



“Extremely Rightful” Resistance: Land Appropriation and Rural Agitation in Contemporary Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Building on ethnographic fieldwork in a northern Vietnamese village, this article explores a rural protest against the appropriation of arable land for a development project. The focus is on villagers’ collective memories of an exceptional protest staged in 2010. The aim of the protest was to pressure local district authorities to increase the compensation villagers agreed to take three years earlier. While originally accepting compensation when their holdings were appropriated to build an industrial park, they later considered that the compensation paid was unfair and that some funds were misappropriated. They were aware that the likelihood of getting additional compensation was small and the risk of repression high. In tracing their struggle, the article argues that villagers did not seek to retain land as their primary subsistence source or as cherished ancestral land. Neither were they driven by an abstract sense of justice. Rather, they represented themselves as active, responsible decision-makers, determined to risk their own safety to bring their family a better future. They therefore employed an “extremely rightful” form of resistance rarely documented in the scholarship on Asia. They not only confined actions within officially sanctioned channels, but also underplayed all oppositional intentions against central and local authorities.

KEYWORDS

land appropriation;
marketisation; rural
agitation; rightful resistance;
Vietnam

Launched in 1986, Vietnam’s process of market opening, widely known as Renovation (*Đổi mới*), is a version of marketisation that is widely regarded as more successful and peaceful than its equivalents in the former USSR and other post-socialist countries (Fforde and de Vylder 1996; Watts 2002; Ravallion and Walle 2008. For other post-socialist settings, see Burawoy and Verdery 1999).¹ Yet the concern of this article is with one of the most contested features of marketisation in Vietnam, as well as other marketised agrarian settings in Asia: mass protests over land acquisition.² In the last 15 years, Vietnam has become a site of dramatic mass protests against land appropriation projects initiated by provincial and district authorities to establish industrial parks in rural areas and urban residential complexes. A report by the Government Inspectorate to the prime minister in 2012 stated that 70% of civil cases lodged with

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district and provincial courts involved disputed land appropriations. In most cases, the disputes have engendered extensive public agitations and violent confrontations between local communities and state authorities (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2009; Harms 2012).³

Xuan Village and Protest

The focus of this article is on collective memories of households in Xuan (Springtime), an anonymised village in Thai Binh province, 120 kilometres from the capital Hanoi, and the site of a mass protest staged in 2010. The protest was an attempt by villagers to pressure local district authorities to increase the compensation they had received for their land holdings, appropriated three years previously to build an industrial park.

A site of unmechanised subsistence rice farming until the end of Vietnam's co-operative economy (1958–1986), at the time of fieldwork Xuan was a comparatively prosperous community by the standards of northern rural Vietnam and a showcase of the intended boons of *Đổi mới*. Although some of the poorest households still live in single-storey old-brick residences with tiled roofing characteristic of the pre-*Đổi mới* period, these are rapidly being replaced by city-style multi-storey new-builds with numerous signs of the new wealth generated under *Đổi mới*, notably televisions, telephones and motorcycles.

Of the many villages in the district, Xuan is known as a community of “go-ahead households,” that have been responsive to opportunities of commercial production since the onset of *Đổi mới*. Farming for the market began in 1993, when village authorities divided the community's entire arable acreage, hitherto under the co-operative's centralised authority, into individual holdings and allocated them to all households on an equal basis.⁴ When land appropriation was initiated in 2007, only the poorest few still relied on their household holdings as the primary subsistence resource. For most other households, the gain from cultivating the arable holdings contributed merely 5–15% to their budget. These households obtained much larger incomes from non-farm commercial activities. Besides rice farming, three-quarters of households had obtained a second income from home-based sideline activities. The most common was the rearing of pigs and chickens and making dried rice-noodles for sale to food stalls in neighbouring villages. Two-thirds of households had obtained a third income from small-scale retailing of manufactured consumer goods sourced from outside the village to retail at the village marketplace, from Vietnamese foodstuffs to Chinese plastic utensils (Chau 2018).

In 2007, the district authorities appropriated, as a single site, one-fifth of the village's paddy fields, comprising the holdings of 273 of the 1,600 village households, and allocated the land for the construction of an industrial park. All affected households received compensation in an amount set by the district government. Although villagers can occasionally negotiate with the officials over the compensation rate, by law state authorities can force villagers to comply with their decision and punish those who do not (Harms 2011).⁵

Initially all households with holdings appropriated were delighted about the scheme. All said they knew everyone else was envious though they did not display any hostility to those lucky enough to be included in the plan. A villager recalled that those telling him how lucky his household was to have their fields taken said, “*Nhà ông có phúc mới được thu hồi đất*,” literally “You are lucky to have your fields appropriated.” The use of

the auxiliary verb “*được*,” signals a desirable occurrence, rather than a stroke of misfortune, for which the verb form would be “*bị*”.⁶

Everyone in Xuan who recalled the day of compensation payment in 2007 described the atmosphere then as “*tưng bừng*” (joyously festive). Although the households due to receive compensation were told they could collect their payments at the People’s Committee’s headquarter at 8 am on the designated day, everyone said they arrived far earlier. There was a near-stampede when the doors eventually opened as the crowd rushed in, jostling one another to be first. While the payments were available over three days, all were completed in a morning. The villagers were so eager to get the money that they signed the necessary forms without reading them. Both well-off and poorer households considered the compensation generous for their holdings and no-one thought it fraudulently provided.

What made Xuan households’ attitude towards the scheme much more striking was their protest three years later. From June to August 2010, virtually every household whose holdings were appropriated in 2007 launched a much-publicised agitation. Over three months, state officials were confronted with villagers erecting tent encampments and blocking entrances to the appropriated land. The villagers explained that their agitation was not resistance to the acquisition scheme itself, but an attempt to open negotiations over newly perceived inadequacies of compensation. It is striking that in villagers’ recollection of the protest, they emphasised that they had every reason to believe that their chance of getting additional compensation was far smaller than the possibility of being repressed by police. Despite this risk, they refused to back down even when district authorities threatened to stop their protest by force. So in September 2010, the district government mobilised hundreds of policemen to destroy the villagers’ makeshift encampments and detain some protestors.

The Xuan case calls into question three major strands of scholarship on the causes of protests against land appropriation in Vietnam and other rapidly marketising Asian contexts. First, Xuan households’ initial support for the land appropriation scheme is much in contrast with what many scholars have documented elsewhere in Vietnam and Asia: villagers are considered voiceless victims whose lands are taken against their will by an all-powerful state and who stage protests because they regard the appropriated holdings as their primary subsistence resource and its loss a direct threat to their survival (for Vietnam, see Harms 2012; for China, see Zweig 2000; for India, see Levien 2012; for Laos, see Kenney-Lazar 2012). Second, Xuan households’ voluntary relinquishment of their holdings calls into question literature which documents fierce villagers’ efforts to retain their land, either because they consider the holdings ancestral lands to be defended from commercial development or because the sites are of great cultural and symbolic values to the local communities’ traditional way of life, such as graveyards and communal houses (see, for example, Suu 2007; Yep and Fong 2009; Labbé 2014).⁷ Third, the Xuan protest cannot be fully explained by a growing body of scholarship that attributes such protests to villagers’ feeling of injustice over inadequate compensation, motivating them to challenge state authorities whom they consider corrupt to gain a fairer share of the premiums from land transactions (see Luong 2005; Kim 2009; Truong and Perera 2010; for China see Cai 2003; Yep 2012).⁸ The Xuan case raises issues not thoroughly discussed in this scholarship, which are why villagers dare to incur the risk of confronting state authorities and how they manage to evade or minimise repression, given the

extensive literature on state violence against public protests in China (Guo 2001), India (Patnaik 2007) and Vietnam (Han and Vu 2008).

Researching Protest, Theorising Resistance

Xuan villagers retain vivid memories of the land appropriation scheme and of the protest three years later and talk about the protest amongst themselves. Yet they still consider this dramatic event a “sensitive” issue, to be discussed with outsiders with great caution. Hence, my inquiries of the protest could begin only after several months of fieldwork, when I had gained a fair amount of trust from locals. Great care was required when exploring the event, only discussing it when informants took the initiative in recalling memories of the protest, often amidst conversations about other topics such as household livelihood choices, living conditions, education and career opportunities for children and the local management of land since *Đổi mới*.

Having established a good rapport with villagers, interviews could be arranged to discuss the protest. Out of more than 40 interviews made, of particular value were repeated discussions with the three leaders of the protest, who provided in-depth insights into how the protest was planned and executed and whose memories are the focus of my discussion. Group discussions were also organised, bringing together the leaders, other protest participants and villagers who did not participate in the event yet were observers and quiet supporters of the protestors. These group discussions, typically involving four to five informants but sometimes up to 20, allowed villagers’ memories of the protest, particularly their views of the risks and the motivations, to be shared and discussed.

By documenting villagers’ collective memories of one of the most dramatic chapters in the village’s history since the onset of *Đổi mới*, this article makes three contributions to the scholarly literature on resistance against land acquisition in contemporary Vietnam and Asia. First, while most scholarly works on resistance against land appropriation in Vietnam have focused on urban and peri-urban settings, this article offers an account of a rural community and the transforming effects of land acquisition. It will be shown that, compared to their urban counterparts, being 120 kilometres from the central government, media outlets and legal consultation services in the capital presented Xuan households with a distinctive set of challenges when launching the protest. They thus creatively devised strategies of resistance both similar to yet also very different from those documented for urban Vietnam.

Second, it will be argued that when launching the protest, villagers did not seek to defend their holdings as the primary source of subsistence or as ancestral land, which state documents now regard as signs of “backward” peasant mentality, passivity, and lacking in developmental aspirations (Phong 2007; Vietnam Communist Party 2002). Neither were they driven by an abstract sense of justice. It will be demonstrated that while villagers were indeed infuriated by the injustice they suffered because of district officials’ corruption, what really encouraged them to stage such daring public agitation was a careful judgement of opportunities and risks and a local sense of agency and personal responsibility for achieving sustainable gain and security for their families.

Finally, the article shows that to negotiate the danger of violent state repression, Xuan households employed an “extremely rightful” form of resistance rarely

documented for contemporary Asia. While instances of “rightful resistance” can take various forms, they share one thing: although users of rightful resistance strictly employ legal non-violent channels and utilise state’s own laws and rhetoric to legitimise their actions, they always publicly air discontent with and criticisms of state authorities. In most cases, local officials are the target of villagers’ anger. On occasions, however, the protestors even challenge the central government and state policies generally (see, for example, O’Brien and Li 2006; Tran Thi Thu Trang 2009; Turner and Schoenberger 2011; Kerkvliet 2014). Yet as will be shown below, Xuan households not only confined actions within officially sanctioned channels, but also underplayed all oppositional intentions against state officials, both the far-away central government and local district authorities.

Actively Seeking Gains For Family

Of the Xuan households with holdings appropriated in 2007, Mr Thanh’s household was amongst the poorest. By 2007, Thanh’s household relied on their rice crop for subsistence and a little extra cash. His wife was permanently unwell and unfit for manual labour. Their two sons were in school and could only help out occasionally outside school time. Because Thanh had to do all the work of cultivation, he was unable to earn as much from the bricklaying he did for additional income. As they had to spend Thanh’s entire bricklaying wage on everyday expenses, the family had no savings and was considered poor by the village’s standards. At the time of land appropriation, the family lived in an old-brick single-storey house with a leaky roof.

In contrast, Mrs Han’s household was amongst the most well-off in 2007. Han’s household was one of the largest pig breeders in Xuan, earning an income four times that from cultivating rice on their holdings. With funds from pig rearing, Han had built a two-storey house with a bathroom with high-grade sanitary-ware, a large courtyard, and expensive tiled floors. Han earned even more income by running one of the most popular retail stalls in the village market. Profits from the stall had financed her daughter’s education, who had become a college student in Hanoi two years before the land appropriation.

Despite these different circumstances, both the well-off like Han and those substantially poorer like Thanh said that before the land appropriation, they all had a keen desire to sell their holdings. Yet, as Thanh recalled:

Before the land appropriation, what we gained from cultivating our holdings only gave us enough to eat. But everyone today knows that having enough to eat is not enough. So back then we really wanted to sell the land for cash to find new income sources. It was the only way we could afford new comforts, like rebuilding our house, so we had a proper place to live and worship our ancestors like most other households. But we found no buyers, so we could not afford even to repair the leaky roof...

Based on such statements, two motivations behind Xuan households’ desire to sell their arable holdings were revealed. First, the villagers did not consider their holdings “cherished ancestral lands.” Rather, what they are sentimentally attached to is the house plot, on which a family house is built. Almost everyone said that the house plot had remained in the family from before the August 1945 Revolution, while the fields were

only provided in 1993 when co-operativisation ended. This meant the land was not thought of as a long-held family possession to be preserved at all costs. Second, when the appropriation scheme was launched, households' expectations of a decent family life had changed radically. Everyone said that in the early *Đổi mới* period, what everyone needed was a piece of arable land to meet basic subsistence. Yet by 2007, all households regarded things like proper housing, motorcycles and proper schooling as essential. Paddy cultivation did not produce sufficient income to meet these expectations.

As most middle-income households like Han's household had moved from relying mainly on paddy cultivation to a new world of commercial activities like home-based sideline activities and retailing, they thought they had obtained a better means to satisfy the new standards of a prosperous family life. Therefore, they no longer considered the holdings a safety net worth keeping. For poorer households, selling their land was their only way to obtain more remunerative livelihood options and provide the family with the new and higher living standards enjoyed by many other households.

In this context, when the possibility of land appropriation emerged, as Thanh expressed it, the scheme was "*chết đuối vớ được cọc*" (a floating trunk for a drowning man); it was a life-saver for the household. Thanh recalled a widely shared village memory of the day the scheme was announced:

The district authorities promised that for every household with appropriated holdings, at least one household member would get employment in the new industrial park. Most importantly, they said we would get compensation for the holdings, and the rate was three times the average price of farmland in Xuan in 2007.⁹

Like all households with holdings appropriated in 2007, Thanh considered the district officials' offer more generous than he had expected. He said these villagers were excited about the prospect of industrial employment. More importantly, Thanh considered the scheme gave his household exactly what they had long desired; the sale of its land at three times the amount they had wanted. Even for well-off households, the compensation was a remarkable windfall; for Han it was equal to two years' revenue from retailing. For Thanh, this was a fabulous offer:

As soon as I received the compensation at the committee's office, I rushed home to hide the money. I was afraid the district authorities might change their mind and did not take the land... We had never held that much money in our hands. Originally we expected to sell our land for enough cash to raise some chickens, but with the compensation, we could do something much better.

After a quick discussion, his family decided to use the money to open a stall in the village's marketplace selling manufactured provision items.

Thanh's response on using the compensation funds was typical. Many decided to invest most of it in finding new income sources or expanding current ones, to replace the income from the appropriated land. At the time of fieldwork, Thanh's wife's market stall was doing well and the income from the stall made a massive difference to the household's budget. The average return from the stall was VND 1.5 million (\$75) per month, three times the income paddy cultivation had generated. It provided the family not only with essentials, but also allowed modest savings. Thanh's eldest son had also become a worker in the industrial park, earning a monthly wage equal to his mother's income from retailing.

Land appropriation delivered substantial changes to the living standards of most households involved. Those who already had big houses like Han spent money on new amenities. Han said she purchased a motorcycle for her daughter studying in Hanoi. Poorer households like Thanh's spent the money on housing redecoration. Thanh's house was renovated a year after the compensation payment with a new flat concrete-roof. With the earnings from his wife's market stall, they later added a bathroom with a flush lavatory. Thanh explained "Because we took the compensation and used it well, we have achieved a new life for our family. Now we have everything: a proper place to live and worship our ancestors and stable incomes."

Like all Xuan households with appropriated holdings, Thanh represented himself as a choice-making agent, actively weighing the gains and risks his family would face in the appropriation scheme and being bold in grasping opportunities for family gain. In short, they willingly relinquished their holdings to district officials because they considered the scheme an opportunity to be grasped. Their land suddenly became a valuable asset with the state offering a chance to convert it into cash for a substantially better family life.

From Joy to Anger

It was the spirit of initiative and agency, rather than victimhood and passivity, that was also the inspiration for Xuan villagers to handle the much more complex situation that unfolded two years later when they discovered that the compensation they had received was only a fraction of what they had been entitled to.

Information regarding the inadequacy of compensation was not received as official news: "Everything we had was informal, word-of-mouth information," said Han. Each household had their own story about how they were alerted to the idea that they had been cheated. The news came through various connections: urban kin, village kin and neighbours. Such different pieces of information were eventually put together and presented villagers with something they considered trustworthy.

Han was widely considered to have been the first to alert others of insufficient compensation, thanks to her access to well-off kin living in cities, a source unavailable to most other villagers. Han's elder sister, Duong, was one of the few Xuan villagers who received higher education in Hanoi thanks to the socialist state's policy of free higher education in the 1970s and 1980s. After graduation, she permanently settled in Hanoi where she became a university professor. Han recalled the moment she learned of under-compensation:

One day, two years after the land appropriation, I called my sister to inform her that I had just bought my daughter the new motorbike. That was the first time I told her how much compensation we got in 2007. But she was surprised, saying she knew people in farming villages near Hanoi who had received much higher compensation. She told me district authorities commonly misappropriated the compensation supposed to be paid to villagers.

Until that point Han had considered the compensation generous. The conversation suddenly made her suspicious about the compensation received.

As suspicions grew, villagers began seeking evidence to verify their scepticism. The first point of support were village relatives. After talking with her sister, Han

immediately recalled a conversation with Nguu, her 75-year-old uncle. A war veteran and retired accountant to the village People's Committee, Nguu lived with his wife, a retired teacher. As they both had pensions, they had never relied on paddy farming for subsistence. Since their only daughter got married and moved to live with her husband's family five years before the land appropriation, and as both had become old and lacked the means to tend their own fields, they had lent their holdings to some relatives in the village free-of-charge. They had been delighted when half of their holdings were appropriated in 2007.

Nguu became a leading figure in the 2010 protest. As the People's Committee's former accountant, Nguu had wide respect and was considered a learned man, from whom other villagers regularly sought advice. Nguu explained: "After talking to Han, I started searching for public documents related to the compensation procedures, in state-run magazines, in the village committee's office for public records and even the provincial central library. Finally, I found this document..." He referred to Decree 188, which the central government issued as the official reference for district authorities to decide the compensation in all land appropriation schemes across Vietnam. Nguu expressed his emotions: "I was shocked. The decree said the maximum compensation rate is 90,000 VND per square metre, three times what we had received!" He shared this discovery with Han and other households who had had their holdings appropriated. All said that the district officials' corruption immediately became their key concern. "We discussed it everywhere, in the village pagoda, our houses, the market, and everyone became interested in finding more evidence," Nguu recalled.

Thanh was widely credited by other villagers for finding what everyone considered the hard evidence of the compensation inadequacy. He recalled that a friend in a village 20 kilometres from Hanoi had also received compensation in his village, two years after the appropriation in Xuan. Initially, district authorities there offered villagers the same compensation rate as in Xuan. But the people there knew about Decree 188 and demanded more compensation. Eventually, the authorities there had to increase the compensation to VND 90,000/m². Thanh said: "I told this to others. Everyone became angry. Apparently, the district officials had misappropriated the compensation the state had given us." The Xuan villagers became convinced that what they had considered generous compensation was but a small portion of a much bigger sum the central government had granted them. The villagers thought that these funds had probably been misappropriated by district officials.

Their sense of unfairness immediately inspired a new goal for the villagers; they determined to claim full compensation. Another meeting was held, with villagers saying they no longer met in small groups in private houses, but moved to the village's communal house, which had a courtyard that could accommodate representatives from 273 households. The solution that everyone considered sensible was recommended by Nguu. He recalled: "Back then I said we should form a group of spokesmen [*ban đại diện*] to go to the district committee's office and request a reconsideration of our compensation." In other words, Nguu and other villagers then thought the most feasible solution was to seek justice through administrative procedures, which they knew was a relatively safe avenue. This is because, in contemporary Vietnam, state authorities consider it normal for anyone who thinks they have been deprived of their rightful money to search for documentary evidence of entitlement and file a request to

local officials for consideration; this is not something considered confrontational or anti-state (Vietnam National Assembly 2003, articles 136 and 138).

The mission to the local state offices was assigned to those who had contributed the most to discovering what villagers believed to be serious officials' acts of trickery: Han, Nguu and Thanh. Three days after the meeting of those who had received compensation, the three representatives travelled to the district committee's office, some seven kilometres from Xuan. Nguu explained: "None of us had ever been there before. We brought the Decree and the case of Thanh's friend's village. Upon arrival, we asked to meet the officials in charge of the 2007 scheme." Nguu went on to say: "We thought at best, they would acknowledge their mistake and increase the compensation, or would at least agree to reconsider our case," implying that villagers thought they had a strong case and the district officials would treat their request with appropriate seriousness.

Yet they were disappointed. Nguu recollected:

Those who met us were low-level cadres, not the high-ranking officials we met in 2007. The big officials did not bother to see us. And the officials we saw straightforwardly rejected our request. They said it would be illegal to reconsider the compensation, because we had agreed with the original rate and had signed the forms to relinquish land to district authorities and taken the compensation voluntarily. They also said it had been two years from the day of land appropriation, so the deadline for any request for reconsideration had long since passed.

Nguu recalled how surprised he was by the way the officials treated them as backward, ignorant peasants, to be ignored and taken lightly, without warmth and seriousness.

This unsuccessful approach sparked heated debate among villagers regarding the rejection of their request. Again, Nguu's explanation was convincing for the villagers: "I told others that from my knowledge, what the officials said made perfect legal sense. It meant we had put up a weak case against the district authorities regarding any claim of additional compensation." Nguu agreed with the points made by the officials. He realised they faced tremendous legal challenges if they were to claim additional compensation compared to households in Thanh's friend's village, who realised the trickery in good time and filed the complaint before signing the contracts and taking compensation.¹⁰

A significant problem for the villagers was their lack of hard evidence of the district officials' corruption. While they believed there was trickery involved, as Nguu put it, "Up until then, everything we knew had come from word-of-mouth information." He recognised that to prove that officials had misappropriated payments, "we had to show written evidence of how much the state had given the district to use for compensation, and how much difference between that and what the district authorities had given us." Realistically, Nguu knew that "the officials would never disclose such information, because they did not want to take off their shirt to show others their back," using the proverb, "*vạch áo cho người xem lưng*," that describes stupid culprits who reveal to others the evidence of their own crime. Nguu knew that access to such information would be strictly limited, and ordinary villagers could not request the necessary documents without the permission of the district government itself.

To find this critical evidence, the villagers and the representatives decided to bring their case to the next higher level in the local administration hierarchy, the provincial

committee. Everyone knew that provincial officials had the authority to see the documents and verify fraudulence, if any. Yet again, their efforts proved fruitless. “The provincial officials rejected our claim on the exact same grounds their district subordinates,” Nguu recalled angrily.

Upon the second unsuccessful attempt to seek justice from administrative procedures, villagers reached a painful conclusion. “The provincial and district officials were in the same boat [*cùng hội cùng thuyền*] and had cheated us from the beginning. There was nothing we could do against them,” Nguu recalled. Villagers believed that the provincial authorities had made arrangements with the district officials to get a share of the misappropriated compensation, and thus would cover for their subordinates. Therefore, villagers would stand no chance of using administrative procedures to claim additional money.

Substantial Gain, Huge Risk

Following the unsuccessful trip to the provincial office, villagers again met to discuss how they could claim justice without using administrative procedures. They found two cases they considered good models. Nguu proposed one: “...I said we could do like people in Quynh Phu.” A neighbouring district, in 1997 the people there formed a network of villages and staged three months of agitation with thousands of participants. Their protest was against corrupt local officials who were extorting vast sums from villagers as fake imposts they fraudulently represented as compulsory fees to community development schemes. Nguu recalled that the Quynh Phu villagers “attacked people’s committee offices, seized village officials they considered corrupt and demanded redress from the central government. They became famous in Vietnam for securing sympathetic central government’s intervention.” That intervention involved high-ranking officials being sent “to investigate instead of ordering repression.” Eventually, the investigators decided in favour of the villagers and punished the officials. This case was repeatedly recalled by villagers as a case of local government’s corruption successfully challenged by intelligent actions by rural communities, and thus a potentially effective model for them to follow.¹¹

Thanh proposed another model involving a friend’s village near Hanoi. There, villagers rallied and threatened to bring the case to the Supreme Court and the central government. The district authorities became frightened and agreed to additional compensation. Thanh’s example showed that even if central officials did not actually get involved and punish errant local officials as in Quynh Phu, district authorities could be pressured by rallying villagers to compromise to avoid possible punishment from central superiors.

By the end of the meeting, villagers all agreed they had new hope for what they had thought a dead-end quest for more compensation. Nguu expressed the new consensus:

We all believed that staging a protest would be the only way to pressure the district authorities to increase the compensation. By launching a protest, we could get the attention from the central government. Only the central government could verify whether the district authorities had misappropriated our money.

However, in recalling this meeting, many villagers were more interested in recalling the risks they would face when staging a protest. Han said she was the first to warn: “I told

others we was just a small group of 250 households, and our village was 120 kilometres from Hanoi. Therefore, getting noticed by the government wouldn't be easy."

The villagers soon realised they would face even greater dangers. Nguu explained that he told villagers that the people of Quynh Phu did not gain justice easily:

Before the government got involved, Quynh Phu district authorities had used the protesters' violent actions like seizing officials and attacking state offices to accuse them of disrupting public order. Many protestors were beaten and arrested by the police before the central officials pronounced them not guilty...

Nguu used the official words "*gây rối trật tự công cộng*" (disrupting public order), which is an actual phrase of state legislation, describing violent acts of hooliganism that cause widespread public disturbance.

Villagers recalled that after listening to Nguu, almost everyone said they had heard about the same charge of "disrupting public order" being used by district authorities against rural agitation across Vietnam. One villager showed copies of a leading state-run newspaper he had taken to the meeting to share with others. The newspaper reported on a protest against land appropriation two years earlier. It displayed images of what looked like random acts of violence, with angry villagers using sticks and long-bladed knives to attack police. According to the newspaper, these villagers were accused of "disrupting public order," with police mobilised to restore order. As the villagers explained, this was a euphemism for a violent crackdown. The villagers agreed that such violent repression was commonly deployed by local authorities against rural protestors, meaning the Xuan villagers could also become victims.

But even "disrupting public order" was not the charge the villagers feared most. Han had a collection of internet articles her sister sent after Han informed her of their protest plan. These articles were about another protest staged before agitation began in Xuan. These villagers had also signed forms and taken compensation before discovering the officials' misappropriation of compensation funds. They protested for more money. Yet the result was repression by the police and many were arrested. The situation faced there appeared similar to Xuan. Han recounted:

The officials claimed that villagers had conservative peasant mentalities [*tâm lý nông dân bảo thủ*], thus did not want to relinquish the land. They therefore opposed the land appropriation policy [*chống đối chính sách thu hồi đất của nhà nước*] and impeded the state's goal of industrialisation [*cản trở sự nghiệp công nghiệp hoá*]. We could easily end up the same!

What Han had realised was that because Xuan households were in a weak legal position vis-à-vis the district officials regarding their compensation claim, district officials could use these terms, also actual phrases of state legislation, to attack and stigmatise them as holders of a growth-inhibiting subsistence mentality, who were defying the land appropriation policy itself. All knew that the state considered this far more serious than "disrupting public order." These accusations meant the villagers could be cast as opponents of an actual policy and as subversive of the government. Villagers knew that this could be fatal for their claims, as such a charge granted local officials limitless power to repress.

As Nguu explained: "We all then knew that launching a protest could be a double-edged sword and our chances were just one in a hundred," using the idiom, "*con dao*

hai luōi,” describing an act that can bring both substantial benefit and great damage. The villagers knew the odds were stacked against them when staging the protest. There were many ways their proposed agitation could be interpreted as a serious offence by the authorities. The latter had at hand a repertoire of terms and categories to label their action subversive. This meant the chances of violent repression were high and the chance of additional compensation low.

Personal Sacrifice For Family Prosperity

All participating households claimed they would never have taken these massive risks had it not been for the strong sense of responsibility for their families’ future. Most said the prospect of getting three times the original compensation meant an unprecedented opportunity to obtain family improvements beyond their most optimistic expectations, which their responsibility as parents and family care-takers meant they could not miss.

Such a large amount of money was particularly important to poorer households. Thanh explained: “With the original compensation we had managed to open the retailing stall and renovate our house. So if we got three times that amount, we could add another storey, or send my second child to college. Until that time these things had existed only in our dreams.” His wife, however, did not want Thanh to participate in the agitation because it was too dangerous and suggested that they be satisfied with the original compensation. Yet, as Thanh explained to his wife:

This is a one-every-thousand-year opportunity to make our family’s life better. We have taken the original compensation and have made small improvements to our living standards. But now we have the chance to achieve much bigger improvements to our children’s future. If we miss it because we are afraid and only care about our own individual safety, then are we still worthy of being parents anymore?

So Thanh did not participate in the agitation as a self-interested, maximising individual, but as a caring parent determined to fulfil a moral calling to take all opportunities to achieve a big improvement in his family’s well-being, even if that meant putting himself in danger.

The determination to take a risk to achieve big family gains is also conveyed by better-off households. Sitting in the presence of the comforts they had acquired at the time of the agitation, Han admitted that in 2010:

our living standards were better than the majority. But our duty was to make our family’s life even better. We had managed to send our daughter to college. But if we could get the full compensation, we could get her a job in a state agency. If so, then however dangerous it was to participate in the protest, it would still be worthwhile.

Photographs of their spacious two-storey house and of their daughter in college uniform were among the evidence that the household was better-off than most other villagers. Like everyone in Xuan, they considered state employment a break-through advance for any family, a much bigger jump even from the other advances achieved. Villagers believe state companies never go bankrupt, thus providing an infinitely more secure employment. Yet securing state employment requires “sweeteners” on a scale far greater than what a household earns from sideline activities and small retailing. Han could meet the \$3,600 cost of her daughter’s study over four years, yet a state job would

require \$12,000 lump-sum “sweeteners,” which they could afford only if they got the compensation in full.

“Of course when we were about to launch the agitation, we knew we could have been beaten, even arrested. But these risks would affect only me, not my family,” Han said when tapping both hands to her chest, using the term “*bản thân*,” referring to her individual self, instead of the whole family. Han explained that before launching the agitation, villagers reached a consensus that each participating household would send only a single adult member to participate in the protest. This arrangement was crucial because if their protest was repressed by the police, only that individual would be vulnerable, while other household members would remain immune from legal charges. This decision reflects a situation villagers had learned about since the onset of *Đổi mới* as the authorities had largely abandoned the much-feared practices of the 1950s to 1980s that forced whole families to take responsibility for a crime committed by an individual family member. Han revealed that although her husband originally wanted to represent the household in the agitation, she persuaded him to let her take that role. Because she had been one of the spokespeople who brought the villagers’ case to the offices of district and provincial governments earlier, Han believed the district authorities had already identified her. Therefore, by volunteering to participate in the protest, Han wanted to make sure she would be the only household member made vulnerable to state repression.

These accounts indicate that Xuan villagers did not stage the agitation to regain their holdings and to cling to that as their primary source of subsistence or a cherished “peasant” way of life, as many poor farming communities in India (Banerjee 2006), China (Guo 2001), Cambodia and Laos (Baird 2017). Neither did they consider themselves passive victims of an all-powerful state, who accepted defeat or broke out into hopeless acts of frustration without carefully planned strategies. Rather, the protest was an active effort by Xuan households to claim the additional compensation they thought they rightfully deserved, yet had been illegally appropriated by district officials. At the same time, this did not mean Xuan households launched the protest out of an abstract sense of justice, merely seeking a fairer share of the premiums from land transaction, as Yep (2012) documents of rural protests in China. Their choice to stage the risky protest was instead a thought-through decision, informed by a process of carefully factoring risks and gains. More importantly, that daring decision was motivated by a local sense of agency and personal responsibility for achieving sustainable gain and security for the family, and an unyielding will to put the benefit of the family above the individual. While protest participants could have avoided confronting local authorities, protecting their individual safety, they launched the protest fully aware of the dangers they faced, ensuring their families were well protected, as they struggled to provide them with a brighter future.

Extremely Rightful Resistance

The agitation was launched in June 2010. According to Nguu, the protesters first erected two tent encampments, blocking two main entrances of the industrial park which, by then, had finished construction and two factories were about to begin operation. The protesters thought that blocking the park’s entrances would cause the

companies to become frustrated. Nguu explained that this frustration would lead the companies to “quickly report our protest to the media, the district officials, and the news about our protest might even reach the central government.” The site and time of protest were carefully planned to maximise the chances of agitation in a small village being noticed by the authorities.

All households joining the protest said they shared two responsibilities in the following three months. First was contributing a small sum to pay for the tents, drinking water for those guarding the tents and electricity bills for the household that ran a line to the protest site. Second, the adult members that represented each household to participate in the protest took turns to man the tents in case local media came to report on their agitation, or district officials sent police to destroy the tents if unguarded. At the same time, this rotation also allowed participants to continue their daily household activities and only commit a small amount of their time to the protest.

Besides these collective responsibilities, villagers said they assigned specific tasks to particular households to utilise their unique resources. Han was tasked with contacting her sister Duong in Hanoi who then put villagers in touch with a former student, then a reporter for a local newspaper. The reporter helped cover the news about the Xuan agitation in the newspaper only two weeks after its launch. Nguu was assigned to stay with the tents most of the time as well as being the protestors’ spokesperson to meet local media and visiting district officials, partly because he lived on pensions and did not engage in economic pursuits every day. A week after the agitation first appeared in the local newspaper, the district committee sent low-level cadres to the encampments. After learning of villagers’ wish to meet higher-level officials to discuss additional compensation, the cadres left, promising to be in touch soon.

Yet attracting the media and district officials’ attention was only the “easy” first phase. All enthusiastically recalled how they handled the second phase, when their protest was noticed by district officials, which also made them vulnerable to repression. As villagers recalled, the solution that everyone then considered sensible was to avoid any reckless move. They recognised that such actions by people in protests before theirs allowed officials to criminalise their action and legalise the use of repressive power.

When villagers first met district officials, they took extra precautions to avoid making any acts in public that could be classified as “ *bạo lực* ” (violent). Nguu remembered: “We set a rule that nobody should act aggressively in front of the district authorities or the media, and nobody should not carry weapon of any kind, which could be photographed and used as evidence against us.” Even household long knives that some protestors used to split bamboo while guarding the tents were removed and replaced with small knives as the long ones could be seen as weapons. By adopting this tactic, villagers aimed to avoid what happened to villagers in Quynh Phu and elsewhere, where violent acts in front of state officials saw them charged by local police with “disrupting public order.” Xuan villagers, by contrast, said they strictly avoided violent confrontation of these kinds, and using tent encampments to block the park’s entrances was their strongest move. Such acts were widely seen as small violations and normally would not be criminalised as “disrupting public order.”

Yet leaders of the agitation said that avoiding violence was only one amongst many complex strategies pursued. A week after the district officials first visited the villagers’ protest site, they returned. This time their tone was more threatening. As Nguu recalled,

“As they got out of their car, they immediately ordered us to dismantle the tents at once. They said we were preventing the industrial park from beginning operations, thus opposing the land appropriation policy and impeding the state’s goal of industrialisation.” Ironically, this kind of threat told the villagers that their non-violence strategy had worked, otherwise they would have been repressed and arrested. Even so, they now faced accusations that they feared most: opposing the land appropriation policy itself and being subversive of the central government.

In response, villagers said they devised a new tactic. They chose people with special backgrounds to appear in public, either to be at the encampment or to meet the district officials and reporters covering the news. They asked “war veterans, Heroic Mothers, and Party members to be at the tents more frequently. With their presence, nobody could say we were opposing the regime and the state...”¹² Nguu remembered as he displayed an old military uniform with dozens of medals pinned to it, which he normally wore when attending formal state-sanctioned ceremonies as a veteran and Party member. He added: “I wore the same uniform to meet reporters and district officials back then.” This tactic was adopted from the experiences of Quynh Phu, where protestors used it to evade police repression. The villagers’ plan was to show that their actions were represented by people best qualified to embody the officially praised merits of heroism and patriotism, the most loyal contributors to socialism and the Party-state. They were the last people who would challenge the regime’s legitimacy.

Two weeks later, after failing to press villagers to voluntarily dismantle the encampments, the district officials began sending high-level cadres to the encampments to meet the protestors and eventually invited their representatives to the district headquarters to submit their petition (*đơn kiến nghị*). For the Xuan protestors this was confirmation that their agitation was entering a new and much more risky stage when they would have to both air their compensation claim and disentangle their action from the charge of being anti-government. They would have to do this by means of official talks and written petitions. The latter were significant: “Written language was black ink on white paper [*giấy trắng mực đen*],” said Han. This proverb refers to something officially written or declared that cannot be altered and denied. Villagers feared if they said or wrote inappropriate words in official meetings and their petition, the district authorities could use these as evidence to accuse them of opposing the Party-state.

In response to this new situation, the villagers employed an unusual tactic. Although their true intention was to protest the district authorities’ corruption, they deliberately avoided terminologies that were oppositional to the district officials. The reason was their knowledge of a technique often used by local officials when reporting protestors’ terms to the media or higher-level officials. They would extract a sentence from a whole document, separating some words from the rest of the sentence or omitting a verb’s object, thereby altering the whole meaning of protestors’ original intention. For example, villagers said they strictly avoided using the term “*biểu tình*,” literally a protest, to describe their action. Han explained: “On many occasions when I met reporters, they often asked me ‘why do you protest,’ referring to our action as ‘*biểu tình*’. I immediately said that what we did was not ‘*biểu tình*,’ but only ‘*trình bày nguyện vọng*’ [expressing one’s needs].” While the term “*biểu tình*,” used without an object, had been widely employed to describe organised public acts in which participants expressed objection to policies and the state generally, by contrast, “*trình bày nguyện vọng*,” conveyed no

oppositional intent. As Han observed: “The phrase meant that we were ‘below,’ asking for help from those ‘above,’ rather than criticising them for misappropriating our money.” Instead of accusing the district authorities of violating state laws and illegally depriving villagers of their rightful entitlement, villagers intended to represent themselves as being at peace with the state, humbly asking for help from a benign, caring and respected superior.

Another example of villagers’ unusual tactics is the petition villagers submitted to the district authorities and the press, the first paragraph, in bold, explained their aim:

All Xuan households whose land was appropriated strongly supported the policy of land appropriation and building the industrial park, because this policy made our life better. However, the compensation we received in 2007 was lower than the compensation rate elsewhere in the province and the rate regulated in Government Decree 188. We therefore propose that district authorities consider increasing the compensation for us in accordance with the state’s policy as regulated in Decree 188, so that we can improve our living standards even more.

Villagers said that this single paragraph conveyed multiple tactical intentions. First, it contained no word with oppositional implications. Instead, they addressed the district officials using formal, respectful terms like “*đề nghị*” (propose), meaning politely asking or formally requesting. Nguu proudly credited himself for coming up with this term, saying it conveyed less critical intent than the term villagers originally planned to use, “*yêu cầu*,” (forcefully demand), which was commonly interpreted as an order issued by a superior to a subordinate. Second, by referencing Decree 188, villagers wanted to show that they were law-abiding citizens, not lawless people trying to disrupt public order. Finally, they aimed to show that their action was not driven by a conservative mentality, for which they defended the land in defiance of state modernisation efforts. Instead, they wanted to represent themselves not only as modern people and progressive supporters of the policy of land appropriation and industrialisation, but also as responsible citizens, trying to uphold the legitimacy of the state that they considered caring by peacefully requesting district authorities to properly implement the policy issued by their central superiors.

Some Vietnamese rural communities have abandoned risk-minimising tactics of “rightful resistance” in favour of more daring confrontational strategies, like showing disdain for state regulations, challenging existing laws and asserting officially unrecognised rights (Harms 2012; Kerkvliet 2014). Xuan households, however, aware of their vulnerability to state violence, did precisely the opposite. These villagers adopted a milder form of protest than a typical “rightful resistance,” so as to avoid the risk of being treated as dangerously anti-state. They not only confined their actions within officially sanctioned, non-violent channels of expression and employed official rhetoric, but also underplayed all oppositional intentions against state officials. What distinguished the Xuan protest from a typical “rightful resistance” was villagers’ efforts to downplay critical and oppositional intentions against not only the central government and state policies generally, but also local district authorities, a common target of villagers’ criticisms and grievances in “rightful resistance” protests in Asia (see O’Brien and Li 2006). Instead of portraying themselves as justice-seekers and aggrieved victims of corrupt local officials, they represented themselves as law-abiding citizens

loyal to the regime, supportive of the state's modernisation efforts, who were humbly asking for support from both the central state and local district authorities.

Unexpected Ending

Using the tactics discussed above, the villagers recalled that they avoided repression and continued their blocking strategy for three months. Then, in mid-August, approaching Vietnam's Independence Day on September 2, a critical moment came, and their determination was put to its most challenging test. Independence Day is an important occasion when high-ranking central officials visit provinces to monitor the preparation for the anniversary. They pay particular attention to public demonstrations, seeking to avoid anything that could threaten the immaculate look of the peaceful country that central leaders want to show to the wider world.

The villagers were close to their goal of having their voice heard by central officials but they now faced a "moment of life and death" (*thời khắc sinh tử*), considered the biggest challenge since their protest began. Nguu remembered: "From mid-August, the district authorities began sending official warnings, ordering us to dismantle the encampment immediately, otherwise they would resort to '*cưỡng chế*' [forced eviction]." They understood that the danger of state repression was no longer a possibility, but a real, imminent threat.

Some villagers became frightened. Some wanted to stop the protest. Some said they should at least temporarily back down, while some exhibited a reluctance to maintain the encampment for fear of a police raid. Most protestors, however, remained unwavering. Recalling that moment, Han explained her response: "Why are you already afraid after a little threat? If we back down, there won't be another chance. Our family will have nothing. For our children's future, we must remain strong, even if they [the district authorities] threaten us even more."

The villagers remained resolute and refused to back down. It was then that district authorities decided to move. In an account universally told in the village, on the day before Independence Day, several hundred police officers were mobilised to mount a raid. The raid dismantled the villagers' encampments, detained some villagers on site, including Han and Thanh, taking them to the district police headquarters.

The villagers considered the raid an unusual crackdown. Everyone at the protest site that day was surprised, believing that the police had been instructed to avoid hurting villagers and focus on dismantling the encampments. The people detained recalled that they were not harshly treated as were protestors in other agitations they knew. Han remembered her surprise: "We were put in a hall, not jail, and served good food. No-one was beaten. They even gave us a TV to watch that night and released us the next morning with no charges."

A week after the raid, the district authorities announced that every household who had land appropriated would receive title to a piece of unused state-owned land, equal to 5% of the appropriated holdings, on a site next to the industrial park. The district authorities called this "land used for business and service activities" (*đất kinh doanh dịch vụ*). This phrase meant the land should be used for off-farm commercial activities like retailing and service provisions, not for agricultural production. The district authorities then told villagers to consider the land their goodwill gesture, besides the

original compensation, to help villagers move from agricultural practices to more remunerative commercial livelihood strategies.

The benefit villagers actually got from the services land exceeded anything they could have imagined. Six months after the protest ended, speculators from the provincial capital started visiting Xuan, seeking to purchase the land at high prices. Villagers heard rumours that the speculators were related to high-ranking provincial officials, who knew about a plan to turn the area into residential blocks. This plan would massively increase the price for the land, which was then of modest value, and bring the speculators a windfall. Although villagers said they did not believe in this prospect, neither did they turn down the speculators' attractive offers. By early 2013, all households had sold their service lands for a big gain, nearly equal to the full compensation they had originally expected.

All participating households described the gain from this land as the biggest their households had ever made since the onset of *Đổi mới*. With the money from selling title to the service land, Thanh renovated his house with a second storey. For a household without money to fix a leaky roof five years previously, the two-storey house was a huge family advance. Thanh said they were “lucky” (*may mắn*) to get the service land and the money for housing renovations, implying that he attributed the achievement to objective conditions.

But other villagers did not fully agree with Thanh. “Luck has nothing to do with this.” Han said, declaring:

Had it not been for our desire to give our family a better life, and had we not risked our safety to demand more compensation, we would never have had this money. Because we did not back down at the threat of repression, the district authorities realised how determined we were. Although they destroyed our encampments, they knew we would protest again until they give us what our family deserves. It was our determination that forced them to back down (*xuống nước*).

The villagers clearly thought they were victors, successfully forcing the district officials to compromise. Providing the land as a *de facto* additional compensation was a clever device to reduce villagers' discontent and forestall future protests.

Through their memories of the agitation, villagers not only show that they live in a world of precarious market changes and unpredictable state moves, but also demonstrate what they consider a morally righteous way to handle such a world. That is, not by passively evading risks to protect their individual safety, but by actively balancing risks and gains, and in appropriate circumstances, being sufficiently brave to sacrifice their own safety and confront state power to achieve life-changing gains for their families.

Conclusion

This article has focused on a village in a situation relatively under-represented in the scholarship on land-related conflicts in contemporary Vietnam to explore the causes and forms of rural resistance by documenting villagers' collective memories of protest. It has been argued that Xuan villagers did not launch the protest to regain their arable holdings and cling onto them as their primary subsistence source or a cherished way of life. Neither were they driven by an abstract sense of justice, merely seeking a fairer share of the premiums from land transaction without clear ideas about the risks

involved and how the additional money should be used. Rather, these households planned and executed agitation with considerable agency, bold initiatives and a sense of responsibility, constantly factoring the vagaries of state power into their calculations of risks and gains. They exhibited a firm determination to achieve a better future for their family, even at the cost of putting their individual self at risk. In face of the dangers of state repression, they employed an “extremely rightful” form of resistance, in which they confined actions within officially sanctioned channels, underplaying oppositional intentions against state authorities. This style of resistance is relatively under-documented in the scholarship on contemporary Asia.

In contrast to official statements, which often assume that Vietnamese farming communities are passive and have no developmental aspirations, Xuan households’ collective narratives show that they did not stage the agitation out of a sense of desperation or victimhood. Rather, their activism was as an active choice driven by their desire for their family’s well-being and material improvement. Xuan villagers’ version of “rightful resistance” shows that even when impersonal forces of chance and state power might appear to reduce them to passive, choiceless objects, there is much for individuals to take responsibility for, and to be active and creative in making gains for their families.

Notes

1. “Marketisation” is used to refer to the processes of economic liberalisation and market reforms that were officially launched in Vietnam in 1986 under the name of Renovation (*Đổi mới*), and elsewhere in Asia, Africa, Latin America and post-socialist Eastern Europe throughout the 1980s and 1990s in the form of structural adjustment programmes and “shock-therapy” policies (Burawoy and Verdery 1999). Yet as Carroll (2012a) points out, marketisation is an all-encompassing term that has been used to describe many different versions of market reform. For example, marketisation in today’s Vietnam and China has been actively led by socialist states as a means to achieve economic prosperity and protect the legitimacy of the socialist regime (Beresford 2008; Nonini 2008). In other Asian contexts it is now led by international financial institutions seeking to foster “deep marketisation” that works on, through and around the state (Carroll 2012b).
2. This article is part of a research project that builds on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2012–2013 in a village community in the Red River Delta, northern Vietnam’s lowland riverine rice-belt and the cradle of Vietnam’s Kinh-Viet majority’s civilisation. That research particularly examines how rural households have negotiated continual state policies to marketise rural economic practices and livelihood choices, so as to foster modernity in today’s countryside. For information on land acquisition in China see Guo (2001); for India see Walker (2009); for Laos and Cambodia see Kenney-Lazar (2012) and Baird (2017). For an overview of global land grabbing and forms of local reactions, see Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011); Borras and Franco (2013).
3. From 2001 to 2005, Vietnamese state officials appropriated at least 5% of arable land for the construction of industrial parks in rural areas and housing complexes in urban contexts, affecting roughly 10% of the country’s population (Suu 2009, 108; Kerkvliet 2014, 20).
4. Although rural households received arable land in 1993, they only received use-rights, not ownership rights. Under Vietnamese laws, “the Vietnamese people” collectively are the designated legal owner of all rural land, and the state is the legal representative of “the Vietnamese people” with the ultimate authority to decide how land should be used and distributed (Suu 2009, 107–108).

5. According to the 2003 Land Law, the state can take back the land for the purpose of “national defense, security, national interests, public interests and economic development” (Vietnam National Assembly 2003). The Law also granted district authorities almost full power to initiate land appropriation schemes in rural areas (except for land under the management of religious organisations, overseas Vietnamese and foreigners). Unlike in China, where any land appropriation project must be agreed by village officials, village cadres in Vietnam have little say in the land appropriation process (Kerkvliet 2006, 2014; on China, see Cai 2003).
6. The verb “*bị*” is commonly employed in academic and media accounts of land confiscation in Vietnam, thus rendering land appropriation something suffered rather than positively experienced (see Vo 2011).
7. Contemporary Vietnamese official statements have been framed in these ways. They are critical of villagers claiming land as the primary subsistence source and as an inseparable part of local culture and way of life, claiming this as evidence that such rural communities are irrational “peasants,” lacking appropriate ideas about growth and the country’s progress to modernity (see Phong 2007).
8. Many scholars argue that the feeling of injustice that drives public protests in contemporary northern Vietnam is rooted in pre-revolutionary and socialist traditions of egalitarianism, which are sharply in contrast with the situation of rapidly rising inequality in living standards and economic opportunities characteristic of market reform (Taylor 2004; Tran Thi Thu Trang 2009).
9. In the village, this price is commonly understood as the average price at which a high number of villagers are willing to sell their arable land. It is known that by the time of the land appropriation, many households were willing to sell the farmland for VND 4 million per *sào* (360 m²). The district authorities then offered Xuan households about VND 12 million per *sào*, the standard compensation rate for arable land as regulated in the provincial Land Price Framework.
10. Xuan households also faced greater challenges than households whose land was appropriated for housing projects in urban Vietnam and China and who can more easily obtain evidence of injustice from public sources (see Kim 2009; Truong and Perera 2010; for China, see Ho and Lin 2004). In appropriation schemes for housing development in Vietnam and China, developers normally compensate households at the price for arable land (*đất nông nghiệp*). However, they later transform the land into housing blocks, turning it into residential land (*đất ở*), the value of which is far higher than farmland, and publicly advertise the land for commercial sale for a price from 10 to 100 times the original compensation rate, reaping massive gains in the process. Nevertheless, it also means that the households with holdings appropriated can publicly verify the unreasonable difference between the compensation rate and the commercial price of the land (Han and Vu 2008).
11. On the protest in Quynh Phu, see Luong (2005) and Tran Thi Thu Trang (2009).
12. Heroic Mother (*Mẹ Việt Nam anh hùng*) is a title of honour awarded to a Vietnamese mother who has sacrificed either her only son, or more than one son, to the cause of national liberation.

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