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Public Forests and Private Paddies in the
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Standing atop the Ca Dam canal in the heart of Tam Nong district in Viet Nam's Mekong delta, one can see for miles to the southeast. The vista boasts a 1800 view of lush green ricefields bounded only by the village of Tan Cong Sinh on one side. On the other sides the ricefields stretch out like a desert for miles on end, interrupted only by scattered reed huts, and occasional patches of dark green, scrubby forest stands. The view's only limit is the eye's capacity to stand the bright sun. Bobbing among these green deserts are the fields' owners, spraying insecticide, spreading fertilizer, or checking small fishnets.
Inhabitants of Tam Nong depend on the revenues generated from these rice expanses for their survival since the district has no industry or other major commercial crop. Since 1976 government institutions and villagers have converted wild grassland and forests in the hopes of funneling the district's land use and its economy down an ever-narrowing path towards monospecific agriculture. Recently, however, they have both found out that much of the district's soil is not good for rice paddy. Turning to look northwest, one sees a different landscape. The foreground is filled with low, wild grass and wild rice, which abruptly stops at the edge of a thick forest stand several hundred meters from the canal. As in the ricefields, people move among the vegetation. Unlike in the ricefields across the canal, here users do not own their land, and human activities include setting fires; catching fish with nets or electrocuting them with car batteries; collecting fuelwood and pole-sized saplings; and grazing water buffalo. This side of the canal is the Tram Chim National Park, the other the Tan Cong Sinh New Economic Zone; their visual differences represent the two different models for land use and property ownership in Tam Nong I will discuss.

Open Access, Hidden Meanings:

Public Forests and Private Paddies in theMekong Delta of Viet Nam

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May 9, 1995

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Standing atop the Ca Dam canal in the heart of Tam Nong district in Viet Nam's Mekong delta, one can see for miles to the southeast. The vista boasts a 180^0 view of lush green ricefields bounded only by the village of Tan Cong Sinh on one side. On the other sides the ricefields stretch out like a desert for miles on end, interrupted only by scattered reed huts, and occasional patches of dark green, scrubby forest stands. The view's only limit is the eye's capacity to stand the bright sun. Bobbing among these green deserts are the fields' owners, spraying insecticide, spreading fertilizer, or checking small fishnets.

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* * *

Introduction

In recent years Tam Nong has seen much controversy over how to use its land. For the past decade, the population in the district has increased dramatically, jumping from 49,645 in 1983 to 72,917 by 1993 (District People's Committee, 1994). Since the district's family planning programs have been mostly successful, the growing numbers are attributable to migration from neighboring districts and northern provinces (Phu Tho Commune People's Committee, 1994). As a result of this migration, the Tam Nong "community" is a patchwork of regional differences and dislocated individuals who have had financial, social, or political troubles in their native homes. Policies which encourage this migration pattern have traditionally provided an opportunity for Viet Nam's poor and landless farmers to escape troubles at home, and as such is deemed essential to national stability by the government (Thang, 1994). National stability, however, comes at the expense of local stability in Tam Nong. Because of these policies, Tam Nong has become an archetypal frontier town, whose inhabitants vie for land as competing individuals, with few established social groupings and ties to the land, community, or history. Social ties are tentative, and customs of common resource access are not well developed.

Until recently, land-use debates have favored arguments promoting rice agriculture, to the detriment of existing grasslands and what small stands of forest Tam Nong nurtures. As a secondary effect, this agricultural development has increased reliance on Tram Chim National Park as a source of non-agricultural dietary protein, fuelwood, and construction materials. Consequently, planners are beginning to realize the importance of reforestation. This paper will describe a situation which has contributed to the partial failure of reforestation projects that were designed to take this resource pressure off the park. These projects attempted to allocate land to poor farmers as "private property" under the condition that they plant it to trees to which they had rights of harvest. As I will explore later, there is much confusion as to the property relationships surrounding these allocations, which characterizes the reforestation failure.

As I will show, Vietnamese agriculture is currently making a gradual transition from collectives to private, family farming. As ownership relations change, open access forest land and grasslands are transformed to rice, and become enclosed to common use, thereby separating many poor migrants from needed resources. Increasingly the only areas where they can find fuelwood, fish, and rats is in Tram Chim. The Vietnamese government and international conservation NGOs are trying to provide viable alternatives to "poaching" in the park by bringing land outside the park under privately planted forest cover. Moreover, they have found that much of the remaining open land is acidic and not good for rice. According to the plans, income from fuelwood and poles grown on these acid-sulfate soils are to give the poor the means needed to buy food. In theory, reforestation will simultaneously restore some of the pre-settlement ecosystem and provide a means of resource access to these new villagers who cross the dike into Tram Chim.

On the surface, these reforestation initiatives have seen little success since they simply ask farmers to plant trees

without providing compelling incentives for them not to choose rice agriculture. Government and private consultants have begun to address the tax, irrigation, and economic issues making reforestation on private land a daunting task. The pilot projects they have developed in response to farmers' complaints do account for these factors and have had greater success than the initial program, but still are resisted by many farmers. Data gathered from my interviews with government officials and farmers imply that more attention need be paid to non-economic factors determining individual behavior in order to explain this reluctance. Literature research on history, ideology, culture, and recent government policy confirms this need, and suggests a context in which to frame the project failure.

In sum, my argument is as follows. By relying on reforestation of land distributed as private property, the pilot projects fail to account for basic notions of property which may implicitly define forest land ownership as different from rice land ownership. They assume that rice fields and forest plantations hold similar meanings for the farmer/owner, his or her neighbors, and the national government. As I will show, private property is a spectrum including both strong and weak claims to ownership. Moreover, the strength of one's claim depends on the owner's ability to communicate exclusive ownership. The differing signals that forested property and rice property transmit affect the way these property types are perceived by villagers, and consequently define their degree of exclusivity. If land use is indeed integrally related to popular conceptions of property, then the increasing process of privatization makes efforts at reforestation increasingly difficult.

These reforestation failures, thereby contribute to the process of land-use monospecifization, leaving green deserts, illegal poachers, and resource scarcity in Tam Nong. Moreover, national and local history show that forested land, rather than communicating exclusive ownership as rice does, communicates an unowned -- or at least not privately owned -- resource. Land-use planners, I believe, must take seriously the various non-economic factors of reforestation which influence the poor farmer making critical decisions about crop choice before private reforestation projects will be embraced.

Surveying the Land

Migration into Tam Nong is largely a result of two factors. Increasingly the government has validated claims to family households' exclusive use-rights of land, and farmers have achieved greater control over the land they till. Moreover, government policy has increased the buying prices of agricultural products (Thang, 1994). As a result of these two changes, people have come to take advantage of wild land in Tam Nong and the percentage of land under cultivation in the district has jumped in the past ten years. Because this agricultural trend has focused on maximizing production for sale and consumption, it has increased the hectarage under intensive rice cultivation at the expense of other types of land use. In the recent past, as forests and grasslands are "reclaimed," the district's agricultural production has correspondingly increased.

While the transformation of land to paddy agriculture has increased the income of established landholders, others have not benefitted from the agricultural boom. Migration into Tam Nong continues, and the poor arrive from overpopulated provinces in other regions of the Mekong delta and from the north to join those coming from cities where the unemployment rate runs high. More come every season looking for work or a chance to try their luck in planting. Often, these farmers invest all their capital in planting rice on free, government-allocated land in New Economic Zones (NEZ) where the soil is poor and the irrigation often unreliable. Worse, after having invested in the move to Tam Nong itself, many have few resources left over to buy needed fuelwood, fish, or other dietary supplements. While villagers were once able to gather these resources in publicly owned forest land, the availability of these resources is becoming increasingly scarce as more grassland and forest is cleared for rice paddy. The transformation of land, therefore, means a greater squeeze on those poor farmers who depend on these open access resources. Consequently, Tram Chim, with its large forest tracts, has become the source of many poor villagers' food supplements, and has assumed a new role as Tam Nong's semi-restricted commons.

Organization of the Paper

Government and NGO planners have offered explanations for the reforestation failures which focus on ecologic and economic problems. In response to these explanations, they have adjusted the reforestation plans. Judging from initial farmer reactions, however, these revised plans, do not make the programs acceptable to the villagers. While some agree to the terms and follow through with their commitments, others accept the program and then do not hold up their end of the agreement. I intend to dig beyond the mechanistic fine-tuning of the reforestation programs that ecology and economics provides. In order to achieve this depth of analysis, I bring together diverse aspects of theory, history, policy, and practice. Because of this wide-ranging methodology, perhaps the best way to understand how and why I chose to look at what I did is to understand the political ecology approach. This body of theoretical work, however, is not alone in its conceptual influence on this paper. Critical to my use of political ecology is the use of a fluid conception of ownership which defines property as a set of social relations rather than as a thing (Macpherson, 1982) to explain Tam Nong's dilemma.

The first section, "The Political Ecology Approach," therefore describes the method by which I selected relevant research questions and created a geographically unbounded matrix of sequential and simultaneous processes to link these questions to each other and, more importantly, to the central problem of reforestation in Tam Nong. The second section, "Seeing Communication: the Meaning of Property Relationships," establishes the fluid definition of property and shows the political and social relationships tugging at the things we think we own. It also speculates about changes these relationships undergo with the development of private property.

The third section, "Contested Meanings: Origins of the Failure," is the link between theory, history, and practice. In it I suggest how property theory is related to some of the problems the latest reforestation programs encounter. The first half of this section describes the actual program for tree-planting, and then draw out the powerful national history in which Tam Nong's forestry programs fail. This historical analysis helps explain how farmers' reluctance to farm trees in Tam Nong is related to a deep-seated popular ideology of the importance of cultivating rice. Instead, this reluctance might better be seen as the latest chapter in a long history of Vietnamese political and agricultural expansion . Because of this history, the cultivation of paddy rice holds important cultural and social meanings related to the history of the Vietnamese people. As part of various political programs, land has traditionally been distributed for rice cultivation, and my argument assumes that this association between ownership and rice cultivation has become the underlying fabric of any Vietnamese land allocation system; a fabric which cannot be unravelled with simple policy prescriptions. In sum, national land allocation programs have traditionally equated rice cultivation with productive land use.

The second half of this section reviews some of the more recent development policies and goals implemented on the national and local levels since 1975 which have continued to reproduce and communicate ideas about the inherent productivity of rice paddies and the open-access nature of forests to lowland Vietnamese. Until very recently, policies to maximize rice production have determined land use in Tam Nong. In particular, policies had encouraged rice production in the Mekong delta as a means to generate surplus grain to feed a hungry nation in the early 80s. Northern Viet Nam has always had food crises, and after the end of the war, Ha Noi leaders hoped that the Mekong delta would provide some relief.

While Socialist policies could not feed the nation, the trajectory of rice-maximizing policies has led to a growing reform process to privatize land. By putting land into individual hands, agricultural choices are downscaled from the government to the family level which, until recently, had made these decisions in the Mekong delta, and consequently production has increased (Pingali & Xuan, 1990; SPC,1989). In theory, market incentives and increased household control will lead to higher personal investment in land and increases in production. Overall, the market, like past government policies, has encouraged rice production. In doing so it has reinforced the idea that rice cultivation is productive land use, and has made an implicit connection between private property and rice cultivation. Concurrent with this agricultural focus has been a local history of small, government-sponsored reforestation projects in Tam Nong. Combined with a national law which does not explicitly clarify the forest farmer's exact property relationship to the wood he or she harvests, the trees from which it is harvested, or the land in which it is planted, the projects have created an implicit association between forests and State property.

The fourth section will combine the notions of property, national history and recent development policy to offer possible explanations for what some government and international NGO analysts see as "irrational" behavior in Tam Nong. Strangely, farmers have decided against the reforestation pilot projects in favor of planting rice, despite planned economic incentives and ecologic conditions to the contrary. Using two examples of how economics and ecology have failed to explain human choices for land-use, I suggest that more knowledge of the complex meanings of land and how these meanings are communicated may help account for the failure of reforestation projects. I suggest that what economics or ecology fails to explain -- continued attempts and failures to plant rice -- might better be seen as attempts to affirm property rights or as reflections of contradictory meanings of land than as unwise investments.

Finally, I conclude that the meaning of land must be recognized by planners as an important influence on crop choice and therefore that it has important ramifications for reforestation. Villagers may not, for example, believe that forested land can be privately owned even though recent reforms allocate it on similar terms as it does for rice. Rather, according to popular belief, private property may have a very definite paddy appearance. As expressive as any government title of ownership, this appearance communicates to other villagers that a piece of property is owned by someone other than the government. Among local villagers, the more important statement of ownership is planting rice. Forests, on the other hand, are seen by locals as a form of common property used to supply fish, rats, and fuelwood for anyone who can cast a net or wield an axe. Therefore, organizations implementing reforestation projects might consider how to overcome the common belief that forested land is a form of open-access property if

pilot projects are to see greater success.

The Political Ecology Approach

In considering reforestation in Tam Nong, I have brought together diverse bodies of research and personal interviews to explain the gap in logic between farmers' avoidance of planting forests and government programs to reforest acid-sulfate soils. To better understand this gap on the micro level, I followed a political ecology approach out of the local world of Tam Nong through the realm of national history, culture, policy, and even into some of the tomes of social theory.

The method of approach has been eloquently described elsewhere (Bryant, 1992; Neumann, 1992; Watts and Peet, 1993), but I will reiterate several key points for this paper. Political ecology is a methodology which has grown out of the concerns for ecology married to "a broadly defined political economy" (Watts and Peet, 1993), and which integrates the empirical study of local behavior with larger political economic structures and history to gain a complex understanding of local resource situations. It is through this process of following what political economist Piers Blaikie (1985) has called the "chains of explanation" linking micro analysis to macro theory that local problems are adequately contextualized.

Neumann (1992) provides a model for political ecology methods in his study of resource access in Mount Meru, Tanzania, where he began his course of analysis at the "bottom." Local actions were observed and "grounded in the web of social relations" (87) which gave them a local context. From this web, Neumann follows the "chain" to the social, cultural, political, and economic factors which influence local decisions but which are generated on a national level in Tanzania and an international one in England. Finally, he addresses the local and non-local history that influenced the point of resource access.

As a method of understanding local resource use, this loose model has enabled my research to expand out from detailed personal interviews with farmers in Tam Nong to more formal interviews with People's Committee officials in Tam Nong and in Ho Chi Minh City, to literature research on the history of national culture and policy in Viet Nam. It has facilitated my integration of these diverse elements of agricultural choices and provided a window through which the individual resource decisions that farmers make in Tam Nong can be understood as a result of their grappling with a complex mixture of local, non-local, and historical influences.

Seeing Communication:the Meaning of Property Relationships

On the one hand, villagers regularly cross the dike separating Tram Chim from the fields of the NEZ's in Tam Nong. On the other, many of these same villagers refuse to accept land intended to provide the same resources they enter the park to harvest. The NEZ fields are predominantly rice and "privately" owned by individuals. Tram Chim is "owned" on similar terms of exclusivity to villagers as a national park. Though the terms may be similar in contract -- both are exclusionary -- in practice they seem to be subject to different rules of access. Moreover, this difference seems to exemplify a classic case of discontinuity between *dejure* and *defacto* law. In such a context, it is important to understand how villagers may understand private property, and how it differs from government understanding of that same property. Furthermore, as Viet Nam gradually privatizes its system of land allocation, a complex understanding of popular conceptions of use-rights to land will permit greater insight into understanding how individuals make resource choices; how communication and meaning mitigate legal and policy structures.

Levels of Communication:

Property is a form of social communication whereby a claim to certain "use rights" for a resource is recognized by other members of a social group (Rose, 1985). The debate among legal scholars and social scientists has produced differing ideas of the notion of property, but few dispute the fact that land is not owned in an absolute sense, but made up of a package of certain rights (Rose, 1994). The classic notion of private property conferring "absolute" ownership, as reflected by Blackstone (1766), is problematic in its denial of larger socio-political contexts (as described in Rose, 1990) and local circumstances (Peluso, 1994) which define user rights. On many levels, the social body and institutions that oversee access to a particular resource set definite parameters which both restrict and confer individual rights of ownership. In this sense, a property's exclusive "owner", is constrained by the myriad of social bodies and communities of restriction and conferral. Consequently, the popular idea of private property being an exclusively owned "thing" becomes diluted to mean "rights conferred by a social grouping to use a resource," or "rights for certain uses" as defined by the larger group. In this sense, the difference between "ownership" and use rights is one of degree rather than substance, as is the difference between "private property" and collective property

allocated to individuals. One's ability to claim exclusive use depends on how much the larger social and political groups want you to have those rights.

Private property might be seen most usefully as a system of long-term use rights given to one of a number of competing claimants for a resource. These use-rights are continuously negotiated between claimants and political or cultural forces. Moreover, since the "winning" claim depends on legitimization by a larger political and cultural order (Rose, 1985; Benda-Beckman, 1979), political and cultural groupings evaluate the persuasiveness of a claimant's communication of domain (Rose, 1990, 1985). These two sources of legitimacy, political and cultural, however, are characterized by slightly different processes of change.

Usually, government decisions are issued by fiat, where an executive body declares a discrete, definable policy change: a drug is declared illegal, medical practices declared immoral, wars declared won. Cultural change, however, is less manipulable since there is no single regulating body. Since local and national State policy exhibits different processes of change from local and national culture -- the former *dejure* behavior, the latter *defacto* behavior -- it certainly cannot be claimed that legal recognition of a change in land use rights will necessarily entail a change in cultural values for use rights.

Research from Africa, for example, has shown narrative and storytelling, as much as appeals to codified law, is important in establishing property claims. This literature shows how local actors draw upon local cultural meanings to legitimize claims to non-local authorities. Despite legal changes and policy shifts, *defacto* forces retain some authority and continue to affect local resource use (Peters, 1992; Goheen, 1992; Falk-Moore, 1986). Of course policy shifts *do* have a normative effect on cultural values (Rose, 1991) and behavior, but it often takes longer for the values driving policy to become internalized in wider cultural norms. Thus, while policies regarding property can easily declare change, these changes are less easily implemented. It can be inferred, therefore, that national policy changes occur more quickly than local cultural ones do.

Some have described the matrix of negotiation and communication through narrative appeals by individuals to the local and national levels as a "process" by which diverse sources of legitimacy constantly interact with each other and individuals to affect "local practice" (Peluso, 1994). No matter how the process is described, the literature provides important insights into complex local notions of property embedded in culture. On top of these is added State policy, with its own notions of property. The result is a contradictory world of mixed messages and contested meanings.

Meaning:

Negotiating the matrix described above, and gaining legitimacy from the quickly shifting values of national legal authority and from the less quickly changing values of cultural influence requires that a landowner understand the meaning of resources to each of the sources of legitimacy. In order to do this, she must understand the values of the group conferring rights. While the U.S. government, for example, values National Parks as a source of natural beauty, the parks are valued for a very different reason by native groups who have traditionally used the resource for subsistence resources (Warren, 1994). These values create specific meanings which subsequently characterize the narratives claimants use to establish property rights.

Rose (1994) has said "a claim of title depends on the claimant's ability to *signal* (emphasis added) dominion to the world. " (p.502) Moreover, "some venerable statutory law obligates [her] to *keep on* [sic] [signalling] lest he lose his title by 'adverse possession'" (1985, p.79). In other words, each claim to property -- if it is to be exercised -- must be validated. What Rose calls "the world" is, more accurately, a social group of which the claimant is a member. There are an infinite number of formal and informal groups with established memberships and norms. In the United States, for example, one of the bonds which holds together and defines the dominant group is the general acceptance of American law as a regulatory authority; in the academic community an example of one of these bonds is the implicit agreement that ideas should be cited. If either "contract" is broken, "membership" in the group is withdrawn: criminals are put in jail, plagiarists are shunned and cannot get a job. But this validation rarely extends beyond the bounds of the defined "world." Native Americans, for example, "signalled" their legitimate claims to settlers, but the European "world" had a membership list which -- until it recognized Indian rights -- excluded non-Europeans. Without a common "world" between Indians and settlers, Europeans could justify ignoring native claims to resources. Again, academics can always go get a job in the business sector.

In many countries, national government allocation programs redefine this "world." They redefine the institutions, individuals, and groups which must recognize an individual's authorized claim. Moreover, they redefine the political

body to which the narrative appeals are presented. In effect, they remove the negotiation from the local to the national level, and in doing so change the meanings individuals use to gain legitimacy. Furthermore, establishing a relationship between local *individuals* and national law, as is often the case with Western legal systems (for example, Falk-Moore, 1986), can create *competing* meanings of resources (Peluso, 1994; Shipton, 1992). Local resources can say one thing on the local level, and a very different thing on the national level. In this sense, there is often a disjuncture between what land means to the local farmer and the community he or she lives in, and what it means to the national government trying to influence the use of that land.

As implied above, one social group which validates claims is local. Peluso (1994; 34) has demonstrated that local resources can be "important representations of kinship, markers of settlement history, indicators of territorial claim, and so on" to a wide array of community members. In defining only one claimant of a piece of land as its "owner," titles, in theory, give exclusive rights and the power of definition to individuals who thereby negotiate meanings with national policymakers, and consequently weaken these complex meanings of local resources. Of course these local meanings are not so easily swept under the carpet. Suddenly creating a contradictory meaning by issuing titles will not reverse local practice. It will, however, create a dilemma for this individual trying to balance local and non-local meanings.

Many agrarian societies that are shifting from a locally based system of social organization to one dependent on a national government have expressed mixed feelings about the codification of exclusive rights to resources (Shipton, 1992; Stephen, 1994; Peters, 1992; Benda-Beckman 1979). A main function of systems for social organization is to regulate individual autonomy (Benda-Beckman, 1979) and oversee distribution of resources to the community. Such relocation of the negotiation process redefines a resource's meaning in terms of the it's value to the nation rather than to any local community (Peluso, 1994; Shipton, 1992; Shipton and Goheen, 1992). It takes some of the power of definition from the local level, and places it in the hands of the national government.

For this reason, titling programs have been received both with open arms and suspicious frowns on the local level. Although some individuals may favor titling, local community representatives often oppose land registration because titles can lead to enclosure of land, thus excluding some resource users from their means of subsistence. This opposition can take the form of formal complaints to officials or "resistance" to exclusive rights.

Stephen (1994) has shown how titling threatened to undermine local meanings by de-localizing the body legitimizing property claims in Mexico. With the breakup of commonly held ejido land has come an outcry from community leaders who rightly fear that individuals given a "bundle" of rights defined by the national government rather than the local community allows individuals to sell their titles off to the highest bidders, which are often large individual landholders or corporations. They fear the process Schmink and Wood (1992) describe in the Amazon. Once property is titled, they say, "the relationship between the contending parties change[s] fundamentally. Not only [does] the document increase the value of the land [by establishing exclusivity of the owner], it also transform[s] it into an asset that c[an] be readily converted into cash... The titling of ... claims and the emergence of a competitive market for land thus contribute[s] to the consolidation of rural holdings" (p. 179). On the one hand titling promises some locals security to invest in their land, on the other it threatens to exclude some from important resources.

There is a healthy body of literature describing how processes of exclusion, such as titling, can affect marginalized segments of society. E.P. Thompson (1975), Nancy Peluso (1992), Douglas Hay (1975), and Steven Hahn (1982) all describe how exclusion from access to commonly held resources can contribute to increased social stratification and a tightening of access to subsistence resources by the poor. In each of these cases, forests were the bases of common resources, and provided multiple services for local communities. For the marginalized groups in each of these cases, the forests meant commonly held resources available for local use, but for political elites they meant exclusion, power, and wealth.

Contested Meanings: Origins of the Failure

Reforestation in Tam Nong takes place in a context of changing power dynamics and competing meanings. The physical act of seeding land is imbued with implications which transcend the seedling's economic potential. This potential is only one of a constellation of factors which influence farmers' decisions. In this section, I describe the planting program in general, its economic goals and incentives, and how they have failed to increase the acreage of forests. Subsequently, I will offer the concept of land's meaning as a tool to explain what economics cannot by examining the two main sources of meaning in the land of Tam Nong.

Tree Planting

In Tam Nong district there are 10,000 hectares of acid sulfate soils land (District People's Committee, 1994). Part of this area includes the last remaining native tram *(melaleuca leucadendron)* forests. Rice *can* grow in these acid soils, but requires heavy fertilizer subsidies and plentiful irrigation. Usually four years of heavy fertilizer use and constant irrigation is sufficient to wash the acid out of the soil to permit good harvests. Tram, on the other hand, is a scrub-type forest species native to acid soils, and once it is mature survives with little care in these areas. Traditionally tram has provided fuelwood and construction material for villagers, as well as a breeding environment for the fish and fowl species which make up most of their dietary protein.

Currently, farmers are attempting to plant rice on 7,000 of these hectares (District People's Committee, 1994). The national government, the District People's Committee and international NGOs, however, believe that tram forest should be planted on this land in order to maximize the overall efficiency of the district's land types. Since the government can neither heavily subsidize rice farming with enough fertilizer and irrigation water, nor build extensive irrigation networks into acidic areas, they believe that rice agriculture in these areas is unsustainable for most farmers lacking the resources to afford the irrigation and fertilizer requirements over the period necessary to wash the acid out of the soil.

In order to help them, the national and local governments have implemented projects which attempt to integrate the needs of the migrants with the idea that tram plantations are the only way both to use this land productively and take pressure off Tram Chim. To this end, the government has zoned areas for tram plantations, and has recruited poor villagers to plant tram on wild lands, promising ownership of the trees once the stand matures in ten years (District People's Committee, 1994). In this way, government and international NGOs are trying simultaneously to provide a livelihood for the truly disadvantaged, reforest the wetland with production plantations, and protect the park.

According to the District People's Committee, the typical story is of a farmer who plants rice one season, but cannot make back his investment capital due to poor harvests. Wealthy farmers can afford to build an irrigation system to wash out the acidity over the four to five years required to do so, but the majority are forced to leave the land in search of labor opportunities, letting the land revert back to its wild grassland state. Initial programs seem simply to have asked farmers to plant tram. Even though they have not succeeded at rice planting, many poor farmers just did not want to plant it. Planners have difficulty understanding this refusal, and tend to interpret the reaction as irrational, attributing their uncooperativeness to reasons like "lack of good knowledge and technical expertise;" an "insecure tenure system;" or "lack of communication between the government and the farmers." These answers, however, seem unfounded, overly vague or simplistic, since it is intuitive that after several years of bad experiences with rice in this area, the word would get out that planting it was not possible without significant overhead capital or heavy government support. What then, is the reason for such seemingly irrational choices by villagers?

I believe that this problem calls for an understanding of the meaning crops hold for villagers. Mechanistic approaches to answering these reforestation questions in Tam Nong suffer from the perception that farmers will make choices based solely on the economic benefits envisioned by planners. Many planners think these farmers' choices make no sense. However, choices are subject to more complex influences than simply evaluating ecological conditions and calculating material benefits from the program. Rather, notions of land ownership and the cultural connotations defining what private property looks like and what commonly held -- or public -- property looks like are integral to an understanding of why farmers make their decisions. Land may have different meanings depending on the way it is used, and these meanings often influence what people plant almost as much as ecological appropriateness or economic efficiency does.

In order to explain this meaning of property, I use the idea that property is a form of *communication,* and conclude that, ultimately, the *meanings* that ricefields and forests communicate not only to the farmers in the program, but also to the other community members may have been omitted from the reforestation planning process. Two histories have generated these meanings: an ancient, national history of land transformation to rice, and a more recent, local history of government ownership of forests.

Nam Tien: the March South and Popular Meanings of Rice

Viet Nam's national development can be seen as an extension of a specific way of life based on rice paddy agriculture and the cultural values that way of life reflect. These values have origins in the lowlands of southern China, but over the centuries have seeped thousands of miles southward into the swamps of southern Viet Nam. Historians' accounts of Vietnamese culture agree on the importance of the frontier, and the Vietnamese people's historic push southward -- or in Vietnamese, Nam Tien -- in the creation of modern Viet Nam (Cotter, 1968; Dao, 1993; Hickey, 1964). This push has origins with the Chinese inclusion of northern Viet Nam in 218 B.C., and today is manifest in the

agricultural process occurring in Tam Nong.

The idea of a frontier refers to the colonization -- both within the nation and outside it -- of unsettled, wild lands. In the past, most wild land was covered with forests, but over time, and after many wars, wild land has come to include vast stretches of defoliated grasslands and scrub brush. Although the definition of what these marginal lands physically looked like has changed over time, their colonization by Vietnamese settlers was the expression of a bundle of political, economic, and cultural forces that have influenced every Vietnamese government. From the Nguyen Dynasty in the late Seventeenth Century to the southern Diem government in the 1950s (Cotter, 1968) to the current government, Vietnamese leaders have vigorously extended their influence and agriculture into areas not dominated by rice paddies. Though these forces are integrally related, here I will discuss primarily the blend of culture and economics which has brought successive generations of poor Vietnamese into Viet Nam's marginal regions. Although a comprehensive study of political control in the margins of Viet Nam has not yet been done, see Cotter (1968), Banister (1985), State Planning Committee (1989), Bangkok Post (4/14/89), Far East Economic Review (5/25/89, 4/23/92) for a better understanding of the politics of expansion. In addition, see Menzies (1992) for an analogous situation in late imperial China.

In 218 B.C. the Chinese emperor in Peking established control over what is today northern Viet Nam, and began the process of making the loose tribes of Viet people more Chinese. The Chinese government encouraged waves of Han Chinese settlers to move south into the newly conquered territory convinced that intermingling of Chinese with Vietnamese would solidify the region's allegiance to the emperor. This cultural inundation both assimilated and was assimilated into the indigenous Vietnamese culture. Moreover, it contributed to high population densities in Viet Nam's Red River delta, which then became the source of successive waves of migration south into the Cham, and then later the Khmer kingdoms. This cultural assimilation included an ecological element which was to change forever the landscape the Chinese claimed. Initially, rice paddies simply took over indigenous Vietnamese practices, but they later came to typify Vietnamese culture in its move southward (Hickey, 1964).

According to Gerald Hickey (1964), this initial process of inclusion began Viet Nam's trend of geographic and cultural inclusion. Periods of Vietnamese expansion usually started with military successes to the south. Following these conquests, the construction of roads and canals opened up land to successive waves of migrants from densely populated northern villages. Crowded villages in the northern plains of Viet Nam sent landless peasants, adventurers and "undesireables" out to clear forested land the army had conquered (Brocheux, 1995). The process placed villagers familiar with the agricultural practices and social organization of the densely populated northern lowlands in unfamiliar lands where they created new homes by transforming wild forest into agricultural land. Vietnamese villages began to pop up all along the narrow strip of lowland sandwiched in between the Annamite range and the South China Sea (Cotter, 1968).

Agricultural expansion in Viet Nam has always been integrally related to military expansion, and the government saw the establishment of secure Vietnamese villages as an effective and efficient way for the central government to control the land it had won in battle. Consequently, government land grants, supported by military muscle have backed up the conversion of land from forests and grasslands to sedentary agriculture (Hickey, 1964; Cotter, 1968), and began the trend of agricultural and cultural migration which persisted until very recently in Tam Nong. These villages were built with very Vietnamese conceptions in mind, as anthropologist Neil Jamieson (1991) points out.

Few Vietnamese valued the jungle, the mangrove swamp, or the forested hillside; they valued the bamboo hedge around the village, the banyan tree near the village gate, fruit trees in the garden and a shade tree in the yard, the village well, fishponds, a pier in the pond, the bunds around the ricefields, irrigation canals, dikes along the river. Remote and exotic flora and fauna, like jungle and swamp, lay outside their systems of meaning, beyond culture. Such things were useless and dangerous. (p.8).

Using these conceptions of a Vietnamese landscape, the Vietnamese settlers were able to culturally and ecologically integrate newly acquired territories.

Government's historic encouragement of villagers to use intensive agricultural practices was probably not simply nostalgia. Jim Scott (1976) believes that pre-colonial mainland Southeast Asian states formed where irrigated rice provided a taxable economic base for a surplus slated for national distribution or for providing national income to pay for roads, schools, and national security. Perhaps in support of this thesis, the process of agricultural conversion of marginal areas within Viet Nam may have served the economic interests of the nation. Moreover, some historians such as Michael Cotter (1968), believe that this process had a security element. According to him, the creation of "defense colonies" allowed for the integration and protection of southern lands. Whatever the motivation, state

influence expanded southward, and the government gained control over lands which it turned over to poor farmers and adventurers who propagated their way of life and agriculture.

The extension of Vietnamese agriculture into marginal lands, however, marks the first step in a slow divergence of economics and a culture which defines a Vietnamese landscape as above. Conversion of dry lowland forests had been profitable because the soil was relatively stable and soil nutrients available. With the consolidation of the nation's present borders in 1789, land similar to the Red River delta -- the home of Vietnamese paddy agriculture -- began to run out. From this period on, the settlement of marginal areas within national borders that had yet to be brought under cultivation took precedence over expanding national borders (Cotter, 1968). One consequence of this closing of the international frontier and opening the domestic one was the extension of paddy agriculture into increasingly unproductive land. Thus, an agricultural and cultural system developed in the dry lowlands was imposed on wetland and upland ecosystems. The reasons for this expansion into the hills and wetlands are perhaps more complex than those for expansion in the lowlands, which could be justified almost entirely by agricultural production increases. Since rice production has never been as good in the wetlands and uplands of Viet Nam as it has been in the drier lowlands, it seems that policies to encourage the transformation of marginal areas were more strongly political and cultural than previous eras of expansion.

Little research on the politics of agricultural transformation has been done in Viet Nam, but Neil Jamieson has done some work on the culture of Vietnamese agricultural transformations. By the end of the Eighteenth Century, specific models of ecological conversion had become an integral part of the process of expansion and an important element of Vietnamese culture. According to Jamieson (1991),

the Vietnamese valued nature as transformed according to a particular cultural model... What the Vietnamese tried so hard to maintain order with was a cultural conception of natural order that had isomorphic physical, social and religious dimensions... These guidelines were of universal applicability, rooted as they were in cosmology; but in practice they tended to presuppose and to generate a particular kind of ecosystem, one dominated by wet rice agriculture on lowland plains. The ethical dimensions of the social system that related to the environment were focused on preserving and improving the laboriously achieved transformation of raw nature to appropriate cultural forms. (p.7-8).

This mental conception of a "proper" landscape was both manifest in and a result of the process of land transformation through expansion into the lowlands. It is likely that this ideology of proper agriculture influenced migrants and government in their choice to plant rice instead of specialized uplands or swamp crops.

The March South of Vietnamese villages, however, was tempered in the Eighteenth century by the impenetrable conditions of the Mekong delta, and the arrival of the French colonists. In 1757 some Vietnamese settlers had reached Chau Doc on the Cambodian border (Brocheux, 1995), but the mass transformation of land which had happened in the northern and central regions was not yet in its developed stage. Part of the reason for the delay was the political and military struggle between the French and Vietnamese States. Only when political stability was established by a French colonial victory in 1861 was settlement of the then dense forest delta begun anew (Duong, 1985; Jamieson, 1990). But by this time, the job of colonizing the delta and continuing the expansion of paddy agriculture into the delta was left to the French colonists and their implements of mass construction.

Making the delta region good for paddy agriculture and a potential "ricebowl" of the French Colonial empire meant, in part, linking the delta to the port in Sai Gon (Duong, 1985). It also meant creating a reliable irrigation system which would permit large scale agricultural transformation (Brocheux, 1995). The French colonial administration, therefore, set about constructing a maze of canals to drain the swampy soil (Jamieson, 1990), and to facilitate transport, communication and control of the region as the Vietnamese state had never been able to do.

The French mobilized tremendous French technological and financial resources, and Vietnamese labor to construct a hydrologic system which could irrigate the forested, saline and, in many places, acid-sulfate lands of the delta and make them productive. From 1863-1930, massive infrastructure efforts resulted in 3,800 km of 50 m deep waterways, which facilitated Vietnamese settlers to develop and "improve" 2 million ha. of rice land (Duong, 1985) and increase the land under rice cultivation in the Mekong delta over four times. In part from childhood memories of his youth in the Mekong delta, Pierre Brocheux (1995) has eloquently described the initial settlement process.

The building and maintenance of such canals required a substantial labor force, and this was furnished by the *corvee*, a system of impressed labor. To maintain the canals a dredger was introduced in 1884, and from the 1890s on they were commonly used, becoming a familiar silhouette on the plains of the West. Like large fish escorted by

smaller, dependent ones, the dredger carried in its wake a crowd of sampans whose owners took immediate possession of the banks, unknowingly creating illegal and complicated situations. (18)

The resulting economic boom continued until about 1930 when all the readily cultivable land had been plowed -- further extension was deemed not to be cost-effective by the French -- and the colonial period of massive agricultural extension concluded (Callison, 1983).

Ironically, having defeating their Vietnamese rivals, the French had become the unlikely proponent of the spread of Vietnamese culture. To be sure, with the French came significant changes to southern Vietnamese society, but the basic ideology of paddy rice cropping continued, and was even perpetuated by the French incursion into increasingly marginal areas (Cotter, 1968). As with previous rulers of Viet Nam, massive French investment in infrastructure and irrigation changed the face of the Mekong delta, turning forests into ricefields. It helped create the conditions under which the Vietnamese agricultural system spread to an ecologically inhospitable environment in the south. At great financial and human cost, the French presence allowed Vietnamese settlers to Vietnamize a very un-Vietnamese landscape.

This culture of Vietnamization has been a strong motivator in land use choices, as Jamieson (1991), has noted.

[T]he influence [between the natural environment and culture] is reciprocal, and eating habits surely shape the environment as well as reflect it. What and how people eat has a strong effect on the pressures that populations exert on their biophysical environment (p.9).

As the nation integrated lands and new territories, the dishes, tastes and eating habits of lowland Vietnamese were transported to regions far from the ricefields of the Red River delta where these tastes had developed. [For an excellent documentation of a specific case where transformation of marginal lands has propagated Vietnamese culture, see Gillogly and Tuyen (1992). They describe how the incursion of ethnic Vietnamese into a minority area has transformed the land-use from a diverse agro-ecosystem based on swiddens to a monoculture of subsistence rice paddy.]

Post-1975 Meanings: Private Rice and Government Forests

From 1975 until very recently, land policy has continued this trend to maximize rice production by converting wild lands into paddies. Although this continuation has focused more on alleviating hunger, during this period there has also begun a growing realization that not all land is best allocated to paddies. During the war much land was degraded due to bombing, defoliation, and initial migration programs after the war left few trees standing. Thus, added to the traditional emphasis on rice was a caveat that forests must be recreated as well. In Tam Nong this recreation was done exclusively by various incarnations of the State.

1. Agriculture

Despite widespread war from the mid forties until 1975, the ideology of agricultural transformation which had developed through historic expansion continued to influence policy in both North and South Viet Nam. In the north, millions of people were relocated from the Red River delta into marginal northern lands to increase agricultural productivity through the New Economic Zone (NEZ) program (Banister, 1985; Nhan, 1992). In the south, programs like Land-to-the-Tiller (Callison, 1983) continued to promote the dominant ideology that paddy agriculture was synonymous with productive agriculture.

The victory of the north in 1975 simply meant the victory of the NEZ version of agricultural development. Faced with a tremendous food deficit after the end of the war, the newly established Socialist Republic of Viet Nam met its food requirements largely through improved crop yields by increasing fertilizer use in an attempt to promote food self-sufficiency (SPC, 1989). In part, these improvements were achieved through intensification of the NEZ program which was intended to maximize the country's natural resources by relocating landless, rural and urban poor to land-rich, marginal areas (Banister, 1985; Huyen, 1994). Much agricultural land had been abandoned during the war, and the NEZ's were, in part, an effort to replant this land. The *implementation* of the program exhibited more ambitious goals, and extended into many regions not suitable to intensive rice agriculture, needing large quantities of chemical fertilizers to produce rice surpluses (Banister, 1985). The NEZ's, therefore, have been the focus of intense government-sponsored, rice-based development, providing homes, subsidies, and infrastructure to landless farmers -- in a similar way that had been done before for previous generations of landless Vietnamese.

No comprehensive study of the NEZ policy has yet been published, but the areas receiving the most migrants were the Central Highlands and the Mekong delta (Nhan, 1992). The general pattern of relocation to marginal lands can be discerned from the following comments by Nguyen Van Thanh, director of the Department of Labour and Population Distribution:

As incentive for people to move, the state - in theory - pays for the [migrant] family's transportation costs to the new economic zone, provides a temporary mud or thatch hut, and gives enough rice to feed the family for six to nine months, officials say. The government also promises to prepare the new village, digging wells and building roads, irrigation systems, clinics and schools. (Taken from Far East Economic Review, 5/25/89).

In addition, the government provided land for agriculture and had several production tax exemption programs, depending on what the land produced (VIR, 8/19/94; VIR, 3/29/93).

It appears that results from these areas have been mixed. Despite the fact that NEZ's are formed only in unsettled areas which tend to be those areas unfavorable to intensive agriculture, some migrants find better lives, others find a slow decline into increasing poverty. In general, reports from the Central Highlands indicate that most agricultural failures have occurred in the highlands. Reasons most often cited for the NEZs' failure to increase agricultural production include poor planning, underfunding, counterproductive price policies, and other management problems (Banister, 1985). Officials, for example, reported in 1992 that many of the people resettled to marginal areas during the 1960s caused "land degradation, barren hills, and low harvest" (Le Van Lanh, 1992). In addition, the Far East Economic Review reports tremendous difficulties in NEZ's planned for the Central Highlands (see, in particular, FEER: "Taking to the Hills," 5/25/94; and "Mountains of Dust," and "Dynamics of Despair, 4/23/92).

NEZ projects in the Mekong delta, on the other hand, which converted 500,000 hectares of uncultivated land into agricultural land between 1981 and 1989 (Nhan, 1992), saw greater success in generating a surplus. In a 1979 address, Vo Chi Cong, chair of the CPV Central Committee's Department for the Transformation of Agriculture, stated that

The [Mekong] Delta abounds in farmland. This region, which is making extensive use of machinery in the production of goods, can produce enough grain for the people's consumption, for use as industrial raw material and for export. We must strive to carry out *agricultural transformation* [to rice] so as to accelerate production. We must practice intensive farming and multi-cropping, use new strains and develop livestock raising. (Broadcast of address to 5th-9th April Cuu Long Conference on the Agricultural Transformation in the former Nam Bo Provinces.)

The ideology Cong reflects brought intensive agriculture to marginal areas of the delta such as Tam Nong. Initially, the NEZ programs here met with great success. In 1982, for example, the Ha Noi Home Service reported that Tam Nong District was one of the highest rice producing areas in the country thanks to "good application of intensive cultivation and growing techniques, including better soil preparations, use of more fertilizer, [and] more rational use of rice strains in different regions (BBC, 12/22/82). Through such reports, the Mekong delta -- irrespective of ecological conditions -- was emphasized to government officials and the public, as a national region synonymous with agricultural success; a "ricebowl" from which the country could feed. This idea was very appealing in a nation of chronic food shortages, and the Mekong delta became embedded in government and public consciousness as a means by which the whole nation could develop and feed "the People." This ideology is reflected in current plans, and as long as land remains available, the government will continue to encourage landless and poor urban workers to occupy NEZ's (Huyen, 1994).

The NEZ program and the great increases in production came to Tam Nong in 1979, but initially were not met with open arms. Even before this date, the district was slated as a target for in-migration, but it was not until 1979 that agricultural transformation and the mass adoption of chemical fertilizers became an integral part of the process. A tremendous flood in 1979 wiped out most of the non-intensive, floating rice crop which had been widespread throughout the district. According to the District People's Committee, the government took the opportunity of the wholesale destruction of that year's crop to introduce intensive agriculture. Existing intensification plans were accelerated, and two new irrigation canals were built through the district. In the first year after the flood, villagers were reluctant to adopt practices which required a lot of fertilizer and irrigation water. However, they were strongly encouraged to adopt the new system, and eventually did. Today, locals agree with Ha Noi's reports that, initially, infrastructure development, which was later combined with increased household control over input and output decisions in 1988, eventually did help boost rice production, and encourage replacement of one annual crop of floating rice with the two crops of chemical fertilizerenhanced, high yielding varieties used today.

2. Forests

Concurrent with these programs, however, is the growing national and local recognition that lost forests need to be rehabilitated. While rice has historically been associated with national expansion by settlers, in post-1975 Tam Nong, forests have been associated with government activities. Although these activities have been as diverse as political education, agroforestry, and environmental protection, local forests and their differing uses have all been planted by various State agencies. In fact, there is little or no precedent for individual tree planting in Tam Nong. This fact is critical in the creation of meaning for forests; especially to the villagers asked to participate in reforestation. As much as cultural associations impel people to farm rice, political associations between forests and government impel people not to plant forests.

Although forests do not dominate Tam Nong's landscape today, this was not always so. Botanical data (Thang, 1994) show that Tam Nong was once covered with dense forests, and interviews with long-standing residents show that before the escalation of the war in the late 1960s, the land was covered with a mix of grassland, floating rice and tram forests. By the end of the war in 1975, the forests were essentially gone, having been intentionally destroyed in an effort to deny the National Liberation Front -- commonly known as the Viet Cong -- a safe haven. The dense forests and forbidding swamp of Tam Nong had provided a relatively secure home for a major revolutionary base from which the Viet Cong planned its war with the Americans and the South Vietnamese regime. By digging canals to drain the swamps and using heavy firepower, the U.S.-backed government cleared the forests, but was not able to root out the Viet Cong.

In true revolutionary fashion, some of the Viet Cong who survived the war to become Party leaders after 1975 designated a large tract of Tam Nong district as a historical park. In doing so, the government decided to recreate the original wetland forest ecosystem in Tam Nong, in the hopes that this park would be a tool with which older Party members could show subsequent generations how the Revolutionaries had lived and suffered to liberate Viet Nam from her "Imperialist and puppet-government oppressors." This park later became Tram Chim, and the ideological *raisons d'etre* mixed with environmental ones.

Today, the tract that receives the most attention is Tram Chim, but other forested areas are important to mention. The commune of Phu Duc borders Tram Chim, and lies next to a separate tract of forested land which informants claimed was planted by the District People's Committee sometime around 1985. On the other side of the Phu Hiep canal, lies a tract of forest which now belongs to, and most likely was planted by the Provincial People's Committee. There is another tract of forested land along the Tan Cong Sinh canal owned by a local military unit. In addition, some villagers mentioned that there was another military-owned tract in the district. While there is forested land on plots allocated to individuals, each of these major stands in the district are State-owned. While this land is controlled by the State, villagers are sometimes allowed access. The Provincial People's Committee stand, for example, is regularly thinned by local villagers in the employ of the People's Committee. Sometimes, however, villagers break the legal rules to gain access since the number of guards is so small. Although the exact terms of forest access remain unclear, villagers are aware that most of the forests in Tam Nong are owned by the government, but available for limited use by the common village "people."

3. Privatization

Most recently, national policies to maximize grain production have focused on reform in the way land is allocated. The current trend towards privatization has placed crop selection and long-term use rights in the hands of farming families under the assumption that individual, rather than collective decisions will maximize yields (Pingali & Xuan, 1990; Xuan, 1992). With collectives, each farmer was allocated between one tenth and one seventh of a hectare of land without long-term tenure rights, and land was frequently reallocated at the will of the collective officials (Pingali & Xuan, 1990). Agricultural inputs were provided by the collectives, outputs were distributed through them to meet pre-set national production goals (Vylder, 1990), and shared labor was mandatory (SPC, 1989). Neither inputs nor outputs were controlled directly by farmers.

In 1981 the "contract" system was implemented, granting farmers greater independence from the collective on which they farmed their land. Each family was now in charge of farming their own plot with certain restrictions set by the collective. No longer would the collective use a simple blueprint to distribute the inputs and buy up the harvest. While production quotas for the individual plots remained, the *manner* in which they could be achieved

changed since the responsibility for agricultural choices was placed on the family rather than the collective. This change also meant that mutual aid requirements for working neighbors' fields were lifted (SPC, 1989). Under the contract system, the collective retained its monopoly on fertilizer and its monopsony on the harvest, maintaining fixed prices at both ends of the agricultural process. The exception to the collective's control was the product from 5% of a farm family's land allocation, which could be sold on an open market free of taxes and was not subject to the production quotas required of the other 95% of the plot area.

In 1986, the Vietnamese Politiburo decided that family-based farming rather than collective-based farming would form the foundation of Viet Nam's future agricultural development. This policy shift took the form of Resolution #10 in 1988, and confirmed earlier indications that the country was moving to privatize land resources. Resolution # 10 is seen as a watershed in Viet Nam's land reform, coming in the same year that the government announced its general economic liberalizations known as Doi Moi, or "New Renovation." According to the simplified debate between socialists and capitalists, it increased relative autonomy over land, created great incentives for individual farmers to increase productivity, and is seen as the "engine" behind Viet Nam's recent agricultural boom (SPC, 1989; EIU, 1990/91).

Resolution #10 lifted the five percent restrictions on private output sales, and allowed family inheritance rights for the allocated plots. Perhaps most importantly it allowed the sale of exclusive rights to the land allocated by the collectives and the sale of the farmer-collective relationship associated with these plots. In effect, this created a market for exchange of use-value rights. Under this new policy of controlled "privatization," individual farmers, not collectives, selected fertilizer, technology, capital inputs, suppliers and buyers (SPC, 1989; Pingali & Xuan, 1990).

By 1993, long-term tenure rights and titles for family farmers were promised in exchange for repayment of the collective's investment prior to 1992 (BKK Post, 1993; EIU, 1993/94; BKK Post, 1993). One million hectares of collective land is to be redistributed to farming families in this way, and the role of the state seems to be changing from one of land supervisor and planner to one of land broker. The promised titles guarantee small farmers 20-year leases. While stopping short of allowing absolute capitalist private property, it does produce certificates which may be transferred, inherited, or mortgaged (BKK Post, 1993) as long as taxes calculated from a government land price list are paid (BBC, August, 1994).

These efforts have seen success beyond expectations, and in 1989 Viet Nam became the world's third largest exporter of rice (Xuan, 1992). This success, however, has added weight to popular associations between rice and prosperity, thereby strengthening the popular conception that rice is wealth. These policies may also have added the words "private property" to what has come to be the definition of rice land.

4. Forests and Privatization

It is in this context of settlers' relationship with rice, government planting of forests, and national reforms to privatize land use that the current reforestation initiatives are promoted by the State. On the one hand, government has, in the past, been eager to replant forests which remained largely under State control, while on the other it is redistributing land with twenty year use rights for riceland and fifty year use rights for agroforestry land. The combination of these two trends raises an important question about rights to newly planted forests in Tam Nong to which I now turn.

Recent national plans have ostensibly called for the reforestation of barren land, such as the acidic soils of the Mekong delta (see Hoe, 1992), and the Tam Nong government has developed specific plans accordingly. They hope to have 5,000 of the 10,000 hectares of acidic land under tram cover by 1995, and in lieu of government-directed, NEZ agriculture, the People's Committee is trying to create incentives for farmers to privately plant tram. However, as of 1994 only 900 hectares of tram forest had been successfully planted in Tam Nong (People's Committee, 1994). Part of the reason for this failure is that these recent plans for reforestation have been developed on the same basis as those for rice agriculture: "privatization." In order for reforestation efforts to succeed, government planners believe, "the allocation of land and forest should be executed... with clear boundaries and certifications that identify the rights of land users" (Hoe, 1992: 91).

The national government, for example, provides low-interest forestry loans and incentives for planting forest species on land allocated to "farmer and enterprise worker households" in an ecologically similar tram region of the delta (Hoe, 1992: 92), and the program in Tam Nong seems to be structured along similar lines. These programs have given farmers money to plant tram, and allow them to sell their produce free of taxes, as is the case in Tam Nong (District People's Committee, 1994). Local government and international NGO's encourage farmers to take these

loans, but few do, citing very concrete reasons for choosing not to plant tram. The following reasons, whether well-grounded or not, were the main arguments given by farmers to avoid the loans.

Taxes: There seems to be confusion as to what is taxed and how much. Farmers say they need to produce enough income from their land to pay taxes, which are set according to the agricultural quality of land. Some of those with whom I spoke were reluctant to farm tram, believing their land would be taxed according to its ability to produce rice, not on its ability to produce tram. According to the District People's Committe, however, there is a four percent output tax on forestry products, while the average for rice product is ten percent. Since the law taxes product, not the land on which it is produced, is it simply that farmers don't understand the law? Or is there a more subtle reason behind this justification.

Ecological Reasons: Growing rice next to tram forests is technically difficult, for the forests harbor rats which feed on rice in adjacent land. In addition, the two crops require different hydrologic regimes. Since a comprehensive system of canals and irrigation ditches has been constructed for intensive agriculture, many are reluctant to stray from the norm. [It remains unclear, however, why the increase in rats is so undesirable. Although rats do feed on the grain, they are in some ways a resource. After the harvest, it is common for farmers to burn the residual organic matter in fire rings to trap the rats. In a province where rats and fish are the main sources of protein, an increased rat population, intuitively, might not seem so bad, especially since the number of fish caught in the district every year continues to decrease.]

Wealth: Perhaps the greatest impediment to tram farming is economic. Given ideal soil conditions, a mature tram forest only generates about half the income as the same acreage planted to rice. In this context, ideal conditions refer either to non-acidic soils or to sufficient irrigation water to flush the acid out during the first few years of cropping, and to keep the soil inundated during the dry season. Since many of the farmers considering these loans come to Tam Nong because they are too poor to survive in other areas, they put a premium on establishing their livelihoods quickly. But for many, the quality of land is not sufficient to grow productive rice crops, as they know, so it would seem in their best interests to accept the tram.

The reasons given by farmers do make *some* sense, but seem not to fully explain farmer resistance to the reforestation programs. The need to explain the resistance fully is apparent. Although adjustments to the program intended to allay these concerns have been implemented, the program still stagnates.

What Land Means in Tam Nong

The government and international NGOs have tried to implement programmatic adjustments to deal with these complaints in order to overcome disincentives to planting tram, and have provided the economic and ecologic conditions in acidic areas suitable for growing tram. In these areas, irrigation is not sufficient to support rice growing, taxes are lower than for rice, and landless farmers are given land. Although some of these farmers accept the government programs, still many resist the plans. It seems their resistance may be related to land's meaning in the local and non-local social and historical context.

Article 3 of the 1991 Law on Forest Protection and Development offers a starting point from which to interpret the meaning of land. It states that "natural forests and planted forests using capital allocated by the State are owned by the State" (p.664). According to this law, then, neither the land allocated nor the trees themselves really belong to the farmer. But if the difference between private and commonly owned property is one of degree rather than substance, as I have argued, then why does not a farmer take limited control over resources rather than receive nothing? If he or she were to receive land allocated to rice, the land still would not be owned in an absolute sense, but she would have rights to the harvest. Once the trees reached maturity, the property relationships would be similar to land planted to rice: the State would own the land, and the individual would have rights to the harvest of that land and benefit from its produce, whether it be rice or fuelwood (see note #9).

In practice, however, the property relationship is not simply the *dejure* one between individual and State, but also one between individual and other kinds of social group. For this reason, it is important to examine the local, cultural fashion in which land use-rights are allocated.

In sum, land planted to tram carries with it the two underlying meanings on the local level. Firstly, it signals that the land is not owned in the way land has traditionally been allocated in Viet Nam. Tam Nong's experience of agricultural transformation may be seen as the current manifestation of a very old tradition of government distributing land to poor farmers for production purposes which have historically served both individual needs and government coffers. This history has created a powerful ideology of land development and values a model for land

use heavily weighted towards rice. Secondly, despite the explicit agreement with the national government concerning individual use-rights of forested land, forested land communicates to the local community government -- and therefore public -- ownership. In a district where most of the forest has been planted by some incarnation of the State, it is not surprising that villagers identify forests with State ownership.

As the following considerations will suggest, economics cannot account for why some individuals choose not to accept the reforestation land program. Other factors, such as popular meanings of land and its use may also affect these choices. In some cases, for example, it may be that planting rice and creating familiar surroundings override economic alternatives to planting rice; in others it may be that forested land is not compatible with popular conceptions of private ownership. These situations, it seems, can only be explained by examining the blend of social communication according to the traditions and meanings developed over Viet Nam's and Tam Nong's history of land transformation.

Some Like Trees, Some Don't

In 1993, the People's Committee received $5,000 to plant 100 hectares of tram along the edge of Tram Chim in the hopes that it might take some of the pressure off the park's resources, and work towards fulfilling the reforestation goal set for 1995. The land slated for reforestation belonged to the People's Committee, but had been farmed for one year by poor newcomers to the region. They agreed to participate in the reforestation effort, and were given tram seedlings to plant on land belonging to the government. The agreement guaranteed them long-term use rights as long they cultivated tram, and ten years after the planting they would own the land, the trees and their products all tax free. Furthermore, they would be able to plant understory crops and receive all their proceeds (Hoe, 1992; People's Committee, 1994). Unlike standard reforestation schemes, the only requirement was that they would have to pay back the cost of seedlings (which the People's Committee was planning not to collect in the end). During the ten years it would take for the tram to mature to a point where it could begin to provide income, the farmers were given rights to rice fields in another part of the district to ensure their survival.

The project was only partially successful, with many farmers neglecting the seedlings, allowing wind to uproot them, or even uprooting them directly. The People's Committee attributed the low success rate to "bad planting techniques and bad communication." Assuming that the rice allocation would have sustained these farmers for the ten years -- and indeed half of those accepting the project are confident it will -- these explanations would not adequately account for those who did agree to plant the tram and knew the proper techniques. Since planting tram is not a complex feat, and many of the farmers did understand and believe the terms of the agreement that they would eventually own the trees, it seems possible that the project's failures might best be explained by the cultural associations and popular ideology which defines forested land as publicly owned property.

Uncle Three's Trees

It is the same concern that one farmer named Uncle Three seems to have in one of the villages surrounding Tram Chim. Uncle Three had six hectares of land to till for himself in 1989 under the privatizing reforms. At the time, since he had long-term use rights guaranteed by the government, he planted three hectares to rice on the NEZ side of the canal, and three to tram just outside Tram Chim park where the soil is very acidic. By 1994, two of the tram hectares had been destroyed by floods, wind overturns, and encroachment by other villagers and their water buffalo. During the same period he and his eight-member family have harvested eight seasons of rice from the other hectares. Labor in Tam Nong is cheap, and given an irrigation ditch for good water supply, he could plant rice in these two destroyed hectares. Uncle Three says he would not plant rice here even if the government had plans to extend irrigation ditches to his land. His justification is the "rats are bad for rice" argument which other farmers use as reason not to plant tram in rice areas, and he believes that the whole area around his plots would also need to be riceland in order for rice planted to his two hectares to succeed. Still, he chooses not to replant those two hectares of tram. Protecting the seedlings is not nearly as difficult as planting rice, and the fact that the tram plots are near his house would seem to make it easier for his large family to care for them. Instead, Uncle Three forgoes the possibility that these plots may one day become a profitable agroforestry plantation, and lets them lie fallow. By doing this, he runs the risk of losing this land to the government which has the right to reappropriate land that has been left fallow for six months. Even though he believes the land is not profitable for rice, why would Uncle Three not at least try to plant something on the land to gain some profit in the future or at least maintain his ownership?

It seems entirely possible that he is reacting (or not reacting) to popular ideas about land use which define user-rights differently from the government's titling policy. It is important to note that no strangers ever grazed water

buffalo in his rice fields (nor have I ever heard of any such case in the district). For him, a major issue in growing tram seedlings was keeping out local villagers and water buffalo so that the seedlings could survive to maturity. In addition, it seems that he might be worried that if people do not respect his property claims now, why should they when the forests are denser, more valuable for their resources, and less easily patrolled by his family? Since sufficient control of his property was not possible in two thirds of his tram land, Uncle Three may not have thought it worthwhile to invest in replanting tram. In light of increasing in-migration of farmers to whom he has no social connection and therefore no shared community, it seems an especially wise choice.

Finally, his tram land is planted near the park, a government-owned forest which is already under illegal use by villagers. Ever since 1975, locals have associated tram reforestation efforts specifically with government property. Tram Chim itself, for example, was an area of wild grassland and floating rice before 1987. When the park was created during that year, the People's Committee appropriated the land and planted the tram forests that exist there today. Along the Tan Cong Sinh canal, the military owns a large tract of tram forest which it lets villagers use for small fuelwood needs. Outside of Phu Duc village the district People's Committee manages a small area of forest. And along the An Hoa canal the Provincial People's Committee owns a tract of forest which it lets local villagers thin for poles and firewood. It seems highly likely, therefore, that many locals do not distinguish between tram on government land and tram on private property. Similarly, government retakes fallow land, which often looks like land under the initial stages of reforestation. Such popular notions undermine the basis upon which property is distributed -- that based on exclusive claims -- and begin to offer an answer to Uncle Three's mysterious choices.

Conclusion:Recognizing the Meaning of Land Use

Most government and NGO programs focus on wealth as the primary reason villagers are reluctant to plant tram and have created viable economic alternatives to rice agriculture in areas where acidic soils make rice cropping a risky investment. In doing so, they address much of the problem, but miss the importance of social communication and meaning in the process of land use choices, as in the two examples.

As failed reforestation examples have suggested, land planted to tram has no history of being a statement of private ownership, and therefore cannot be treated simply as a form of private property like a plot planted to rice. Since, as Rose has stated, a land's use communicates to the village a statement about ownership as much as a title does, farmers' choices may not always reflect "rational" economic decisions. Good economics may often be at odds with insurance against trespass by other resource-users or, worse yet, poaching of fish, fuelwood, and rats. Not only is it more difficult for the farmer to control access to resources on his land under tram cultivation, but it is also more difficult for him to communicate to other villagers that the resources on the land are private, and do not belong to any of the various manifestations of the government. Moreover, in a district where the only tram existing has been planted by the government, I believe tram has assumed the identity of a public resource in opposition to the riceland, which takes on the identity of government-allocated land for individual use.

Land has historically embedded meanings which influence these farmers' decisions. Rice has come to hold a meaning which registers a claim to the popular belief that the land is productive in the "traditional Vietnamese" way, cultivated and owned for the purpose of maximizing production. It is this claim, this appeal to history and recent policy, that keeps trespassers out and secures an owner's exclusive access to productive resources. Consistent with this belief, it seems likely that the reason many villagers, who are often newcomers to the area, choose rice because it carries with it the strongest statement of claim to property. It may also be one of the root causes for their treating Tram Chim Park as a local source of common resources. Could it be that Tram Chim's claim of ownership is recognized only by the local and national government, and not by many of the villagers? That it is recognized by policy, but not yet by cultural norms?

In a culture where the English idea "to eat" is translated as "an Com" -- or "to eat rice" -- rice's significance is more then economic. Given both ancient and recent history, there is almost no basis for the idea that forested land can be private property owned by individuals, and this may be the reason that these farmers were not confident that their guaranteed rights to the land would be upheld if they planted tram.

My preliminary analysis of the differing meanings of land and how that meaning is communicated indicate that more research is needed to clarify exactly how these competing meanings have evolved and what role they play in land-use choices. In particular, an analysis of how policy changes jump ahead of cultural change to create decision-making dilemmas for local farmers is needed. Such a study might provide important insights into how well reforestation projects will be accepted in Tam Nong.

APPENDIX A

Methods

Data for this study was gathered during a two and a half month field trip to Tam Nong District starting in June, 1994. Subsequent research was conducted at Yale from September 1994 until May 1995.

During the two and a half months I interviewed approximately 35 farmers of Tam Nong. Informants were selected at random from the four villages along the edge of Tram Chim: Tan Cong Sinh, Phu Duc, Phu Hiep, and Phu Tho. All informants obtained their resources locally through farming, fishing, gathering or buying wood, and catching rats. Some informants had been caught gathering resources from the park in the past two years by Tram Chim staff, and some were particularly willing and even anxious to talk about how they earn a living in Tam Nong. Almost all knew that Tram Chim had been established to protect the forest eco-system and that it was forbidden by law to cross into the park.

Interviews were semi-structured and allowed informants to choose what topics to emphasize. Among others, the following questions were asked of farmers in the villages of Tan Cong Sinh, Phu Duc, Phu Hiep, and Phu Tho in Tam Nong district:

a. Property:

i. What land do you farm on? Who owns it? How did you get your land? Do you have a title for land? How did you get this land? How do you know it's yours? Do people work for you? Do you get government subsidies for your land? How are they dispersed?

b. Migration History:

i. Where were you born? Who in your family came to Tam Nong first? How many family members are here now? How long have you lived in Tam Nong? Why did you come here? How did you make a living before you came here? How long do you plan to live here? How long do you think you'll live here? Is your life here better or worse than it was where you came from? Is life getting better, worse, or staying the same for those who still live where you came from?

c. Tram Reforestation:

i. Are you aware of the program to plant tram in Tam Nong? How did you find out? Would you plant tram if asked? Why? Why not? What is tram used for?

d. Taxes:

i. Do you pay taxes? What is the basis upon which you pay taxes? If you were to plant tram would you pay the same rate of tax?

In addition, local leaders were interviewed, including the Vice-Director for Tram Chim National Park, the Chairman of the District People's Committee, a representative of the District Agricultural Committee, a Botanist at the University of Ho Chi Minh City compiling a floral inventory of the park, and the Director of Economics at the Institute for Social Sciences in Ho Chi Minh City. A representative of an America NGO involved with the reforestation projects also contributed to my understanding of the land-use system in Tam Nong.

Finally, as way to understand t policy objectives on the national and international level I used maps from the colonial era, the American war period, the immediately post-1975 period, and the present. These documents provided perspectives on "official" information which was unbiased by personal interaction and revisionist histories.

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