

Rice, Family, Ancestors: The Precious Ingredients of Landscape Heritage in Rural Vietnam

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ABSTRACT— *The reading of an anthropized environment is always a rather complex task, because of the many different variables (e.g. geomorphological, climatic, historical, economic, etc., factors) determining its origin. In this article, the traits of the traditional Vietnamese society are described with the aim of providing a reading key highlighting the influence of socio-cultural aspects on the configuration of the settlements and dwellings in the rural areas of Vietnam. The result of this analysis is the realization of how functional the urban layout of the traditional village and the characteristics of the dwellings are to the structure of a rural society based upon the fundamental importance of family, the division into clans and ancestor worship, the agricultural economy based on the cultivation of rice. These elements are the real genetic factors of a visible landscape generated by the interaction between man and environment.*

Keywords — interaction between man and environment, socio-economic model and cultural traditions, passage - house and living complex.

1. INTRODUCTION

To the Western observer Vietnam is a small and far away country. Not so much for its geographic distance: low cost airline companies have reduced the gap to just a few hours and a few hundred euros. The distance perceived is rather related to the country's historical, environmental and cultural peculiarities. To be able to understand something about this territory, our observer should put on light clothes, suitable for a monsoon climate, set off to one of the many villages scattered like an archipelago amongst the paddy fields, walk along the streets full of the colors of the mangos and pomelos sold on bamboo stalls, breathe the acrid smell of crab sauce, listen to the voices modulating incomprehensible languages, and, finally, welcomed by kind and inviting smiles, enter a house.

If human settlements represent the complex and dynamic organism of a people, the dwelling units are its cells. The social relationships between the individuals are the lymphatic system, while the economy is the blood flow feeding it. But the whole organism comes to light, lives and evolves thanks to a DNA constituted by the socio-cultural model, the century-old distillate of popular traditions, which are often functional to the survival and the perpetuating of a population. Traditions that mould communities and individuals, that are passed down through rites and elevated in the religious and philosophical elaboration.

The Vietnamese community that appears to the eyes of the Western observer is therefore the fruit of cultural models developed throughout the years to adapt the lifestyle to the environment and to the socio-economic changes, like in a sort of Darwinian evolution.

If we use space and time as the coordinates to identify the unfolding of human existence, we obtain a Cartesian plane where the environment can be represented as a function of its many variables: geomorphological features, climate, culture, religion, economics and social structure. The physiognomy of the built-up environment, composed of its material and spiritual elements, can then be read as an admirable synthesis of the solutions adopted to improve the quality of life, as the product of popular experience, the teamwork of several different generations.

It is an innovative methodological approach, because of the sociology of architecture and landscape is very recent. Therefore the proposal analysis is an original interpretation, but with reference to sociology of the territory.

The observation of human settlements must be carried out considering the anatomy, the functional connections, the physiological and pathological reactions to external agents. Especially when the analysis is propaedeutic to a planning respecting their vocation and preserving their equilibrium.

The "territory", seen in both its intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, becomes a "place". A place to visit. A place where people are born and live. A historic and imaginative place – an invisible residence sheltered from time. A material and immaterial landscape, which is the outcome of the interaction of the environment with time and the work of man. A space to be investigated in its dynamism, the result of an organic evolution.

Then the interdependence between social systems and ecosystems, the physical concreteness of sociality and culture, as elements interconnected and interacting with space and environment, cannot be ignored. The territory comes to life, as

a network of relationships, an environment where individual and social, family and urban experiences are developed. A plot hatched with spaces, perceptions, objective and subjective distances, physical and social locations. A plot tailored by the community for its temporary survival and future permanence in life.

It is therefore worth quickly looking through the typical ingredients of the traditional Vietnamese civilization, which influence one another and combine with one another in a functional way.

2. THE RURAL SOCIETY

Family, rice, Uncle Ho. These are the elements on which the swarm of youngsters on their mopeds that invade the field of vision of visitors in town base the perception of their national identity, strengthened by their liberation from all colonialisms.

Let's start from rice, which is the main product of the Vietnamese economy and is largely exported, just consider that Vietnam is the major rice supplier to China.

«The Vietnamese plant the rice, the Cambodians just watch, the Laos listen to it grow». This is what the French used to say when Southeastern Asia was their *Indochine*, but Vietnam still remains an essentially agricultural region. Agriculture and the fertile relationship with land have always characterized and strongly connoted the civilization and culture of this people. “Two baskets of rice supported by a stick” is the geographical description given when referring to the alluvial plains of Tonkin and Cochin china, crossed by the Annamite Range.

Table 1: Five-year averages of key economic indicators

Indicator	1980 –84	1985 –89	1990 –94	1995 –99	2000 –04
GDP growth rate percent p.a.	<u>n.a.</u>	4.3*	7.3	7.5	7.2
Real agricultural output value (billion VND)	<u>n.a.</u>	<u>n.a.</u>	68 905.7	93 840.5	121 989.7
Growth rate of agricultural output (percent <i>per annum</i>)	6.4	3.9	4.8	6.7	4.6
Share of agriculture, forestry & fisheries (in GDP percent)	<u>n.a.</u>	41.7*	34.1	26.4	23.0
Share of agriculture, forestry & fisheries (in employment percent)	71.2	72.7	72.3	70.1	61.9
Share of rural population in total (percent)	81.0	80.5	80.1	77.8	74.8
Cereal production per capita (kg paddy equiv.)	287.9	282.3	323.7	395.6	457.9
Rice export volume ('000 tonnes)	- 114.0	109.9	1661. 6	3 360.9	3 660.7
Coffee export volume ('000 tonnes)	3.9	29.9	119.7	357.5	822.3

n.a.: Not available due to different system of accounting or different price index. Values and rates of growth use 1994 constant prices except for growth rates in agricultural output for 1980–1985 which are in 1982 constant prices.

* 1986–1989.

Source: GSO, Statistical Yearbooks.

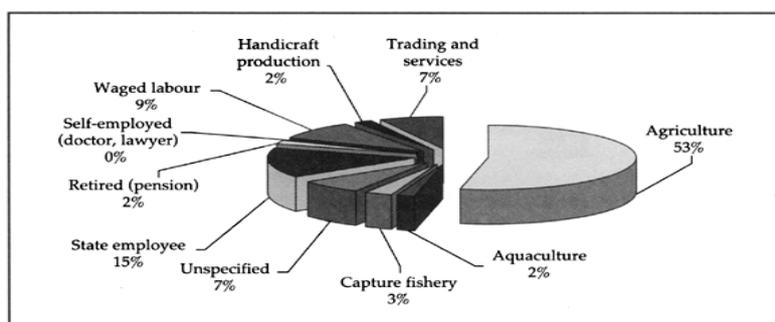


Figure 1: The importance of agriculture in Vietnam, Source: FAO (2005)

The problem of dependence on natural resources, or on energy resources, as we would say speaking in modern terms, reflects also in the ancient Feng Shui architecture, which aims at identifying the site and the rules for building through the analysis of energies and respect of the natural elements. Life and work depend on the sky and land, on their beneficial

interaction. The cycles of the seasons and of life are therefore associated with a concept of cosmic order that must be respected and followed in all its expressions. In fact, the flows of energy, consistently with the values, the cycles and the resources of a rural society, follow this fundamental principle: “everything falls down from the sky, everything ascends from the earth”.

But in the traditional rural society the sense of belonging rests on two pillars: family and clan.

From the very birth of the century old Vietnamese state, family has been the social basis and the center of a dense network of family relationships. The supporting element of every village, the family faces the external pressures from the central state and responds to the strains of a sometimes hostile nature, where farmers have had to constantly protect their work from typhoons, flooding and famine, giving life to important hydraulic civilizations. And it is in this unceasing endeavor that the deep sense of respect the Vietnamese have for mutual support, collective cooperation, unity of the people against natural disasters, as well as enemy attacks, developed.

In a rural society with a poor administrative structure, in certain agitated periods without public order and without a well defined government, individuals find protection in the family. In Vietnam, as well as in China, filial piety, *the hieu*, is the cement of a community related by blood in which all the members, dead or alive, are sympathetic to one another and the disrespect for filial piety (*bat hieu*) is regarded as a crime.

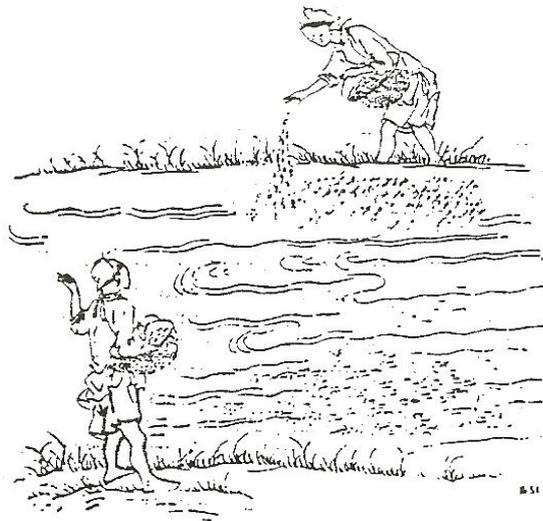
Everyone must do their best, throughout their whole life, to enhance the reputation and prestige of their clan (*ho*), which can be described as an extended family composed of a number of families descending from a common ancestor, for a maximum of nine generations.

The clan is divided into branches and sub-branches, identified on the basis of its male descendants. Each clan has a common asset, the ancestors’ temple, situated in the house of its leader. This is usually the leader of the first branch and is in charge of updating a sort of book of the genealogical tree, where he writes down, by order of filiation, the names of each dead member of the clan, of their first wives and of all the other wives that gave them children, the dates of birth and death, the place where they were buried and their notable deeds, whereas the names of those members who were convicted for dishonorable offence are not even registered. The aim of this book is to perpetuate the name of the clan, its descent and its ancestral cult.

Central importance is given to marriage, which must be precocious and prolific. In fact, the birth of a child is always a happy event. In the traditional Vietnamese society, marriage is essentially a collective act, wanted and organized by the two families concerned with very little involvement of the couple engaged. It is usually arranged by families that wish to form an alliance through negotiations often carried out by intermediaries. If the outcome of the negotiations is favorable, the two families exchange the eight cyclic characters indicating the time, the day, the month and the year of birth of the future bride and groom. Then the couple’s horoscopes are examined: if the outcome is positive, the couple will become man and wife. At this point three fundamental rites are celebrated: the wedding proposal, the engagement and the actual wedding.

A Vietnamese wedding essentially consists of a double private ceremony: before the ancestral altar and the relatives of the bride to be and then before the ancestral altar and the relatives of the groom to be. That is where a further ceremony is celebrated, the “red threads’ ceremony” in honor of the “Old Man of the Moon”, the genie of marriage. A few days later, the bride and groom fulfil the right to marriage in their home village, whereas free unions are extremely rare.

Figure 2: The rice cultivation



Source: P. Muard - M.Durand, *Connaissance du Viet - nam*; Ecole française d’extreme orient, Hanoi 1954

The status of women within the traditional Vietnamese family deserves mentioning. Every woman is compelled to a threefold obedience: to her father, as a daughter, to her husband, as a wife, to her first born son, as a widow. However, in reality she is the mistress of the home and actually plays a very important social role.

When a marriage is not happy, the husband can repudiate his wife only in seven precise cases, although this, just like divorce, happens very rarely, thanks to the palliative of polygamy. Besides the main wife, there can be second-rank wives, married after consultation and consent from the main wife. Eventually a man can also have concubines, whom he buys but does not marry.

Contrary to individualist and moralist Westerners, Confucians prefer not to touch the family structure, leaving to the wife her clearly defined social position inside and outside the home. However the wife remains the legal mother also of the children the husband might have from other unions. She has the right to respect from the husband's other wives and a position of prominence over them. Whereas in case of divorce the ex wife would lose her children and husband, as well as her family and home.

Fate is one of the reasons that could make a man want to change wives. In fact, in Sino-Vietnamese cosmology the destiny of married couples, as well as that of occasional lovers, is ineluctably determined.

In conclusion, the importance family has in the social structure makes the average Vietnamese a collective being, to whom the interest and the will of the group always prevail over those of the individual or of the couple. This social condition is exemplified by the way the houses are arranged in the built-up area, so that everybody lives their life under everybody's eyes. Everybody's emotional life is conditioned by the pressures from the community and every emotional reaction is actually "felt" or "faked" according to the needs of the group. And in this acceptance of the strict family discipline, it can be difficult to distinguish reality from sham, what is sincere from what is just a "game" imposed by one's social role. Sometimes the armor of customs and traditions is a powerful means to restrain and control one's emotions, which can be disciplined through a very effective inhibitory system: etiquette and rites. According to a Chinese saying when you teach your children you should do it publicly, but when you teach your wife you should do in her ear; a married man would "lose face" if he argued with his wife in public, giving the impression of being somehow subjected to her will. A widower mourning his wife should conceal his grief "like a dumb man conceals his discontent when he eats bitter food".

If an individual wants to be autonomous and recover his mutilated personality, he has no other choice than to revolt and escape. However, in many cases the guilt for feeling ungrateful can lead to suicide.

3. RELIGION AND TRADITIONAL CULTS

Walking down the streets of a village, you come across small colorful buildings full of fruits and rice. They are not bizarre doghouses, but the altars of the Penates, or Lares, with their votive offerings. The village comes alive with human and divine life, mixing these presences that interact with everyday life at every crossroad, since they are not relegated to a dedicated space, but scattered along the inhabitants' route.

Promiscuity between the real and spiritual spheres becomes even more tangible when one moves from the street into a house, entering a big and light open space. The brilliant architect of the building, supported by low pillars that slightly lift it off the ground, is the hot and humid climate. The walls of bamboo and palm tree wood allow the air to circulate, delimiting and sheltering the space without closing it.

Inside the smell of burnt incense wafts from a brick altar placed in the center of the room. On the altar there are the cinerary urns of the ancestors', who continue to be a tangible presence inside the house, which is therefore the abode of all the members of the family, of those who are still alive as well as of those who passed away.

These direct observations lead us inside the society's cultural and religious complex, where the cult of the dead and of the ancestors is extremely important.

The cult aims at perpetuating the close relationship between the members of the clan, which is so intense to go beyond the barrier of death, thanks also to the practice of complex rites that give form to the relationships between the living and the dead. Let's see some of these rites.

With regards to burial, first of all the grave must be dug following the principles of Geomancy to assure good fortune to the family of the dead person. When the coffin is lowered into the grave, its beneficial position is verified using a geomantic compass. At that point, the funerary tablet is brought to the graveyard. On the tablet there is an inscription with the last character missing. At the precise moment this last character is painted on, the soul of the dead person goes into the funerary tablet. The tablet is then brought back home, where a rite with the funerary tablets of the four ascending generations (i.e. the great-great grandfather and his wife, the great grandfather and his wife, the grandfather and his wife, the father and mother) is celebrated in the temple. Each time the tablets must be buried in the soil beneath the temple.

Also the traditions linked to the cycles of time and of the seasons are of particular interest.

We can briefly recall the New Year's Eve celebration, which lasts for three days with special rites at the ancestors' altar and solemn processions in the village. Another solemn feast is *Têt Doan Ngo*, celebrated in occasion of the Summer solstice. During the feast paper images and wooden dummies are burnt to keep away summer epidemics and any other seasonal illness. And there is also the joyous festival of Autumn, during which new wedding engagements are made and celebrated with aphrodisiac food.

As far as the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the sacred rites are concerned, in Vietnam, as in the whole area of the Far East, different religious and spiritual currents coexist. The cultural mosaic is the result of several influences: from Confucianism to Taoism, from Buddhism to Christianity, all merged with previous animistic beliefs and practices like Shamanism. The result is a wealth of century old sacred traditions.

There is a clear cosmological concept at the base of the theological and philosophical conceptions: the whole creation is composed of the same substance. Man, animal, plants, minerals, they are all parts of a global Universe that contains their matter and soul. Specularly, the Universe is composed of the same matter as man, animals, plants and minerals.

In this pantheist view, both the human and divine souls are of a similar nature and coexist as complementary parts of the same Universe, in harmony and equilibrium. We could also add: in silence.

While the modern Western civilization is the civilization of noise, the Sino- Vietnamese one, like other Eastern civilizations, enhances the importance of silence. Which, together with music, is a way of expressing the inexpressible.

4. THE TRADITIONAL HOUSE AND VILLAGE

When looking at the interior of a typical Vietnamese house, what one sees is a space that has no delimitations (rooms) functional to the individualistic concept of “privacy”. What we see is rather one big space for the entire family. Movable partitions make it possible to dynamically adjust the space according to the needs of family life, which can become a bedroom, a shophouse or a place of worship. The perimeter of the house varies and measures the size of intimate and collective experiences in a flexible and quick way. The dwelling becomes a passage - house that communicates with the outside and extends organically towards the street, becoming a multifunctional living space.

Figure 2: Inside a H'Mong house, Vietnam

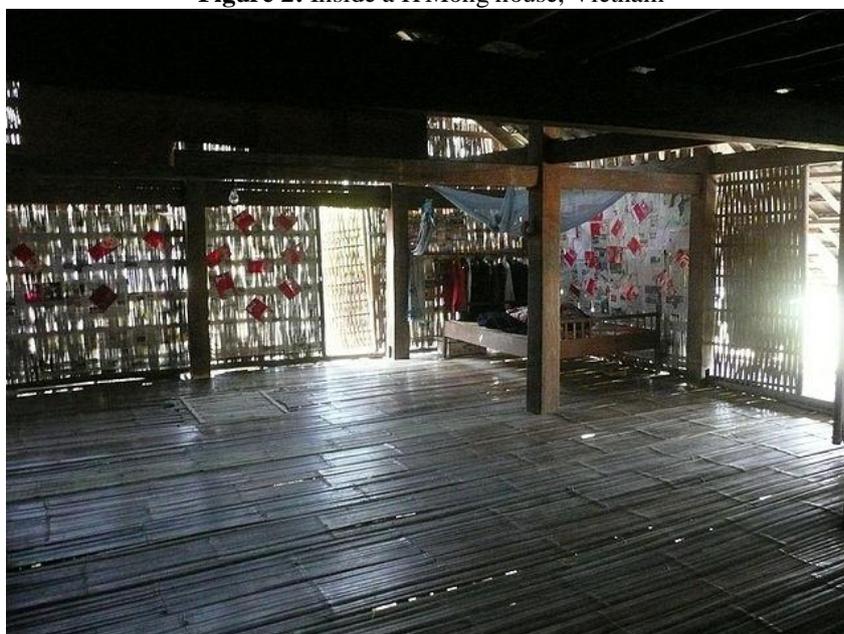


photo by Vincent Hundry, source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/vincenthundry/3040226035/sizes/l/>

In Vietnam, in fact, it is the whole settlement, strongly integrated with resources and values, in other words with material and spiritual elements influencing human experience, rather than its single specific portions, that seems to be the significant space where different activities are carried out and relationships lived.

Every rule connoted by a mystic meaning can be read in its intrinsic pragmatic function: maintenance of the green areas is prescribed as the care of patron divinities, the set up of barriers to alleviate meteorological events is incentivized by the idea of having a shield protecting from “negative arrows”.

This integration explains the homogeneity of the types of houses in the same area and their persistence over time, the coherence between forms of dwelling and environmental conditions, productive system, social structure, ways of life and cultural conceptions. It also explains the symbolic richness of the house seen as a global and complex experience. In fact, the house is interpreted as a microcosm whose specific elements refer to the symbolization of the universe. In particular they refer to the millenary art of Feng Shui or Chinese Geomancy, which can be read as a refined theological and philosophical emanation of a rural society based on families aggregated in villages.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The perfect integration of the different aspects of human existence is graphically displayed in the quadrant of a geomantic compass, where the concentric circles represent and link different aspects and disciplines.

The whole complex system of reality finds a harmonious synthesis in the expert hands of a geomancer and can be read through a set of symbols.

Geomantic symbology represents the coding of an information system that can be used to solve any practical problem also taking into account spiritual needs. For our Western traveler it is a sort of relational database that can be accessed thanks to the geomancer's intuitive and analogical skills. Ultimately, this discipline is functional to a universal planning approach based on the metaphysical concept of the understanding of reality. Where "matter" is no longer the object observed and becomes the observing subject, with its own will and its own soul. Dwellers, the conscious residents of spaces that are alive, communicate with infinitely bigger spaces (e.g. universal spaces), whose origin is essentially divine.

The hearthstone is a tile of the social mosaic, which is, in turn, part of a global system where water, wind and the cardinal points influence the individual and at the same time are used by the individual, who exploits them to his advantage, forming a cosmic design of elements, relationships, equilibria, where everything has its logic and meaning. The stratification of the built-up spaces overlaps the geological one, composing a narrative syntax whose decoding makes it possible to browse the territory like a book, where each page illustrates the same subject seen from different angles. Wind and water shape and besiege the landscape. The hand of man constructs and reconstructs it. ICT expands it towards virtual augmented realities. The mind loads it with philosophical meaning and draws the places of the soul. Art, poetry and literature elevate it. An example for all is "The Travels of Marco Polo", which for centuries, beyond the legends, the dreams and the illusions nurtured by poets and conquerors, has conveyed to the West the image of a world unknown to most people: the East. The strength of this book opened a passage to a distant and different civilization, discovering and revealing it for the first time to Europe. Asia was portrayed by the memory of a traveler as a spectacle of a variety of colors, smells, natural and human expressions.

If the western traveler were able to grasp this equilibrium between the elements, he would feel a sensation as delicate and powerful as a love poem by Kokinwakashu, where the sea foam floats pushed by the waves. Or as a painting on silk, where the artist depicts landscapes, pagodas and scenes from everyday life and the soft refinement of the fabric merges with the gracefulness of the forms and charm of its colors, in an exaltation of an ineffable mystic harmony.

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