

CHAPTER SIX

THE CRAFT VILLAGES OF THE RED RIVER DELTA (VIETNAM): PERIODIZATION, SPATIALIZATION, SPECIALIZATIONS

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Abstract

In the densely populated countryside of the Red River Delta (1,000 inhabitants per square kilometre), an original, local production system is in the process of being modernized and expanded. Founded on the bedrock of craft and industrial villages connected within commercial and family networks, clusters of craft villages seek their way in the context of the ongoing transition to a market economy of a system long administered by the communist State.

A pre-capitalist system of industrial production, craft industries, organized into clusters in Vietnam, have not yet been swept away by capitalism, unlike in other East and Southeast Asian countries, dominated by the market economy and large-scale industrial complexes that employ a numerous, low-paid workforce. In the shadow of China, whose companies are difficult to compete with, Vietnam manages to carve out a niche and continues to produce artisans. But for how long?

Drawing on a diachronic study, we will present the methods of economic restructuring and spatial reform of various cluster types (textiles, woodwork, food processing, wickerwork and metallurgy), the technical transformations of various crafts and their workforce capacity, according to policies implemented and local, national and international economic circumstances.

1. Introduction

In the densely populated countryside of the Red River Delta (1,000 inhabitants per square kilometre), an original local production system is in the process of being modernized and expanded. Founded on the bedrock of craft and industrial villages connected within commercial and familial

networks, clusters of craft villages seek their way in the context of the ongoing transition to a market economy of a system long administered by the communist State.

Craft villages emerged as early as the 11th century in the environs of Hà Nội for the production of objects necessary to the workings of the imperial capital and to supply products for the everyday needs of a village society geared towards home consumption. Since time immemorial, they have been tied into networks of age-old connections, linked to the capital by the “District of the 36 streets and guilds” and to areas where raw materials are extracted, to markets both national and international (principally China). Since the Economic Liberalization of the 1980s, or *Doi Moi*, growing numbers of villages have developed fresh activities, or have intensified their production. This thanks to the opening up of borders, the freedom to do business, the acceleration of town-country links which were restricted during the collectivist era, and thanks to national and provincial incentive policies.

Currently, there are about 1,000 craft villages in the Red River Delta organized into clusters. These localities produce articles designed for the daily life of villagers (food processing, religious objects, industrial products and building materials, commercial services and transport...) and for export (wickerwork, furniture, woollen clothing and *objets d’art*...). They enjoy income several times greater than that of “agricultural” villages and have thus been able to invest in real estate and improve their living conditions.

In terms of production growth, employment capacity of a plentiful underemployed workforce in the countryside and of the resilience of this type of industry during the industrial crises of the collectivist period, craft villages have proved their worth.

As we contemplate the history of handicrafts in the Red River Delta over the course of several centuries, an endless cycle seems to emerge: its narratives tell of the birth of the crafts, their dissemination and specialization, technical improvements and eventually their death and subsequent resurrection.

The type of cluster organization characteristic to Vietnamese handicrafts is a pre-capitalist system that has survived the advent of the market economy. This stands in sharp contrast with the rest of East and Southeast Asia, where large, international corporations thrive on *laissez-faire* economics and cheap labour. Despite being in the long shadow of China, whose businesses are hard to compete with, Vietnam is managing to steer its own course and continues to produce artisans. But for how much longer?

2. Craft villages: an ancient, territorialized production system in perpetual reformation

Linked closely since their creation with the capital Hà Nội and a dense network of markets (Nguyễn Duc Nghinh 1993), craft villages have been organized into clusters, both for production and for marketing. These villages were linked by a latticework of canals and rivers to Hà Nội, the city located “within the bend in the river”, constituting a veritable communications hub between the mountains and the China Sea, opening out to the world.

This production system is specific to densely populated rice-growing deltas. In these Asian monsoon plains, replanting work, a technique necessary for attaining very high rice yields and obtaining two harvests every year, has seasonally required a large workforce. Rice, a colonizing plant, has the merit of feeding a large population, but demands intensive bursts of work at specific times of the year.

During the off-season, labourers have had to find other activities, their small plots of land being insufficient to feed them all year round. In this manner, several villages on these overpopulated plains have specialized in other non-agricultural activities that require little capital outlay and are capable of temporarily absorbing a large workforce.

2.1 Craft villages organized into clusters

Craft villages began to thrive as the Chinese conquest was ending. After Emperor Ly Thai Tô moved the Imperial Court from Hoa Lu to Thang Long on the banks of the Red River in 1010, several villages began developing craft activities. They were granted monopolies and dedicated themselves fully to the manufacture of religious and luxury handicrafts for the Imperial Court and the affluent classes in Vietnam and other Asian countries (such as China and Japan).

Craft products were also used in the daily life of the villages, which were largely geared towards home consumption: cotton cloth, ceramics, agricultural and hydraulic tools, rattan and bamboo goods, sedge mats, processed foodstuffs (e.g., from flour mills, oil mills and distilleries) and industrial products (metalwork, milled paper) (Fanchette and Stedman 2009). A wide range of items could be manufactured, owing to the availability of a large variety of botanical and animal raw materials.

Each village produced infinite variations on the one item it specialised in. Wickerwork is the best example of this diversity: there are eight varieties of bamboo, each with its specific characteristics, from which an

endless variety of baskets can be made: baskets of all shapes and sizes, with a more or less tight weave, baskets for cooking, for transporting the harvest or soil, for irrigation, for drying the harvested crops, for preserving goods or breeding silkworms; watertight baskets to carry water. In 1930, Pierre Gourou counted more than 800 crafts in the Red River Delta (Gourou 1936).

This same author observed a tendency for each village to specialise in one specific activity and for labour to be divided among villages, which thus become integrated production groups manufacturing the same type of goods. This development probably started at the onset of the 17th century, at a time when handicrafts underwent rapid evolution stimulated by the growth of Hà Nội. Aspects of the burgeoning production process called for rationalization, including:

- A monopolistic mindset (organized around social rules and rituals): once they had succeeded in developing an industry, villages wanted to protect their production methods, which therefore had to be kept secret.
- Poverty meant that craftspeople sought to make a swift profit and lacked the means to purchase large amounts of raw materials or otherwise tie up capital. Individual villages would therefore only carry out part of the production process and sell semi-manufactured goods on to another village, which would in turn manufacture the finished product.

This localized system of production is founded on villages, the territorial and social building blocks of Vietnamese society. They are communities of shared skills within a territorialized and demarcated space defined by an architectural and religious heritage consisting of communal houses, temples or small pagodas designed for the worship of the village's craft ancestors and tutelary spirits. A rich, intangible heritage finds expression in these places and bears witness to the defining role of these crafts within this village society (Fanchette and Stedman 2009).

2.2 Villages linked to the capital through the “District of 36 streets and guilds”

Traditionally, cities in Vietnam were symbols and seats of power and were regarded as religious centres. They were military strongholds responsible for defending the integrity of the national territory and the place of residence of the celestial appointee—king or lord—or his

representatives (Langlet Quach Thanh-Tâm 1993). At the same time, they were also trade centres.

During the Ly Dynasty (11-14th centuries) communities of artisans working in the same craft gradually moved to Ke Cho, the capital's market. They set up shop in "urban villages", while continuing to go back and forth to their native villages. This constant to and fro movement stimulated trade and the craft industry. The city workshops called upon the vast reserves of rural manpower that contributed to the enrichment of this district and of their villages: orders placed in the capital provided work for the craft villages, the city representing an immense market for these products, some of which were made there on the spot.

Then with densification and urbanization, what had once been large urban villages specialized in a one craft activity turned into specialized streets. There were in fact roughly one hundred streets – 36 was chosen as an auspicious number. Each street was named after the goods it sold: Sugar Street, Hemp Street, Cards Street, Dyers' Street, Cup Street, Cotton Street, Chicken Street, Tray Street, Tin Street, Drum Street, Fan Street, Comb Street... (Papin 2001). Shopkeepers were sometimes themselves artisans. Trade with foreign countries stimulated craft industry and the city was visited by Western and Chinese merchants (Nguyễn Thua Hy 2002).

2.3 A city at the crossroads between markets, which lost its role during the collectivist era

Thanks to its favourable location at the crossroads of multiple waterways, the Red River, the Tô Lich River and the Kim Nguu River (Hà Tây), the "District of 36 streets and guilds" was at the heart of regional commerce. Via numerous ports located along the Red River and the Tô Lich River, merchandise from craft villages in the Delta was brought to the specialized streets of the capital.

City markets were held at the various gates of Ke Cho's surrounding walls. There were eight large ones in the 18th century, excluding specialised markets such as the rice market, fish market and frog market. Small markets would take place in front of the Red River wharf; brine, salt and sugar were traded in the streets bearing their names, which are located near the river (Nguyễn Thua Hy 2002). Markets specialized in craft products, silk or paper, for example, were held in the "District of 36 streets and guilds" or round West Lake, on the outskirts of the capital.

Then, in the 1950s, during the collectivist era, private enterprise was outlawed. Artisans from the villages were organized into production co-operatives. In the more active villages and where local authorities were

more “understanding”, some artisans were able to continue production clandestinely. Purchase of raw materials became difficult and selling craft produce called for a lot of imagination (DiGregorio 2001). The handicrafts industry then experienced two contradictory trends: production was reduced in certain sectors as a result of the ban on individual production, while it increased via craft co-operatives in sectors under tight State control. Craft co-operatives were to fulfil several functions:

- Enable provinces to become self-sufficient in agricultural and hydraulic machinery and tools in order to increase agricultural production and manufacture supplies for everyday life, such as paper, furniture, pottery, food products, etc.
- Produce commodities for Eastern European countries—the West was in the grip of the Cold War and therefore boycotted the new Communist State of Vietnam.

Trade was controlled by State enterprises in the “District of the 36 streets”. It lost its role as intermediary with craft villages. After the economic liberalization of the 1980s, only a few streets managed to re-establish these ties, but as markets have developed for export or towards the provinces in the south of the country, fresh trade networks have been established.

2.4 A growing number of craft villages since Doi Moi

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, co-operatives could no longer rely on the preferential markets of Eastern Europe. After decades of State control, craftspeople were faced with a tough challenge: in the context of *Đôì Moi* and its open-door policy, they would either have to find new markets by themselves or stop production. Some villages managed to adapt to the new context, depending on the nature of their activity and on craftspeople’s personal history and social networks (especially relations with the merchants of Hà Nội). Today, some craftspeople run prosperous international businesses, some have reinvested their talents in other commercial or production activities, while others have left the village or gone back to agriculture.

Some of the more active craft villages developed private initiatives long before the advent of *Đôì Moi*, thanks to the acquiescence of local authorities aware of the failure of the collectivist system. A number of disgruntled craftspeople left dysfunctional co-operatives and continued practising their craft illegally (DiGregorio 2001). When economic

liberalization occurred, they were ready to integrate the market economy system.

Although a certain number of villages lost their craft (weavers, itinerant carpenters), or switched to fresh activities (trade, food processing), others mechanized and increased production. Some clusters expanded with the opening up of foreign markets, particularly those producing wickerwork and fine furniture. The most dynamic villages shared their techniques with surrounding communities. More than a quarter of craft villages in Hà Tây Province developed craft activities with the advent of Dôì Moi.

Thus in the year 2006, there were about 1,000 craft villages in the Red River Delta, employing roughly a million workers.

In Hà Tây Province, a few large clusters of more than 10,000 workers emerged: La Phu (knitting and confectionery), Huu Bang-Chang Son (mid-range furniture), Duong Liêu-Cat Que - Minh Khai, an important centre for the processing of agricultural produce (noodles, glass noodles, starch...). As for the host of villages producing wickerwork, they became organized more in networks than in clusters, but employ many workers through subcontracting on a temporary basis.

In Bac Ninh, the most dynamic cluster of villages is Đông Ky (fine furniture) composed of three contiguous communes that employ 25,000 people, of which more than a third are workers from outside the cluster. Da Hoi is at the centre of a cluster of nine villages specialized in the production of metal bars and rods for the construction industry. In 2006, the commune was home to about 5,000 artisans and workers, and employed around 7,000 others from outside. Finally, a smaller, heavily industrialized cluster specialized in papermaking covers the commune of Phong Khê with the village of Duong O at its centre, and an industrial site established within the commune.

3. A local production system that integrates all the stages of production and marketing

In spite of the upheavals of the economic and political history of the last century, craft villages have managed to survive and even to prosper. Our hypothesis is that the resilience of craft villages can be explained by their bunching into clusters, a very flexible organization of villages in terms of use of workforce and capital and within which the production process is fragmented and the economic risks spread widely.

3.1 The organization of clusters

The organization of clusters takes place on three levels (Fanchette and Nguyễn Xuân 2009):

- Between villages:

A cluster of villages is composed of a central village (the mother-village) and of secondary villages. At the centre are the major producers and placers of orders, official businesses, often mechanized and concentrated within a designated craft park. Several types of inter-village relations can be found within clusters. Each village specializes in one type of product but relies on others for:

- Supply of raw materials (trade, sorting, recycling): for villages using recycled products, there is a long processing chain for these materials. Workshops that carry out this kind of work generally belong to secondary and poorer villages of the cluster that have a numerous workforce and scant means to set up mechanized workshops.
 - Knowhow: some villages have had a craft specialization for centuries and take part in the making of luxury articles or objets d'art (woodcarving, mother-of-pearl inlaying, joinery...). These are often villages where the artisans are not businessmen or salesmen and rely on more dynamic villages to market their products.
 - Production space: large-scale contractors in the mother-villages have big workshops and, lacking sufficient land in their villages, they rent plots of land in neighbouring villages.
 - Services: (transport, trade, markets for raw material, workshops for repairing machines) and other related activities linked to the principal activity (packaging, dyeing or sewing services for textile villages).
 - Supply of manpower: the extension of the employment area of clusters takes place in two directions: the closest communes for subcontracting and the hiring of some temporary workers, and the provinces on the fringes of the Red River Delta for longer-term workers, without experience, but working for lower wages.
- At village level:

Work is divided up between complementary businesses, each responsible for one stage of production, or which may also specialize in one type of product. Mechanization and diversification have extended the production chain and generated an increase in the division of labour

between households. Recycled raw materials (paper or metal) are traded down a long line of collectors, then processed by craftspeople who have invested in machines-smelters sell recycled metal in the form of ready-to-use sheets, which can then be cut up to make pots, trays and gongs.

- Between village businesses and formal sector companies on industrial sites:

Large-scale companies established on urban industrial sites subcontract the production of spare parts to specialized workshops in craft villages. This type of relationship can be found in the metalworking industry.

3.2 The formation of clusters

Villages organized themselves into clusters several centuries ago to respond to the fragmented organization of work (and thus avoid competition), and for specialization and optimum use of raw materials.

Division of labour is particularly noticeable in the silk industry, where the production process entails several different stages. Each stage is carried out by a different village within a network. Some activities were complementary: the lacquerware manufacturers of Bing Vong often worked with woodcraft or wickerwork villages.

Another factor explaining the high degree of interdependence among villages is the fragmented way in which raw materials are used for the manufacture of various goods (e.g., bamboo or latania palm leaves). Each village only uses part of the raw materials for the manufacture of the goods it specializes in, and then sells on what is left to other villages, which use it to produce the category of objects they specialize in.

During the collectivist era, several crafts were spread through co-operatives. As the taboos concerning trade secrets no longer held, co-operatives specialized in certain kinds of artistic products formed large groups of artisans capable of delivering orders to Eastern European markets. In the villages around Phu Vinh, a famous village specialized in rattan weaving, training courses were organized. The craft was shared with about ten surrounding villages. Today, rattan and bamboo weaving has become the speciality of craft villages in the district of Chong My and employs nearly 35,000 villagers (Fanchette and Stedman 2009).

The spread of new crafts has taken place around the most dynamic villages since Doi Moi. Villages having undertaken mechanization and modernization of their activity have scaled up and diversified their production (Fanchette 2007); businesses need vast workshops and employ a large workforce (either *in situ*, or subcontracted). In order to respond to a growing market in the construction industry, the metalworking village of

Da Hoi set up a 13 ha industrial zone at the beginning of the 2000s, where blast furnaces have been installed. Businesses that were unable to obtain land here built workshops in surrounding agricultural villages or on the small industrial park in the commune of Dinh Bang located along the main road. Fresh crafts have appeared in the poorest villages of the commune: couriers in the village of Da Van link up the many businesses in the cluster, particularly those enclosed within the congested village centre. In this same village, people weave wire to make anti-erosion devices for dykes or chicken baskets and cages, and all other kinds of utensils for daily life. Shops selling metallic bars and rods open in neighbouring villages, while others provide workers for businesses in Da Hoi.

3.3 Conflicting new trends in the development of clusters

Two development processes of clusters can be witnessed with the mechanization and formalization of a growing number of businesses working for export.

The extension of the production chain, with fragmentation of the process is as follows:

- Each machine must pay its way; artisans specialize in a single stage of mechanized production.
- Specialization of artisans in sophisticated techniques.

A larger number of workers are involved in the production process and seek to diversify their activities. The cluster takes up more space and opens up to other markets. The example of the aluminium beaters who have mechanized the pressing of receptacles is significant: they produce them more cheaply, in greater quantities, and in a more standardized manner than those who work by hand.

The production chain for fine furniture is made up of eight stages: from cutting up the wood, first treatment of these pieces, carving, mother-of-pearl inlaying or varnishing, through to assembling. These specialized workshops have a geographic dimension that depends on both their needs in terms of production space and the harmful effects that they generate (Hamel 2010).

However, lengthening the production chain makes it harder to control the quality of items produced. It is not possible to impose quality labels and establish strict specifications for the production process. Delivery deadlines for orders are difficult to comply with because between each stage, whether it be for items made by subcontracting or all along a chain of producers who sell partially made items on to the next artisans, time is

continually being lost. These two factors do harm to the export market. Wickerwork, mostly destined for export, is undergoing an acute crisis because foreign markets are much harder to satisfy. The lengthening of the chain weakens relations between the members of the cluster inasmuch as a greater number of artisans take part in it. Familial and neighbourly relations no longer suffice to guarantee confidence in exchanges and services. Fresh ties are developing between those who place orders and the subcontractors: owning a machine that carries out a specific stage within the chain is becoming a reason to develop links between artisans (Hamel 2010).

- Control of the whole of the production chain by big businesses: clusters “pulled along” the commodity chain by traders.

Mechanization, which goes hand in hand with the modernization of formal businesses that seek to standardize their production and speed it up (Fanchette 2007), is moving in the direction of greater control of the entirety of the production process and reducing the subcontracting of production stages.

This takes place in two kinds of sector:

- Very mechanized ones: industrial papermaking. The materials used are recycled paper or imported cellulose pulp. Industry has replaced craft, but producers, in order to avoid competing with industries in the modern sector (joint ventures or State-owned enterprises that enjoy numerous fiscal advantages) draw upon the flexibility of the cluster. They have a foot in each system and, depending on the season, seek to supply various kinds of markets.

- Wickerwork and lacquer businesses employ numerous artisans and subcontracted workers. The production chain is fragmented and the various stages, some of which can only be done manually (weaving), are carried out in villages that are sometimes very remote. The bosses of large businesses themselves try to control the whole production process. They create workshops in various places where they manage to rent land and subcontract to an expert workforce. They can control the purchase of types of bamboo and their treatment on the spot, thus avoiding dependence on intermediaries. These kinds of companies, aimed at export markets, are in effect run by traders who place orders with heads of production groups. Not emanating from the cluster, these businesses set up shop near reserves of manpower to take advantage of knowhow, modest wages and low rental prices.

The rate at which villagers are renewing and replacing craft activities is indicative of these people’s potential for adapting rapidly to new situations. However, it also highlights the frailty of certain crafts that are

particularly vulnerable to economic and social conditions or suffer from geographical isolation.

The factors for change within this country in transition towards a market economy are the result of both the effects of many decades of a collectivist system (management methods, workforce organization, kinds of market, absence of initiative) and those linked to liberalization (the opening up of the property market, individualism, diversification of production, mechanization, disengagement of the State and competition from foreign countries, mainly China). After a decade where craft villages have had to fight for survival, adapt to new markets and innovate, a natural selection is taking place among the various kinds of activities: some are expanding, while others are disappearing. Many craft products designed for everyday life have been replaced by Chinese items produced industrially and sold at very low prices. Itinerant carpenters, *the môc*, have vanished from the landscape: large-scale water management projects carried out during the collectivist era have made biannual or even triannual rice harvests a reality, and the concrete strip houses that replace traditional dwellings with heavy wooden beams have turned this craft—formerly organized into guilds—into a thing of the past. Some *the môc* villages turned to the production of rattan and bamboo goods, which requires little investment, or gave up crafts altogether.

In general, therefore, a halt in production of a particular kind of item does not necessarily mean the demise of craft activities in a village: artisans retrain for more profitable activities and learn fresh crafts.

Organized into businesses or companies, more occasionally into co-operatives, dynamic artisans amaze observers through their capacity to connect with markets, with new techniques and to follow the State's modernization policy. The cluster system survives and adapts more easily to the current economic climate than State or private enterprises in the modern sector. However, the negative aspects of this rural industrialization are numerous, and particularly concern environmental and social matters (working conditions of employees unprotected by Employment Law are very tough).

4. Spatial history of two clusters with contrasting destinies: silk weaving and fine cabinetmaking

The seniority of craft village clusters is not a guarantee of longevity. Thousand-year-old villages that still have a reputation are above all specialized in *objets d'art*, woodcarving, metalbeating, etc. Textiles, in particular silk weaving—although famed well beyond the national borders

at the time of feudal state and employing a large number of craftspeople less than a century ago—has seen production fall steadily since the collectivist era. On the other hand, a recent craft such as that of fine cabinetmaking owes its success to a small group of very dynamic former buffalo traders that managed to establish a network of traders and artisans whose influence spread well beyond borders.

4.1 Silk weaving: an ancient craft with a very fragmented production process

During the colonial era, the textile industry was preponderant in Hà Tây Province to the west of the capital: it accounted for 20,000 artisans out of a total of 54,000 in the Delta. They were to be found in 37 villages specialized in cotton fabrics and their by-products and 25 of silk spinners or producers of silk fabrics (Gourou 1936). These villages were grouped into two clusters not far from Hà Nội, seat of political power until the 19th century and the biggest market for the consumption of luxury goods:

- Near Hà Đông was the silk cluster composed of seven villages all with La in their name (La Phu, La Khê, La Nội, La Duong, La Ca, Đông La, Y La) and 3 with Mô. The other villages were located to the north and south of this major textile centre.
- The cluster around the shores of the great West Lake: where five villages were specialized in silk gauze in the 17-18th centuries.

Division of labour is particularly noticeable in the silk industry, where the production process entails several different stages. Each stage is carried out by a different village within a network: growing mulberry trees and breeding silkworms, reeling off the silkworm's cocoon, spinning silk, weaving and dyeing. Many weaving villages were unable to breed silkworms, because their land was not suitable for growing mulberry trees. Only villages located on the alluvial banks of the Day River (unprotected by the dykes) or on the shores of the great West Lake engaged in this activity. In addition, each weaving village specialized in one of the many different varieties of silk – organza, brocade, taffeta, velvet or raw silk.

During the colonial era, two kinds of industry coexisted: a purely familial industry, traditional, making rough material, belts, the strings for simple tops for women, and a modernized industry, often employing a salaried workforce and producing finer materials, sometimes indistinguishable from Chinese or European ones. Birthplace of silk weaving in Hà Đông, Van Phuc is atypical among most of the Delta's craft villages, with

capitalist-style production systems, regular employees and the mechanization of production (200 Jacquard looms imported from Lyon). These workshops were more prosperous than purely familial and traditional enterprises. Van Phuc, in keeping with La Khê, its neighbour, was home to a large number of famous artisans. Its export markets spread to Asia, then during the colonial era to France.

The weavers were specialized in a single kind of silk: that designed for the working classes and coarsely woven, more precious cloths such as *lint* satins or brocaded *gâm* designed for the Imperial Court and for rich traders. There was a large variety in qualities of silk, each being the speciality of one village (Nguyễn Thua Hy 2002).

These villages have developed according to fluctuations in the market and in fashions. Western travellers and missionaries who crossed this region up until the 19th century never tired of praising the quality of Hà Nội silk. When French colonization occurred in the 19th century, coarser materials suffered from the competition of cotton fabrics imported from France.

Today silk making has almost disappeared from Hà Tây. The collectivist interlude killed off this activity following the suppression of luxury markets, a ban on silkworm production and the reorganization of artisans into co-operatives. Weavers therefore had to switch to the production of low-quality cotton fabrics on wider looms in co-operatives controlled by the State to supply the country at war. Attempts to restart the activity after Dôi Moi have been unsuccessful, owing to the competition from Chinese products, the use of silk threads mixed with synthetic fibres and the absence of quality control.

Of the twelve villages in the Hà Đông silk cluster, Van Phuc is the only one to have maintained the craft despite the upheavals of history. A few talented artisans from La Khê have unsuccessfully tried to rekindle the craft within a co-operative. La Noi, La Duong and Y La produce mediocre cotton fabrics for the domestic market, while La Phu has specialized in knitted garments.

These cotton fabric and knitted garment-producing villages are also organized into clusters, but they answer to industrial commodity chains in China or in the south of Vietnam.

4.2 Đông Ky: a recent and very dynamic fine cabinetmaking cluster

This cluster of craft villages emerged at the end of the collectivist era to become one of the most dynamic in the environs of Hà Nội. In contrast to the ancient silk cluster, it owes its success to the spirit of enterprise of a handful of traders, who belatedly became artisans, and built up a veritable international network of producers of fine furniture and traders in wood.

Đông Ky enjoys many economic and demographic advantages:

- A community of buffalo traders who switched to other activities, once agriculture became mechanized in the co-operatives, and used their capital and their trade networks to find supplies of wood in the mountainous regions and market their products as far away as the south of Vietnam.
- A spatial and demographic dominance compared with the other villages of the cluster. There were about 12,500 inhabitants in 2006, compared with 2,000 or 3,000 inhabitants in the villages of neighbouring communes.
- A favourable location near major travel and trade corridors.
- A neighbourhood of villages specialized for several centuries in woodcarving and the building of pagodas, temples or communal houses.

Originally, this village had several crafts, including coarse weaving practised by women. Artisans built the frameworks of houses and public buildings, made simple furniture and carried out orders placed by State trading agencies.

During the collectivist era, the dynamism of master craftsmen in its neighbourhood created favourable conditions for the emergence of a new craft in Đông Ky: that of fine furniture. With strong links to Eastern European markets, they fulfilled orders placed by the State. The State provided them with raw materials, machinery and took care of exporting. The number of artisans grew rapidly.

At the same time, former Đông Ky buffalo traders began to trade in wood, while still others invested part of their capital into buying antique furniture that the Hanoian bourgeoisie, fleeing the communist regime, sold them cheaply. The traders in antique furniture thus initiated a new craft: fine cabinetmaking. They scoured the Delta provinces looking for antique Vietnamese, Chinese, and even French pieces of furniture, then dismantled and copied them. To begin with, they employed the qualified artisans and

cabinetmakers from the surrounding craft villages or from other Delta provinces, to whom they paid very good salaries. By frequenting them, the children and apprentices of the Đông Ky bosses learnt this art. One of the first founders of this craft willingly admits “the people of Đông Ky stole the craft of other villages”.

In 2006, more than 26,800 artisans and labourers were working in the cluster driven by Đông Ky, either in the workshops and stores of this village, or at home in their own workshops. 40% of the workforce comes from the village, without counting the many workshops that operate by subcontracting for it and that are set up in the neighbouring villages, space being at a premium (Fanchette and Nguyễn Xuân Hoan 2009).

Fine cabinetmaking is very largely a manual activity, only a tiny part of the production process is mechanized. It employs a workforce with diversified levels of qualification: sculptors, engravers, mother-of-pearl inlayers, cabinetmakers, and a host of lowly qualified workers that carry out the finishing work (sanding down, varnishing, assembly, etc.). The various stages of production are shared out among several villages and kinds of artisans. Most of the businesses subcontract the most ornate and carved parts of pieces of furniture to the cluster’s specialized artisans. The easiest production stages are performed by families new to the craft. They carry out a tiny part of the production process (the legs or the armrests of armchairs, the backs of chairs, etc.). They must also subcontract the most ornate parts of furniture to specialized artisans from the cluster’s villages.

Đông Ky businesses employ specialized artisans in their workshops who come from distant villages: qualified cabinetmakers and mother-of-pearl inlayers. Since the beginning of this century, 500 mother-of-pearl inlayers have lived in Đông Ky renting workshops to carry out subcontracted orders.

Businesses in the mother-village employ workers (mostly women) that they train through apprenticeship in their workshops to assemble the subcontracted pieces, carry out finishing work (sanding and varnishing), cutting wood or fulfilling small orders.

They also buy ready-made furniture in the villages of Hương Mac and Phú Khê to make up their orders, capitalizing on their legal and financial capabilities and their commercial contacts for export.

The internationalization of Đông Ky came about thanks to the emergence of “export agents”, controlling the cluster’s relations with the outside world. For the most part, these people were heads of family businesses that have become officially declared, or were integrated into networks, for example military (during the two wars, many soldiers acquired knowhow, travelling all over Vietnam and neighbouring

countries), political (the former co-operatives networks from the collectivist era are still very active and were crucial when the State privatized trade) or commercial and familial. They have succeeded in penetrating the entire sub-regional networks of trade in wood and fine furniture.

5. Conclusion

Since their inception, the craft villages of the Red River Delta have developed on the basis of their contacts with the “District of the 36 streets” in Hà Nội and with a tight network of rural markets. In contact with the regions on higher ground producing plant raw materials (bamboo, rattan, wood, lacquer and so on) through a dense river network and opening out onto the outside world through the traders of Hà Nội, they managed to prosper because they enjoyed diversified markets, particularly the luxury one for the Imperial Court, and an abundant workforce. Their links with China, their former master, galvanized exchanges of technical knowhow and enabled innovation in certain fields of fine crafts.

The artisans of craft villages managed to survive the upheavals of the country’s economic history and to adapt to very varied markets, increasing and diversifying their production. Despite great weaknesses in terms of capital and perfunctory training, most of these artisans work within informal and specialized familial workshops that can produce items for the international market by subcontracting for officially declared businesses.

The key to this success is their organization into clusters, where the division of labour and specialization enable them to limit competition between villages and to create a very flexible production system. At the top of the pyramid, those who place orders, mostly organized into officially declared companies or businesses, subcontract to a host of informal small family businesses manual or labour-intensive parts of the items to be made.

With the economic liberalization of the 1980s, craft villages encountered several challenges owing to a very rapid growth in production and to a diversification in products to respond to fresh markets. Without training suited to this economic context, the most dynamic artisans mechanized their production, officially declared their businesses and joined trading networks, particularly those for export. Having lost almost all links with the “District of the 36 streets” since the collectivist era, without the support of craft guilds, they are developing with no other protection than membership of a production chain where the risks are shared out among all its members.

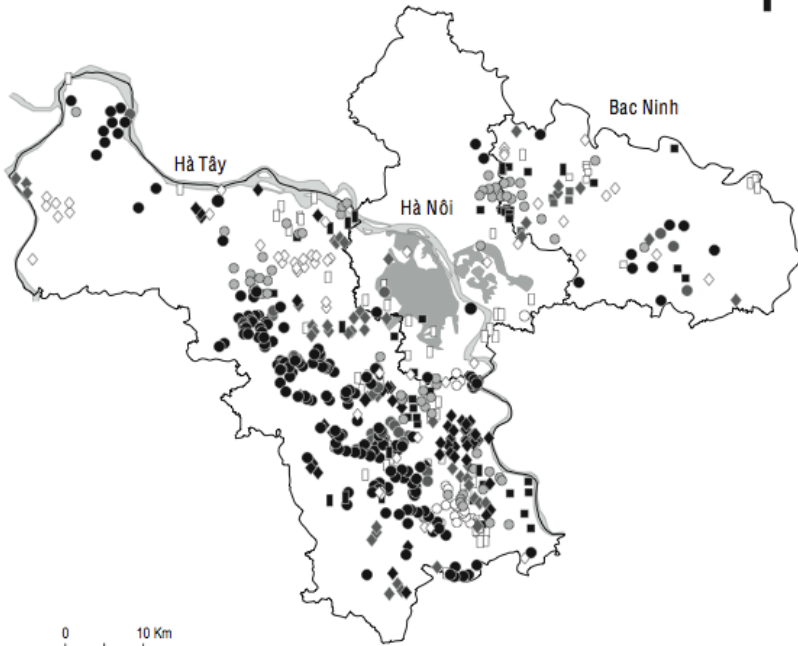
But these production chains change rapidly with market constraints, particularly international ones that are very demanding on quality and production deadlines. The difficulty in controlling the production process and obtaining compliance with precise technical specifications from artisans who only make one part of an item is one of the defects of this nevertheless very dynamic and flexible system. In addition, the need to mechanize and standardize certain parts of the process has encouraged a minority of entrepreneurs to integrate the production chain into their workshop and to eradicate this division of labour system by rigidifying it. At the same time, mechanization of some stages tends to lengthen the commodity chain because some artisans are specializing in the use of a machine from which they seek to get a maximum return. These two conflicting processes threaten the future of the cluster system and by the same token that of craft villages.

In the first case, these businesses seek to resemble modern capitalist or State enterprises that are protected by social legislation and enjoy fiscal advantages and access to land. To produce more cheaply than such enterprises is their credo, which incurs the risk of no longer enjoying the flexibility of the cluster system. The danger is that the economic crisis may hit them hard and drag them under, as was the case for several officially declared businesses in the wickerwork sector in 2008.

In the second case, lengthening the commodity chain renders the value of relations between members more fragile, less confident and more complex, and limits the possibility of quality labelling of products with poor traceability. Vietnam's entry into the WTO will doubtless reinforce the vertical integration process of businesses and limit subcontracting.

It might have been expected that the growth in production and the official recognition of many businesses might have had some influence on the types of co-operation between businesses and changed the nature of the social capital within these clusters. Professional associations, service co-operatives, support from local authorities and technical services to improve the conditions of production are examples of official bodies that, in Western clusters, strengthen horizontal links between businesses of various sizes and makes the cluster gel together. It is apparently still too early to hope for something similar for Vietnam!

**Crafts villages in
Hà Tây, Hà Nội and Bac Ninh Provinces in 2006**



0 10 Km

The various crafts:

- Bamboo, rattan, rush
- Wickerwork and palm leaves
- Wooden furniture
- Mother-of-pearl inlaying and lacquers
- ◆ Embroidery
- ◆ Textiles
- ◇ Food processing and processed foods
- Metalwork
- Building trades
- Paper
- Multi-activity
- Other
- Hà Nội urbanized zone



Sources: JICA MARD 2000, Survey Casrad / IRD 2006
Design S. Fanchette/M. Paschier

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