpetuates a deeply settled authoritarian mind-set that integrates paddy culture into a joint socioenvironmental management model in which control over nature and control over society become coterminous.

The present research suggests that when challenges to any dimension of the system rise to the level of emergencies, the party-state's most immediate response is to retreat into authoritarian self-intensification rather than permitting qualitative changes in the management model itself. Following China's lead, Vietnam is at the verge of full-scale AE in which comprehensive top-down socioenvironmental management systems become the normal and exclusive business of government. Not least, the authoritarian approach to environmentalism implies the conscious selection of intermediary actors between state and society to contain its potential for spontaneous organizing and new ideology formation as well as to defend key state economic interests, which inevitably drives intensified controls. From a larger perspective, spontaneous processes of environmental value change are inhibited, and an ecological turning point is potentially deferred. Moreover, under such social and ideological constraints, the concept of "environmentalism" under authoritarianism becomes debatable: When is the AE model expressive of genuine environmentalist thinking on the part of the state, and when is it more accurately described as a contradiction in terms?

This article has demonstrated the social consequences of the authoritarian state's adoption of an environmentalist agenda from mainly a rural perspective. Arguably, Vietnam suffers from the side effects of a technological revolution that increases the reach and prowess of the state, without a corresponding development of ethics: The utilitarian perspective has contributed to a critical disjuncture between shared norms and the objective conditions of the biophysical environment. Vietnam in its current phase of development demonstrates what happens when an essentially anthropocentric cultural model is intensified by a hard-headed Marxist-materialist approach while at the same time social forces are stifled. Concurrently, this basic outlook from the roots of Vietnamese engagement with the natural environment is carried along by the multitude of Vietnamese farmers and migrant workers who translocate to new towns and cities, to new construction sites, and to the highlands—the new frontier of Vietnamese economic enterprise.[17]

The combined results of technocratic policies and a stalled process of value change is a *staggering mistreatment of the environment* that continues to this day.[18] Thus, while the obvious advantage of AE is rapid and comprehensive policy outputs, and in principle easy dissemination though top-down command structures, this study falls in line with several others in pointing to shortcomings in implementation and outcome. In particular, associated implications are a low public concern, prevailing utilitarian approaches to nature, and a lack of mobilization across the state–society boundary.

So what are the prospects of change? After many years of engagement with rural communities, this research would suggest that, as a minimum, rural governance is reformed beyond the NRD program. Apart from contributing to national economic growth, the present form of rural organization serves the

dual purpose of securing elite economic interests and maintaining tight social control. Such persistent priorities, or path dependencies, not only uphold rural–urban inequalities but also result in an unsustainable agricultural model. Basic interfaces between innovative segments of society and key actors in agricultural production are mostly severed, to the effect that alternative visions for Vietnam's future are stymied. New actors—international, civil society, and commercial alike—are sorely needed in the rural economy together with better land tenure arrangements that allow a greater level of security, better income, and more stable relations to the land. Well aware of significant interprovincial differences and continued north–south controversies, we contend that current authoritarian power monopolies obstruct a cross-sector mobilization toward an effective environmental state.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. These research projects were funded by Danida: "Impacts of Climate Change in Mid Central Vietnam" (P1-08-VIE: 2009–2012), "Climate Change Induced Water Disasters and Participatory Information System" (11-PO4-VIE: 2012–2016), and "REDD+, The Forest Grab of All Times" (13-08KU: 2014–2018). Independent interviews on environmental perceptions around protected areas were carried out in Quang Nam, Kon Tum, and Dac Lak in 2019.
2. Here understood as a combined crisis of environmental degradation and social pressure for reform.
3. For instance, the GGS specifically refers to efficient use of natural capital, reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, and improvement of environmental quality as a means to stimulate economic growth.
4. "Environmental degradation coupled with vulnerability to the impact of extreme weather events and global climate change are major threats to the short, medium and long-term sustainability of the country's development" (WB, 2017, p. 2).
5. Examples are the "Law on Forest Protection and Development," the portfolio of the "Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment," and the provisions of the Law on Environmental Protection, which explicitly claim harmony with economic development.

6. Foreign environmental NGOs include World Wide Fund for Nature, Environmental Investigation Agency, Forest Trends, Fauna and Flora International, and International Union for Conservation of Nature. Also several wildlife protection NGOs are active.
7. Despite a high-profiled anticorruption campaign, Vietnam's TI index declined to 117th place in 2018.
8. Among urban young in Vietnam, environmental awareness and new organizing are rapidly emerging, particularly in the south. A 2018 United Nations Development Programme study on SDGs found that 76% of the young answered that "in Viet Nam people do not make a proper use of land and this is affecting the environment."
9. Restrictions on land use demand that farmers must acquire permission from local authorities to diversify their crops.
10. Standard land-holdings are typically around 1 *sao* ($360\,m^2$) per adult household member, with total land holdings of $500\ m^2$ to $2{,}500\ m^2$.
11. Crop intensification to increase rice exports has achieved average yields to 5.6 tons per hectare but pushed the use of inorganic fertilizer to nearly 300 kg per hectare (in some areas under study as much as 400–600 kg), approximately the double amount of Thailand, and compared with an average of 200 kg in Southeast Asia and 80 kg in the European Union.
12. The Catholic Church is highly vocal and played a prominent role in organizing protests against the Formosa Steel pollution scandal in Ha Tinh and Nghe An provinces.
13. NGOs may be permitted to operate in poorer inland or mountain villages (e.g., World Vision, Care, Red Cross) but only in extension of government work, and local government officials manage all financial support and emergency aid.
14. A law on water management came into effect in 1999, but the legal framework remains ineffective and tends to be ignored by local authorities, who generally prioritize rapid growth (Nguyen, 2013).
15. Evidently, strong environmental ethics might potentially be drawn from Buddhist and Catholic sources.
16. These are "unification of awareness and actions" in agriculture, realizing the national target programs by 2020, improving the quality of planning and management, building specialized development projects, and promoting law and policy.
17. According to one interpretation, they serve as a "territorial spearhead" of the Vietnamese state in the transformation and Vietnamization of the highlands (De Koninck, 1996).
18. Such as Vaclav Smil (1993) described China's mistreatment of the environment in the 1980s.

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