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Migration and Agricultural Production in a Vietnamese Village¹

Nguyễn Tuấn Anh, Jonathan Rigg, Annuska Derks²

Abstract

This paper explores the links between migration and changes in household agricultural production in Vietnam during the reform period (1986–2012) through a case study of Quỳnh Đôi village, Quỳnh Lưu District, Nghệ An Province. Since reforms were first introduced, many villagers have left Quỳnh Đôi to work in cities, industrial zones or to find employment abroad. The migration process has transformed labour structures and supply in many households, leading to changes in household agricultural production across two main dimensions. First, renting or exchanging agricultural land has become common between households in Quỳnh Đôi, and between Quỳnh Đôi villagers and villagers of Quỳnh Thanh – a neighbouring commune. This renting/exchanging of agricultural land has helped to re-distribute land among households that would otherwise be rich in land and poor in labour, or vice versa. These transactions have not been purely market-based but carried out mainly through verbal agreements, which depend on networks of social capital and associated notions of trustworthiness. Second, because many farm labourers have migrated, and notwithstanding the renting/exchanging of land and a degree of mechanisation, households require additional human labour for agricultural production. Facing this situation, various forms of labour exchanges have emerged. Migration has, therefore, become an important generator of change in farming in Quỳnh Đôi village, emphasising the need to see agricultural change in terms of both new rural-urban relations and interactions and the way that these intersect with established social norms and networks.

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Introduction: migration and agricultural production

Vietnam has long been a predominantly agricultural country based on wet-rice cultivation. With about 68 percent of the population living in rural areas and 47 percent depending on agriculture for their livelihood, farming continues to play an important role in the lives and livelihoods of many Vietnamese.³ Yet, and notwithstanding agriculture's continuing importance, farming is far from unchanged. In terms of output value, the agricultural sector has already lost ground to the service and industrial sectors and in 2012 contributed 20 percent of value added (to the GDP), against 42 percent for services and 39 percent for industry.⁴ While this pattern of structural change is common to countries making the transition to modern, industrialised economies, in the case of Vietnam it has been importantly shaped by the policies of renovation (*Đổi Mới*) initiated in 1986 (World Bank 2013: 11). This reform programme has paved the way for Vietnam's integration into the global economy, making it possible for Vietnamese companies to operate on the global market, for transnational corporations to establish a presence in the country, and for Vietnam's workers to find employment in domestic industrial zones as well as to move abroad to work. In rural areas, decollectivisation made it possible for farmers to grow and sell their own rice. The return to household-based agricultural production initially prompted a rapid growth in agricultural production (as occurred in China), transforming Vietnam from a rice-importing country into one of the world's top exporters (Tran Thi Thu Trang 2004: 114; Gironde 2009: 230). Yet, after this initial spurt of growth the expansion of agricultural production has slowed due to a range of constraints on production including lack of credit, rural labour shortages, limits to mechanisation, environmental change, and access to land. Agriculture has also been affected, however, by expanding opportunities in the nonfarm sector.

These developments have had a major impact on the lives and livelihoods of Vietnamese in rural areas. While rural households were initially able to significantly improve their livelihoods through increases in agricultural production, more recently it has been opportunities outside farming and beyond the village that have done much to drive livelihood change. Rural households have become increasingly dependent on the off-farm and delocalised activities of their migrant members. This poses major questions regarding the relations between migration and agricultural production and the impacts of migration on livelihoods, identities, and social relations at the village level.

These questions are not new, but have occupied researchers since long before Vietnam's policies of renovation. The literature has, however, been divided about the relationships between migration and agricultural production. Earlier works, under the influence of modernisation theory, saw migration as a way to deal with and make productive use of surplus labour in rural areas as well as to stimulate agricultural intensification through the earnings and knowledge migrants send to and share with those left behind (De Haas 2010). This view was replaced in the 1970s and 1980s by a more negative assessment of migration. Instead of contributing to rural development, migration came to be seen as "aggravating problems of underdevelopment" as well as widening inequalities within communities (ibid.: 233). With the most able-bodied and innovative people gone and remittances providing for basic livelihood and a taste for new consumer goods, migration failed to provide incentives for productive investment, leading to decreased agricultural production, idle

³ These data are extracted from the World Bank's open data bank. See <http://data.worldbank.org/>.

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fields, and de-agrarianisation. This view is summed up in Connell's overview (1981, and see Connell et al. 1976) of the effects of migration on sources communities:

“Migration tends to produce stagnation in the sending society and contributes to its impoverishment by dissolution of productive unit resulting in a declining intensity of land use and reduced food production. Migration proceeds out of inequality and further establishes this inequality (...) relatively little of the income from remittances is actually used for productive investment, and then by only a fraction of the rural population, whilst much is used on non-productive expenditure which does not contribute either to growth or development but merely reinforces dependence.” (Connell 1981: 254)

More recently, and drawing on new empirical evidence and insights into the role of households in migration choices and livelihood effects, a more positive view of the outcomes of migration on households and local communities has emerged. This has led to the pendulum swinging, as it were, the other way, once again emphasising the beneficial effects of migrant remittances – which far exceed development aid in volume and efficiency – on local development (Kapur 2003).

In reality, relations between migration and agricultural production, household livelihoods and community development are more mixed and heterogeneous than either the optimistic or pessimistic views suggest. For example, in the case of Vietnam, De Brauw (2010) found that migrant households in North Vietnam shifted from rice production to land intensive crops, using less agricultural inputs and investing fewer labour days in farming (de Brauw 2010). Conversely, the work of Stampini and Davis (2009) revealed that agricultural households participating in nonagricultural labour actually spent significantly more on livestock inputs, seeds, services and hired labour. One of the reasons that findings regarding the relationship between agricultural production and migration are inconclusive, is that the aggregate data on which these studies are based do not take into account differences in household composition, access to land and labour, the role that different environmental contexts might play in determining patterns of agricultural investment, as well as the nature of the migration patterns themselves. It would be surprising to find a common migration ‘story’ even in one settlement, let alone between settlements and regions. Furthermore, the effects of migration are not just restricted to migrant households; they also extend to relations between migrant and non-migrant households. In this paper, we look at these inter-linkages through a case study of land and labour exchange in a village in Vietnam's Nghệ An Province.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on research conducted in the Quỳnh Đôi commune in Nghệ An Province. We chose this commune in North-Central Vietnam for two main reasons. First, North-Central Vietnam is an area where little research has been conducted in general and in particular on the question of agricultural production and migration from sociological and anthropological perspectives. Most research has focused on either the Mekong or the Red River deltas. Second, Nghệ An is often considered to be the cradle of revolutionary politics and a place where revolutionary ideals took root and collectivisation policies were implemented with great fervour (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010). This makes it an all the more interesting place to explore how land use and labour arrangements have changed since decollectivisation.

Fieldwork was carried out in several stages between 2000 and 2012, enabling us to build a deep understanding of village life over a period of profound change. In this paper, we draw in particular

on data generated from two research projects: one on “Social capital and household economic development in rural North-Central Vietnam today” funded by the Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and the second on “Globalization and Northern Vietnamese village identity” funded by the National Foundation for Sciences and Technology Development. A sociological survey was conducted in Quỳnh Đôi in March 2012 covering a sample of 300 households. This survey was complemented by qualitative data collected through participant observation and 20 in-depth interviews with key informants, among which were several commune officials, various hamlet heads, chairmen of patrilineage councils, and respondents from various professions.

The Vietnamese Village in Transformation

Historical Background to the Vietnamese Village Economy

Historically, the Vietnamese village economy operated as a unit of production and consumption. The basic production unit within the village was the household. The historian Nguyễn Hồng Phong argues that households were not only engaged in agricultural production, but also in handicraft production, households cultivated food plants in combination with industrial plants, and households engaged in fish farming as well as in growing vegetables (Nguyễn Hồng Phong 1978: 481). The most important basis for the rural household economy in traditional Vietnamese society was land. Agricultural land has, as Kerkvliet writes (2006: 285), been “one of the most politically controversial resources in Vietnam” for at least a century. Land that used to be communally owned and managed during the feudal period became privatised under French colonial rule, causing bitter conflicts over its access, use, and ownership (ibid.). Shortly before the August Revolution in 1945, most land was in private hands, while communal or public land comprised only about one-fifth of the total cultivated area (Trần Từ 1984: 21).

The household economy was progressively dismantled during the period of agricultural cooperativisation (Kerkvliet 2005; Kleinen 1999; Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010). This process of cooperativisation took place through several stages, stretching from the late 1940s to the mid-1980s but was particularly manifest from 1954s to the early 1980s. Initially, cooperation was based on labour exchange in working groups of households helping each other in various stages of agricultural production, and particularly those with high labour inputs, such as harvesting and transplanting. The next step was the upgrading of labour exchange groups into higher-level production teams in which households worked together but received the products of their work individually. Households pooled their agricultural land and shared their farm tools but production was still divided between each contributing household. The next step was the transformation of the production team into a low-level cooperative. Each commune had several such low-level cooperatives. Then, the low-level cooperatives merged and were transformed into a high-level or total commune co-operative (Kerkvliet 2005; Nguyen Ngoc Luu 1987). At this point, or so it has been sometimes suggested, the household virtually ceased to exist as an organisational unit of production with perhaps only five percent of agricultural land being allocated by the cooperative for household-based production purposes (Kerkvliet 2005).⁵

By the late 1970s, a series of emergent problems or difficulties associated with the organisation of land, labour, and production became sufficiently serious to warrant reconsideration. In January

⁵ In this period, households were allocated five percent of the total cooperative agricultural land. This land was cultivated by households. In most cases, it was used to grow vegetables for everyday consumption.

1981, the Secretariat of the Communist Party of Vietnam issued Directive 100CT/TW to introduce the production contract mechanism (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2005 [1981]: 25). Through this contractual system, cooperatives allocated rice land to work on to every household, which in turn had to deliver a certain level of output to the commune (Pingali and Vo-Tong Xuan 1992).⁶ While households were thus in charge again of agricultural production, the cooperative still controlled investment in production and the purchase of any rice produced. This was, however, the first step towards the dismantling of the cooperative system and the return to household production. This came to fruition with the adoption of Resolution 10 of the Politburo issued on 5 April 1988 (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2006 [1988–1989]: 115–116). Although the right to own land was still retained by the state, households were assigned the long-term use of farmland, had control over all matters concerning its use, and were free to sell all products originating from the land after having paid any agricultural taxes and other commissions to the board of the cooperatives (Phan Vu Quynh Chi and Fujimoto 2011: 171–172).⁷

This distribution of land to individual producers did not mean that households had ownership of the land. According to the law, all land belongs to the people of Vietnam and households were awarded usufruct (use) rights to the land allocated to them. Until 1993, when the Land Law was promulgated, households officially did not have the right to transfer these land use rights. In reality, however, farmers wanted and did “buy and sell land use rights, transfer them to their heirs, lend them to other people and use them as collateral” (Kerkvliet 2006: 295). Under the 1993 Land Law this practice became officially authorised. The law not only guaranteed the allocation of farmland for long and stable use but also stipulated (article 3, paragraph 2) that: “Households and individuals have [the] right to exchange, transfer, lease, inherit and mortgage land use rights” (Quốc hội Nước Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam 1993). Under the revised Land Law of 2003, land became recognised as “a special good, having a value and hence able to be traded” (Phan Vu Quynh Chi and Fujimoto 2011: 173). Under the revised Land Law that came into force in July 2014, the land use rights for Vietnamese farmers have been extended for another 50 years – thus offering farmers a long-term perspective on the market for land use rights.

What is not clear in this transformation in Vietnam’s land policy is the actual rate at which land is borrowed, rented, bought, and exchanged between farm households. Transactions involving land use rights have become, it seems, common in Vietnam’s countryside (Kerkvliet 2006: 296). Kerkvliet quotes a national survey from 2002 stating that 15 percent of the rural households surveyed had rented use rights to agricultural land (*ibid.*). Yet, since many of these transactions are informal and unregistered, official figures are likely to be a considerable underestimate of actual practice. Renting land and the use rights that go with it has become increasingly attractive and therefore prevalent in a context where differentiation in the countryside is growing. For some

⁶ On 5 March 2012, the head of hamlet number 3 of Quỳnh Đôi commune told us that all agricultural land was cultivated by individual households, and none by the cooperative. According to a higher level administrative instruction, when allocating agricultural land to households, the Quỳnh Đôi People’s Committee (not cooperative) was required to keep back five percent of total agricultural land. This land, under the control of the Quỳnh Đôi People’s Committee, was let out to households to cultivate based on contracts made between households and the Committee. The households using this land made payment to the Committee according to these contracts.

⁷ This return to the household as the principal production unit has had many social as well as economic dimensions and ramifications. Land use rights are one of these significant dimensions including such issues as land allocation, field exchange between households, and land accumulation (Bùi Quang Dũng and Đặng Thị Việt Phương 2011; Nguyễn Đình Bông (Chủ biên) 2012; Nguyễn Văn Sửu 2010; Thomése and Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2007).

households, renting land is a way to increase agricultural production and therefore incomes when livelihoods are farm-based; those who temporarily give up those rights often do so because they have economic options that are more attractive than farming (ibid.).

In this paper, we discuss the land rental market and the social relations that underpin this market through a case study of Quỳnh Đôi village, Nghệ An Province. In particular, we will look at the demographic and economic changes that have created inequalities between those who have land and those who have labour, as well as the ways in which people juggle, negotiate, and reconcile these imbalances.

The Village Economy in Quỳnh Đôi

Quỳnh Đôi is a typical rice-growing village located in the northern part of Nghệ An Province. The village is part of Quỳnh Lưu District, which borders Thanh Hóa to the north and the Eastern Sea to the east. The national Highway No. 1A runs through the eastern part of the district.

According to historical documents, Quỳnh Đôi was established some 600 years ago (Hồ Sĩ Giác 1988). The village has a long, well-recorded history and a long tradition of education with many villagers obtaining degrees equivalent to Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral level degrees in the era of the classic Hán-Chinese education system. In the colonial period, many villagers joined anti-colonial movements and some became well-known revolutionary leaders. Being located in Nghệ An, Quỳnh Đôi was one of the communes in which revolutionary ideals were widely supported and collectivisation was implemented at an early stage. Quỳnh Đôi inhabitants thus bore the full brunt of the revolution and war, and have, more recently, confronted the socio-economic, cultural, and political changes that have transformed northern Vietnamese villages since *Đổi Mới* (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010).

Quỳnh Đôi has a land area of almost 400 ha, of which about three-quarters is agricultural land. The remainder comprises housing area, ponds and lakes, roads and historical sites (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 5–6). Data from 2010 show that Quỳnh Đôi had a total population of 4,925 inhabitants living in 1,256 households, settled in eight hamlets. The population growth rate at the time was 0.41 percent per year. The total working population of the commune was 1,850 people, of which 1,063 were involved primarily in agricultural labour (57 percent) and 787 in various non-agricultural activities (43 percent) (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 10). In 2010, agriculture accounted for 32 percent of the commune's economic activity; cottage industries and construction for 37 percent; and trade and services for 31 percent. Per capita income in 2010 had reached 7,660,000 Vietnamese dong (VND)/person/year (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 7–8).⁸

In terms of agricultural production, Quỳnh Đôi villagers mainly cultivate wet-rice with the area ranging from 250 ha to 260 ha depending on environmental conditions each year. In 2010, the average rice yield was 52.3 quintals/ha. Besides rice, Quỳnh Đôi villagers grow maize, beans, and fruit trees, the latter of which are often grown in house gardens. Vegetables are also widely cultivated, with 5 ha to 10 ha planted each year across the village. Vegetable production reached 100 quintals/ha in 2010 (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 8). In terms of

⁸ In 2010, 7.66 million VND was equivalent to around 408 USD. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam the average per capita income in 2010 in Vietnam was 1,168 USD (<http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=418&ItemID=10879>). This sum, therefore, represents around one-third of the average per capita income.

animal husbandry, in 2010, the commune had 320 buffaloes, 20 cows, and 500 pigs with the production of live pigs slaughtered reaching 30 to 40 quintals. There were also about 14,300 poultry in 2010 (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012). A number of households in Quỳnh Đôi were engaged in aquaculture, mainly shrimp and freshwater fish. In 2010, the aquaculture area in Quỳnh Đôi was 23 ha, with fish production of 20 to 25 tons/year (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 9).

Apart from agricultural production, the people of Quỳnh Đôi engage in several other activities such as making rice vermicelli, incense, woodworking, bricklaying, and various other forms of petty commerce. There are a few small shops in the village. The trade activities centre mainly around the Nồi market where mostly food and consumer goods are traded (Đoàn Điều tra Quy hoạch Lâm nghiệp Nghệ An 2012: 10).

Mobile Workers and Orphaned Wives

Although agriculture remains the main occupation in Quỳnh Đôi, an increasing number of inhabitants have left the village to look for employment elsewhere. In the past, those leaving the village were often educated villagers who became teachers elsewhere or, later, revolutionary cadres who obtained positions in Hanoi. Among the latter, many have in the meantime retired and returned to Quỳnh Đôi, inhabiting the few newly constructed villas in the village. Migration is, however, no longer limited to an elite section of the population as it was during the colonial (1860s–1945) and socialist transformation (1945–1986) periods. The economic developments since *Đổi Mới* have contributed to the creation of job opportunities for a mass of people in construction, in factories, in the service sector, as well as on plantations in other parts of the country. As a result, Quỳnh Đôi villagers can now be found all over the country, in a range of activities. According to local statistics, in 2005 there were 258 villagers who had left Quỳnh Đôi to work elsewhere (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010: 54). Yet, since most migration is temporary and circular, and since many do not report their outmigration to the authorities, the actual number is likely to be much higher.

While both men and women migrate to work in other parts of the country, male migration tends to be more common and when women move it is often for marriage reasons, bearing in mind the area is patrilocal. This pattern of movement is reflected in village statistics, where the number of females in the village is considerably higher than the number of males (Nguyễn Tuấn Anh 2010: 54). The Vice-Chair of the Women's Union remarked that "Now in Quỳnh Đôi, it is hard to find men in the village." Women, whose husbands have left for longer periods of time, have even started referring to themselves as "orphaned wives" (*mồ côì chồng*). Ms Minh⁹, whose husband has been working in construction and factory work in the South for ten years, explained: "If a child is *mồ côì* [an orphan] it means that the parent passed away. [In the case of a *mồ côì chồng*] the husband is not dead but they are away for so long that it is as if one has no husband."

In explaining the gender-selective nature of migration in Quỳnh Đôi, respondents tended to take recourse in established local notions of the appropriate roles of men and women in society and economy. One female informant, whose husband had worked away from the village in several localities in the South and North since 2002, explained that husbands should migrate to improve the

⁹ Interview on 24 August 2012 in hamlet number 5, Quỳnh Đôi. The names of all people mentioned in this article are not their real names. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese and this and all following quotations have been translated into English by the lead author.

economic conditions of the household whereas wives should stay in the village to look after dependent children and the elderly.¹⁰ This echoes and reproduces long-established conventional thinking.¹¹

There are several explanatory factors underpinning out-migration in Quỳnh Đôi. The first can be traced back to before the pre-colonial era and is connected with the village's ethos of educational achievement. Before the French colonial era, villagers passed the Chinese character examinations and worked as mandarins; then, following colonisation they successfully negotiated the colonial era educational hurdles to become civil servants and teachers; after 1945 they adapted to the revolutionary era and became cadres; and still more recently, villagers passed the university entrance examination to become students, and then entered various knowledge-based occupations. This century or more of educational achievement invariably required villagers to leave Quỳnh Đôi if they were to make a return – effectively, to cash in – on their educational investment.

The second reason, which also underpins the first, relates to the *in situ* opportunities in farming and non-farming. It also primarily concerns those villagers who have not been in a position to acquire further education. Returns to non-farm work in the village's cottage industries are very low, usually significantly less than 1,000,000 VND per month (around 50 USD).¹² At the same time, land holdings are small, productivity already high, and the frontier in farm land expansion closed. If villagers wish to earn more, leaving Quỳnh Đôi is usually the only option. It is also the case that such work opportunities, even those that are relatively poorly paid, are often socially filtered – they are linked to extended kinship relations. It is important to note, however, that while migration linked to educational achievement can be characterised as 'migration for accumulation', the second form of migration is often distress-induced; it is 'migration for survival'. Their implications and outcomes are, therefore, also very different.

Furthermore, these migration patterns have had an important impact on the organisation of agricultural production and the use of agricultural land in Quỳnh Đôi. Three facets of these changes are of particular note. First, migrants who cannot work on their land due to their absence may transfer the land to others, contributing to a, mostly informal, re-distribution of land. Second, migration of household members may create shortages of agricultural labour, leading to various forms of agricultural labour exchange. Third, the organisation of agricultural production is changing as a result of the mechanisation and feminisation of agricultural labour. These represent important changes in the organisation and management of farming in Quỳnh Đôi, which the remainder of the paper will explore in more detail.

Land Tenure and Migration

Allocation and Reallocation of Land

Since Quỳnh Đôi is a predominantly agricultural village, land has traditionally been the foundation of the household economy. After the promulgation of the Land Law in 1993 and the Government decree number 64-CP on the redistribution of lands to peasant households (Chính phủ Nước Cộng hòa Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Việt Nam 1993), Quỳnh Đôi commune also started the process of land

¹⁰ Interview on 4 March 2012 in hamlet number 1, Quỳnh Đôi.

¹¹ Many traditional folksongs reflect this perception. For example, “Nàng về nuôi cái cùng con/Đề anh đi trả nước non Cao Bằng (You – wife – should return to look after mother and children/So that I – husband – undertake social responsibilities)”.

¹² Interview on 4 March 2012 in hamlet number 4, Quỳnh Đôi.

distribution, which was completed in 1995. Land was distributed as follows: each household was entitled to receive several small plots of land some of which would be fertile crop land while others of low quality; and some plots of land would be close to the residential areas while others were situated in more distant locations. The aim of this distribution was to ensure that all households felt they had been treated in an equal manner in the allocation of agricultural lands. The disadvantage, however, was that the lands distributed to individual households were often too small and fragmented for efficient agricultural production.¹³

The General Directorate of Land Survey [*Tổng cục Địa chính*] recognised the many shortcomings of the process of allocating land, among which was the loss of arable land and the extra time required to cultivate scattered plots (*Tổng cục Địa chính* 1997: 1–4). Therefore, in 1997, the General Directorate of Land Survey organised a conference on land reallocation to solve the problem of fragmentation of agricultural plots. The outcome of this was the reallocation of agricultural land with the aim of reducing the number of plots owned by a household.

In Quỳnh Đôi, agricultural land reallocation followed the directives, resolutions, plans, and projects as issued by the provincial level to the district and commune levels. Reallocation was implemented through the “Project of transforming small plots of lands into larger plots of lands in order to change the economic structure for carrying out industrialization and modernization of rural areas.” (Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Quỳnh Đôi 2001a: 1–6)

This process of reallocation extended over four months, from August to November 2001. The rules for reallocation were that each household was to retain the same area of land as before, while the number of plots should not exceed three parcels, in three locations, and of three land ranks. Each plot was to have a minimum area of 350m² and a maximum area of 2500m², while an area of 6500m² was allocated for the combined plots. The steps for the gathering and then reallocation of land were as follows: First, all farmland of all households of the eight hamlets was combined and classified into three location categories: first, second, and third rank. After that, planning for transportation and irrigation of the rice fields was carried out. Second, each hamlet was assigned an area of farmland calculated on the basis of the number of households in the hamlet. Households in each hamlet held meetings and divided the households into groups. Each group consisted of households with the same land area. For example, all households in which each household kept 350m² belonged to one group, households each keeping 2,500m² belonged to another group, and so on.¹⁴ The third step was for each hamlet to assign land locations to groups depending on the area assigned to each group. Then, finally, households in these groups discussed among themselves and drew lots [*bắt thăm*] to determine their land plots (Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Quỳnh Đôi 2001b).

In the process of reallocating land, to facilitate cultivation and to fit with each individual household’s capabilities, there were two additional tweaks to this approach. First, if a number of households wished to be allocated fields far from the village’s residential areas, the households could form a group to receive large plots without having to draw lots, by combining their areas of land. Second, after drawing lots, households could exchange land between themselves, although this did need to be approved by the commune officials. These additional mechanisms allowed

¹³ Land official of Quỳnh Đôi Commune People’s Committee, interviewed on 29 August 2003.

¹⁴ Each household member received one *sào* of agricultural land. In North-Central Vietnam, one *sào* of agricultural land is about 500m². One household may receive several plots of land depending on the number of people in the household and structure/features – and size – of the individual rice fields. If a household had five people, for example, the household would be allocated land extending over an area of 2,500m². In this allocation in 2001, the smallest plot was 350m² in size while the largest extended over 2,500m².

households some flexibility in coming to joint arrangements, which proved to be particularly attractive among relatives.

The results of this distribution and then reallocation of land in 1995 and 2001 are set out in Table 1.

	1995	2001
Total people receiving agricultural lands	4,448 people	4,448 people
Total households receiving agricultural lands	1,230 households	1,230 households
Total plots of agricultural lands	7,545 plots	3,329 plots
Highest number of plots of land held by a household	14 plots	4 plots
Lowest number of plots of land held by a household	1 plot	1 plot
Average number of plots of land per household	6 plots	2.74 plots
Surface area of the smallest plot of land	34 m ²	350 m ²
Surface area of largest plot of land	1,000 m ²	2,500 m ²

Table 1: Phases of land (re-)distribution in Quỳnh Đôi¹⁵

Land Tenancy: unravelling the plots

After the (re-)distribution of land in 2001, households were allocated agricultural land on the basis of a long-term lease (20 years). In Quỳnh Đôi each person (both adults and children) received one *sào* (500m²) of agricultural land. The logic of the land reforms and (re)distributions of 1995 and 2001 was to return land to the basic unit of production: the household. How have things changed in the years since 2001?

The 2012 survey shows that in the five years preceding the survey, 63 percent of the households either rented agricultural land from other households or rented their land out to other households, or did both. Many households, it seems, did not cultivate the fields allocated to them.

This was the case with Ms Liên.¹⁶ Based on the 1994 land allocation exercise, Ms Liên and her husband were each allocated one *sào* of land. Before she married, Ms Liên lived in hamlet 2 and was allocated a plot of land in that hamlet. After marriage, she moved to her husband's hamlet 6 and so she was allocated a replacement plot on the lands of her new village of residence. Yet, the plot she was allocated was far away from the settlement and close to the river that, during very dry years, led to salt water incursion onto her land. Since it was not very convenient to work this plot, she rented out the land to Mr Việt, who paid her a fixed rent of 80 kg of paddy per year. She explained:

“My children are small and my husband works far away from home, so I have to rent land that is near here (...). If I work on my land, I will have to pay more for the costs of transportation at harvest. It is very inconvenient. It is only me; I have to work on my own.

¹⁵ Sources: Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Quỳnh Đôi (2001a): Đề án chuyển đổi đất từ nhiều thửa nhỏ thành thửa lớn để thâm canh chuyển đổi cơ cấu kinh tế để thực hiện công nghiệp hoá hiện đại hoá nông thôn [Project of transforming small plots of land into larger plots of land in order to change the economic structure for carrying out industrialization and modernization in rural areas] and Ủy ban Nhân dân xã Quỳnh Đôi (2001b): Báo cáo kết quả chuyển đổi ruộng đất xã Quỳnh Đôi [Report on results of transforming agricultural lands in Quỳnh Đôi commune].

¹⁶ Ms Liên was interviewed on 4 March 2012.

That is why I have to find land, which is located near my house, and I rent my land to other people who have a truck or buffalo and can therefore work [it] more easily.”

In turn, Ms Liên rented one *sào* from her mother, who was old and, after Liên’s father had died, no longer needed her land. Ms Liên paid her mother a rent of 120 kg of paddy per year. When her children were young, two *sào* were enough to grow rice for her family. But now that her children were older, she needed to grow more rice to meet her needs and rented one additional *sào* from Ms Thủy, to whom she pays a rent of 100 kg of paddy per year, and who in turn rents one *sào* from someone else who is too busy to work on their land. In other words, Ms Liên now works three *sào* of land, of which only one *sào* is owned by the household. To complicate things further, Mr Việt has sublet Ms Liên’s plot of land to a villager in a neighbouring village, Quỳnh Thanh (see Figure 1).

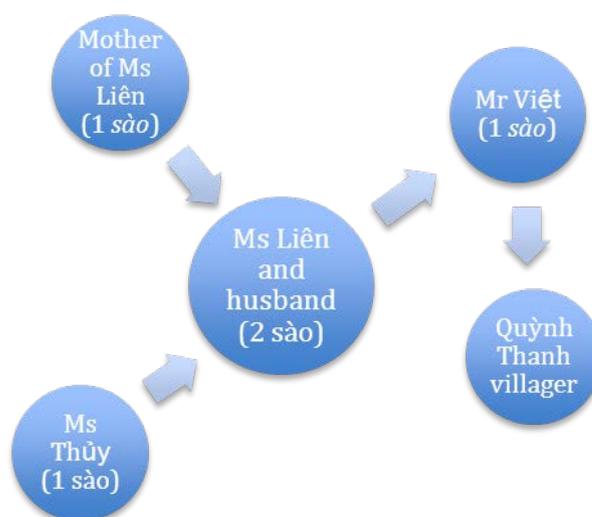


Figure 1: Ms Liên’s land rental agreements

The example of Ms Liên’s land rental agreements illustrates several points. First of all, land rental agreements in Quỳnh Đôi are mostly informal agreements between villagers, who are often also relatives. Results from the 2012 survey show that the majority of land rental transactions were verbal agreements between the concerned households. The parties did not have any papers or documents that guaranteed these transactions; all relevant matters related to the time and price of rental were agreed verbally. In other words, trust between the parties was the basis for the land rental transactions between landowners and tenants. This keeps the arrangement flexible and low

cost. And when either the land lenders or the land tenants wish to end their contract/transaction, they simply meet and agree to bring the agreement to a conclusion.¹⁷

Second, most land rental agreements were based on fixed-rent tenancy, although the rental fee fluctuated from year to year. The unit used to calculate the price was the number of kilograms of rice per *sào* per year. In many cases, in order to make the payment, the tenants brought the rice to the lenders' houses after each harvest. In some cases, however, the tenants paid in cash. The rental fee varied in general from 70 kg to 120 kg of paddy per *sào* per year, depending on the quality of the land, the weather conditions and the relationship between the owner and the tenant. Ms Liên paid her mother 120 kg because the land she rented was of good quality and Ms Liên wanted to support her mother who was too old to work the land by herself. The land Ms Liên rented out to Mr Việt was, on the contrary, of poor quality. During the drought in 2010, when salty water inundated the land, Ms Liên agreed to reduce the rent to 60 kg.

Land was not only rented out to fellow villagers, but also to villagers in neighbouring villages, such as Quỳnh Thanh as illustrated in the case of Mr Việt subletting Ms Liên's riverside plot. To further illustrate this point, 44 of the 160 households in hamlet number 3 rented out agricultural land to households in Quỳnh Thanh commune, amounting in total to some 3.2 ha.¹⁸ Another 6.4 ha was rented out by 30 households to other villagers in Quỳnh Đồi.¹⁹ According to the Vice-Chairman of the local People's Committee of Quỳnh Đồi, the land rented out to Quỳnh Thanh villagers was mostly situated in distant locations and was of poor quality. While he saw no problems with these kinds of arrangements between different villages, others expressed concern that they could lead to the loss of land to Quỳnh Thanh commune. Some villagers worried that problems could arise in the case of transactions between households of different communes, where kinship relations were absent. As Ms Liên explained, neighbouring Quỳnh Thanh differs from Quỳnh Đồi as its inhabitants are relatively poor, they are Catholic, they tend to have many children, and they are not migrating-out to supplement their village incomes. As a result, they are very interested in renting land from Quỳnh Đồi inhabitants. Some of them have converted agricultural land into ponds for breeding fish, integrated raising fish along with growing wet-rice, and have started to build small houses/cottages to take care of the fish and to protect the ponds. There is the

¹⁷ During the fieldwork, on 24 August 2012, the head of hamlet 3 told us that his hamlet had 160 households, among whom 74 households rented out their land to other households in Quỳnh Đồi commune (30 households) and to households in Quỳnh Thanh commune (44 households) – a neighbouring commune. We re-checked this with the head of hamlet 3 by phone interview on 8 May 2015; he explained that the Quỳnh Đồi People's Committee did not require him to keep track of the households letting out their land. However, he calculated and keeps these data to use in the preparation of reports related to the economic life of the hamlet. This highlights the degree of (in)formality that informs the renting of land between households. The head of hamlet 3 also confirmed that there are no formal written contracts between households when it comes to renting land, and that trust between parties is the foundation for these transactions. A plot of agricultural land cannot officially be transferred between households because the household allocated the land still keeps the land use certificates. Trust between parties plays an important role in rental transactions, assuring both sides that the agreement will be honoured. The head of hamlet 3 also added that many transactions between households in Quỳnh Đồi and households in Quỳnh Thanh are transactions between friends or relatives (for example, through marriage) in which social capital in terms of trust usually inheres. For transactions between households within Quỳnh Đồi, these transactions are invariably transactions between relatives, neighbours, or friends in which, again, trust usually inheres.

¹⁸ During the fieldwork, on 24 August 2012, the head of hamlet 3 told us that the total agricultural land that households in his hamlet rented out to other households in Quỳnh Đồi commune and Quỳnh Thanh commune was 9.6 ha. The land rented to Quỳnh Thanh households was 3.2 ha. The total agricultural land of this hamlet is 29.7 ha (we re-checked with the head of hamlet number 3 on 8 May 2015 by phone interview).

¹⁹ Information gathered from an interview with the head of hamlet number 3 in Quỳnh Đồi commune on 3 March 2012.

question of who owns the assets such as houses or cottages associated with the ponds, whether owners should provide compensation for the investments made by tenants in land development when they reclaim their fields, and whether the tenants are actually prepared to give the land back.

Lastly, the case of Ms Liên illustrates how villagers engage in land exchange transactions in order to make up for the imbalances between labour and land within and between households. These imbalances have become even more pronounced as a result of labour migration. It is to this point that we now turn.

Migration and Renting Land

The most important reasons leading to the practice of land rental are changes in the size and nature of the household labour force. As noted above, in 1994, each household was allocated an area of agricultural land for a period of 20 years depending on the number of people living in the household. Under the new Land Law, which came into effect as of July 2014, this period will be extended to 50 years. During the reallocation in 2001, the division of plots changed, but not the size of land allocated to each household. However, between the original land allocation in 1994 and the reallocation in 2001, the number of people living in each household had changed, sometimes quite dramatically, and this altered the use of land and the organisation of agricultural production in the village. In some households, there were more people of working age because household members had married and their spouses were living with the household, or children had simply become adults in the intervening years. In other households, the number of household members had increased because of the birth of new household members. Conversely, ageing and death had reduced the number of working age adults, or migration had taken them out of the household labour force even if they were still regarded as household members. These demographic perturbations led to an unsettling of the balance between land and available labour, which in turn has driven the land rental market.²⁰ We see this illustrated through the case of Mr Thảo:

Mr Thảo's household lives in Quỳnh Đồi commune's hamlet number 7. He was born in 1974 and graduated from high school in 1991 before proceeding to agricultural vocational school. However, he was not able to secure a job with this diploma so he stayed home to work as a peasant. His wife comes from Quỳnh Ngọc commune in the eastern portion of Quỳnh Lưu District. They have two children, aged six and two. They all live with Mr Thảo's mother, who is widowed.

Mr Thảo and his wife have three *sào* of agricultural land. This is the field share allocated to him and his parents in 1994. His wife moved to live with Mr Thảo after the village's agricultural land had been allocated, so she did not receive a field share. His two children were also born after the time of land allocation in Quỳnh Đồi, so they also have no field shares. In addition to the field shares, Mr Thảo's household rents four *sào* of agricultural land from two other households in the village, Mr Thắng's and Mr Hồng's.

Mr Thắng is 65 years and used to be in the army. He is now retired and receives a wounded soldier's pension. He and his wife have six children. Among them, his four adult children have found jobs in other localities, and one is a college student. They live with their fourth daughter. This girl was born disabled, the family suspects because of the effects of Agent Orange used in the American War/Vietnam War. His household has seven *sào* of agricultural land but cultivates only two *sào* to produce enough rice for the

²⁰ In a sense, an allocation of land on the basis of available household labour is out of date from the moment that the allocation is made.

household's consumption. The rest of his household's field shares have been let out to other households including Mr Thảo's. Since 2009, Mr Thảo has rented 1.8 *sào* of rice land from Mr Thắng. At that time, Mr Thảo visited Mr Thắng and asked whether he could rent some of his land. Mr Thắng agreed. In return Mr Thảo pays 70 kg of rice per *sào*, which he takes to Mr Thắng's house as payment following harvest. This transaction is based on a verbal agreement between the two parties.

Mr Hồng is 70 years old and lives in hamlet number 7. His wife died a long time ago and he lives alone. He has five children. Four have gone to work and live in other localities, and one child is a college student. His household has seven *sào* of agricultural land consisting of the field shares of his children, his wife, and himself. Because his children have left to work in other localities and his wife has died, his household does not have enough labour to cultivate all the land. Mr Hồng therefore started letting out his fields. In 2008, Mr Hồng let 2.2 *sào* of agricultural land to Mr Thảo. Since the land is of good quality, the rent was set at 120 kg per *sào* of agricultural land. This is, however, not paid in paddy but in cash. At harvest time, Mr Thảo calculates the amount of money that his household has to pay for renting 2.2 *sào* of rice land, based on the prevailing local rice price, and gives this amount of money to Mr Hồng.²¹

The example of Mr Thảo illustrates the changes in land-to-labour ratios since the original land distribution and how this is driving the rental land market in the village. Mr Hồng and Mr Thắng are old and have largely withdrawn from work; in addition, their children have left the commune to work in other localities. The households of Mr Hồng and Mr Thắng have, as a result, insufficient labour to cultivate the land allocated to them. They therefore only retain a portion of their total field area to cultivate. The rest they let out to others who are in labour deficit, such as Mr Thảo's household. Mr Thảo's household is comparatively young. His children and his wife did not receive shares of agricultural land at the time of the distribution and they therefore have to resort to renting agricultural land from Mr Hồng and Mr Thắng to be able to meet their subsistence needs and derive an income. The fact that Mr Thảo's household has dependent children also limits their scope for migration.

This practice of letting land shows that demographic changes and out-migration do not necessarily lead to de-agrarianisation or fallow lands, as some scholars (Rigg 2001 and 2006; Rigg and Nattapoolwat 2001) have predicted, but rather to arrangements that shift the use of agricultural land from labour-deficient households to labour-rich households. The remittances from migrant household members partially release those left behind from farm work. Instead of leaving the land fallow, rental arrangements allow young households that have enough labour but lack land to farm extra land to provide for their families. This also has implications for how land use is linked to prosperity: cultivating large areas of rice land is not necessarily a sign of being well off, but more likely a labour use and allocation strategy. These arrangements link migrant households with non-migrant households in distinctive ways. The arrangements are, however, informal and temporary in nature. By renting out land, migrant households do not give up their land use rights. They keep their connections with the land and the village and, in many cases, by receiving a share of the harvest, continue to eat rice cultivated on their land. Land remains an important source of security to hold onto in case of return.

²¹ Information from interview on 4 March 2012.

Labour Exchange and Migration

Wet rice production in Vietnam requires considerable labour input, especially during transplanting and harvesting. In order to organise this labour input, farmers mutually depend on each other for a certain level of cooperation (Bergstedt 2012: 151). Labour exchange between households during planting and harvesting is thereby very important (Nguyễn Hồng Phong 1978: 498; Mai Van Hai and Phan Dai Doan 2000: 152). Although this kind of mutual help is often thought to weaken with migration, mechanisation, and monetisation of agricultural production, our survey results show that 240 out of 300 respondents (or 80 percent) reported that members of their households exchanged labour (either help other households and/or received help from other households) in the year prior to the survey. In order to see how this works in practice, we look at the case of Mr Khanh:

Mr Khanh was born in 1960. He is a farmer as well as a bricklayer and lives in hamlet number 4 of Quỳnh Đôi commune. He joined the army in 1978 and left military service in 1982. He and his wife have three children and his household has five *sào* of agricultural land allocated by the commune. His household also began renting five *sào* of fields from a neighbouring household in 2005. In total, his household farms ten *sào*. The neighbouring household rented land to Mr Khanh's household when they left the hamlet and migrated to settle in the South of Vietnam. However, this neighbouring household continues to keep their house in Quỳnh Đôi commune and they return to Quỳnh Đôi to worship their ancestors each lunar New Year and on ancestor worship days. Although they have moved to the South, they have retained their land use rights. Each year, Mr Khanh's household pays an average of 100 kg of rice per *sào* to his neighbour, based on a verbal agreement between the two parties.

While Mr Khanh's household has ten *sào* of agricultural land to cultivate they only have two working labourers – his wife and himself. His children have moved to work in other localities. Thus, during the planting and harvesting seasons he is obliged to exchange labour with other households in the commune. In the past, Mr Khanh had a buffalo to plough his fields, and would sometimes plough the fields of other households in exchange for their help during planting and harvesting. In the year prior to the survey, however, he sold his buffalo and now hires tractors to plough his land. But labour exchange between his household and the other households have continued during peak periods in the rice cycle and Mr Khanh also sometimes helps these households repair their houses, using his bricklaying skills.²²

The example of Mr Khanh's household shows that the exchange of labour does not necessarily diminish in a context of agricultural change, monetisation, and labour out-migration. In a context of out-migration and the rental of additional land, the practice of exchanging labour remains relevant for many households who lack the labour to work their land.

Labour exchanges between households are flexible and can be deployed for a range of agricultural and, sometimes, non-agricultural activities. Besides exchanging equal days for equal types of work (transplanting or harvesting, for instance), labour exchange may, as the example of Mr Khanh illustrates, also involve exchanging one kind of work or service (ploughing, bricklaying) for a day of harvesting. Labour exchange in rice cultivation often involves related or neighbouring households working on each other's land. One farmer in hamlet 6 noted:

²² Interview on 5 March 2012.

“For this summer-autumn crop, my wife Loan and my daughter Linh helped my related households for five days in transplanting rice. The households that often exchange labour with my household are Mr Son’s household and Mr Binh’s household – who are brothers of my wife; and the households of Mr Quý, Mr Nhân, Mr Lợi and Mr Dũng – who are in my patrilineage.”²³

While this shows the continuity of labour exchange, the modalities for labour exchange have changed. As Bergstedt (2012: 162) has also observed in the north of Vietnam, the increased access to money “provided the option of hiring labour, and organising work in a way that released people from the time-consuming task of recompensing other people’s labour efforts by an equivalent amount of working hours.” Ms Thương²⁴, who owns a small shop, told us that harvest time is a busy time in her shop and she is therefore not able to work her household’s land, requiring her to hire labour. Ms Thương lives with her mother – a retired teacher. Her father is dead and her three brothers live in other localities. Her household has five *sào* of land consisting of her share, her father’s share, and the shares of her three brothers – each person being allocated one *sào*. Her mother, a teacher, was not allocated agricultural land. The person Ms Thương hires to work the land for her, Ms Hà, actually also rents 2.3 *sào* (1,150 m²) of Ms Thương’s land. When we asked Ms Thương why, instead of renting out her land she did not hire labourers, she noted that hiring labour is restricted to certain kinds of activities (ploughing, transplanting, harvesting) and that a lot of other work still remains to be done – for which she has no time and her mother, with whom she lives, no strength. She therefore only cultivates the land needed to grow sufficient rice for the household’s own consumption.

The experience of Ms Thương and Ms Hà illustrates the relationship of mutual dependency that exists between those with a land surplus but labour deficit, and vice versa. In assessing the nature of such relationships – and whether they are exploitative, for example – it is necessary to consider the place of rice farming within the context of wider household livelihoods. Rice cultivation is carried out on a very small scale in the village, and rarely generates any profit, as such. Growing rice is largely for household consumption rather than for sale. This means that viewing the renting of land and the hiring/exchanging of labour in the village through the lens of ‘exploitation’ misrepresents the nature of such transactions. These are, in effect, production management arrangements, often undertaken between relatives, to maximise production and smooth out scarcities at the household level. The notion of ‘exploitation’ in such a context does not grasp the nature of the agreement and the relationships that underpin them. Whether this extends to other villages in Northern Vietnam we cannot say.

Another important factor influencing the exchange of labour is the mechanisation of agricultural production. Rice cultivation has become less labour intensive due to the mechanisation of ploughing and transportation. These are activities that are increasingly paid, instead of exchanged for labour. This mechanisation of agricultural labour has, to some extent, also facilitated a feminisation of rice cultivation. With many husbands and adult sons absent working elsewhere, women are now often in charge of growing rice for the family consumption. Ms Linh²⁵, for example, works on her own two *sào* of land as her husband is employed by a construction company in the South and her daughters are too young to be of much help. She noted: “We have here two

²³ Interview in hamlet number 6, Quỳnh Đôi commune on 6 March 2012.

²⁴ Interview in hamlet number 6, Quỳnh Đôi commune on 29 August 2012.

²⁵ Interview in hamlet number 6, Quỳnh Đôi commune on 29 August 2012.

crops per year. But we use machines a lot so it is fine for us. It is not very hard; we use machines²⁶ for ploughing and for the transport of the harvest, which is a door to door service. So it is ok; it is less work than before.”

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to show the multiple ways in which the increasing importance of non-farm and migrant employment have influenced the lives and livelihoods of rural households in a particular commune in Central Vietnam. Yet, rather than seeking answers to whether migration benefits agricultural production of individual households or not, we have explored the inter-linkages between migration and the use of land and labour. The research shows that one of the unintended consequences of the land and economic reforms from the mid-1980s, and especially from the early 1990s, has been a series of social and production transformations which have spontaneously emerged in the study area in response to wider processes. Land rentals, both within and between neighbouring communes, have become a common means of juggling or balancing resources and needs. In the main, however, these rentals remain informal and based on verbal agreements between the parties, rooted in trust based on geography or kinship.

The underlying reasons why leasing of land has become so common is due to a combination of household ageing, population growth, livelihood diversification and greater mobility. The examples we outlined can be broadly divided into three categories: First, those households that do not engage in farming because they are too old and/or the adult members have migrated for work and who lease their land to other villagers in exchange for rice or cash. Second, small-scale farming households with one migrant member or member engaged in other non-farm employment, with those left behind cultivating land to produce rice for their own consumption. These households may either rent or rent out land in order to suit their needs and facilitate access to land and the production that results. And third, there are those farming households that cultivate relatively large plots of land, part of which is rented, and have the labour force to work the land and produce rice for the market.

While the rental arrangements described here are verbal, informal, flexible, convenient, and easy to arrange, they do harbour risks – risks which we speculate will grow as trust becomes frayed and the interests of villagers diverge. We show how this might occur with regard to the investments which some lease holders have made in digging fishponds or constructing structures on the land. The scope for disagreement will likely rise and there may, therefore, be an advantage in formalising some of these verbal agreements to minimise the scope for conflict, notwithstanding the reduction in flexibility and ease that will result.

An allied and complementary social development to the spread of leasing is labour exchange. Like leasing, labour exchanges tend to occur between households that are either neighbouring or related and also depend on verbal agreements between the parties. For a similar set of reasons that has driven leasing, labour exchange is a production management system designed to deal with imbalances between labour supply at the household level and labour demand. This becomes particularly acute during certain periods in the farm calendar, especially the transplanting and harvesting of rice.

²⁶ A number of households in Quỳnh Đôi own hand tractors and these are hired out to other households to plough their land.

Quỳnh Đồi village provides an insight into the way in which wider processes of transformation in rural Vietnam are resonating through the countryside and, at the same time, how rural people have spontaneously arrived at sometimes novel solutions to the predicament in which they find themselves. The spread of leasing and the re-emergence of labour exchange between households has not been orchestrated or, even, anticipated by the state. And yet it is because of the processes set in motion by the policies contained within *Đổi Mới* that rural households have embraced the actions outlined here.

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