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Review Article

Major Economic Sectors in Vietnam from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: One of the most prominent economic sectors in Vietnam from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century was agriculture, alongside mining and commerce. Within this picture, wet-rice cultivation formed the leading branch of production, complemented by forest exploitation and animal husbandry. Mining developed in many localities, helping to supply raw materials for production and boosting state revenue. Commercial activity was fairly lively, sustained by a network of village markets and market towns as well as domestic trade routes, while trading relations were also maintained with a number of countries in the region. Nevertheless, the state's tight administrative controls and its monopoly over foreign trade limited the growth of a commodity-based economy. This article seeks to clarify the actual conditions and characteristics of Vietnam's economy during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

Keywords: Vietnam's economy, agriculture, mining, commerce, seventeenth–nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Vietnam's economy underwent many changes driven by natural conditions, the political context, and the process of territorial expansion. Agriculture continued to play the leading role during this period, while other economic sectors forest-product exploitation, mining, and commerce gradually developed, giving rise to a relatively diverse economic landscape.

The expansion of trade both within the country and with the outside world stimulated the circulation of goods and contributed to the formation of commercial centers and important trading routes. Even so, economic development remained heavily constrained by the administrative mechanisms of the feudal state, particularly its policies of monopoly and control over foreign trade.

Studying the economic sectors of this period not only helps to identify the characteristics of the traditional economy but also helps explain the preconditions for, and the constraints on, Vietnam's economic development before the early modern era. On this basis, the article focuses on analyzing the salient features of agriculture, mining, and commerce in order to clarify the picture of Vietnam's economy from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

Content

The agricultural economy

a. Crop cultivation

Rice: Wet-rice cultivation formed the foundation of Vietnam's economic structure from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Farm implements were very simple, consisting mainly of harrows, hoes, sickles, scoop-and-lever devices for irrigating fields, and hand mills for husking paddy. Alongside intensive cultivation on the flat fields of the low-lying rice regions, there was also a system of shifting cultivation in the upland areas of northern Vietnam.

Each type of soil suited a particular rice variety: rice adapted to flooded land, dry-land rice grown in the mountains and on hillsides, rice tolerant of brackish water in alluvial areas, early- and late-ripening varieties, and floating rice that could grow in deeply inundated areas.

Cultivation methods also differed between the northern and southern systems of production, a difference rooted in their distinct historical conditions. Whereas the northern delta had been farmed for many centuries and had long faced the risks of drought and

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flooding, the south, a more recently conquered region, felt no such anxiety over food supply. As a result, Dang Ngoai (the North) concentrated almost exclusively on growing food crops, while agricultural production in Dang Trong (the South) was more diversified, with industrial crops and export goods occupying an important place.

Food crops: Maize was introduced in the early seventeenth century along with sesame, millet, and black beans, and was immediately planted over a wide area owing to its nutritional value, high yield, and ease of adaptation.

Sweet potatoes were bred into many varieties, with the red, purple, and waxy types being the most common.

Finally, various kinds of beans were introduced from the Netherlands. These beans became widespread everywhere, providing not only a supplementary food source but also helping to replenish and maintain the nitrogen content of the soil.

Besides these staple crops, many kinds of green vegetables were also grown, the most common being celery, radish, cucumber, gourd, and pumpkin.

Fruit trees: Fruit trees were generally those growing wild. Where they were tended at all, this was only within the scope of individual households. Every home had a jackfruit tree, an orange tree, a banana or custard-apple tree, an areca palm, and a betel vine for the family's own use. Fruit growing had not yet become systematic or been carried out on a large scale.

Short-term industrial crops: Hemp and cotton were grown mainly for domestic consumption. But the most developed activity of all was mulberry cultivation combined with silkworm raising, which served a large domestic and export market.

b. Forest exploitation

Timber production: Linked to the building boom of this period, and even more markedly once the truce began, the timber industry appears to have developed especially strongly.

The state also took part in timber exploitation through the development of shipyards. The number of yards increased at Bai Chay and Ben Thuy in Dang Ngoai, and at Ha Mat in Dang Trong, in order to supply larger vessels of greater tonnage, which significantly raised the state's own timber consumption. Warehouses were constantly kept stocked with large quantities of timber to supply the shipbuilding industry and to meet the needs of constructing the court's palace buildings.

The private sector also found opportunities for profit, despite the state's requisitioning policy. Traditionally, the state reserved for itself the right to exploit and use ironwood (go lim), a rare and precious timber that the Hong Duc Code listed among the goods reserved exclusively for the court, on a par with gold, cinnamon, ivory, and pearls. Yet in the list of taxed plant products drawn up in 1724, this type of timber is recorded alongside other kinds of construction timber that regularly appeared in trade. These woods created a lively market, with timber shipped along the coast from southern Dang Trong to the central provinces.

Lacquer production: Lacquer production increased in Dang Ngoai. According to the missionary Richard, most of the annual harvest was transported "to the capital and to Nghe An province, where people possessed the secret of manufacturing, using, and coloring it as they wished." Dang Trong likewise had many kinds of plant oils that served its handicraft industries.

Herb and dye-plant exploitation: The exploitation of dye plants was carried out to meet the needs of the textile industry and, to a lesser degree, of fine woodworking and papercraft. A number of dye plants were commonly used in Dang Trong: chai for producing blue dye, tran huynh (cambodgia gutta) for yellow, and sapan wood and dieu for red.

Exploitation of aromatic oils: The exploitation of aromatic oils was likewise vigorously pursued. Aloeswood, white benzoin, cardamom, and sandalwood from the former Champa and Khmer kingdoms now the central and southern regions of the south had been known since ancient times and drew merchants from every coast, from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, giving rise to the earliest transoceanic trade routes. Cinnamon was the most highly prized aromatic. From 1720, a single tax regime was applied to salt, copper, and cinnamon, with cinnamon subject to the highest rate. This tax was collected twice, once at the time of extraction and again at the time of sale, and a license was required to extract it. The main cinnamon-producing regions were Thanh Nghe and Hung Hoa.

The search for medicinal plants: The search for medicinal plants also revived. Up to this point, a large share of the ordinary medicines used domestically had been imported from China. Villages such as Da Ngu (in Hung Yen) specialized in distributing northern-style (Chinese) medicine. But with the growing success of treatment using southern (Vietnamese) herbal medicine, local sources of medicinal materials were exploited to the fullest. A large number of books on medicine and pharmacology were compiled during the eighteenth century, and it was in this same century that Vietnam's greatest physicians up to that time emerged.

c. Animal husbandry

Livestock were raised mainly to provide draft power and food. For transport, people relied far more on human labor than on animal power (carrying baggage, litters, delivering messages, relay running, and so on). Only occasionally was the Tuyen Quang breed of donkey used to carry heavy loads. Only the state kept horses and elephants in large numbers, primarily to form cavalry units for use in war, as well as for certain tasks in peacetime. Elephants were also kept; their numbers are estimated to have reached several thousand across both Dang in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These elephants came as tribute from vassal states (Laos, Champa, and Cambodia), were imported from abroad, or were captured in the country's mountainous regions, and were kept at military centers in the north and south, especially at Dong Hoi, ready for use whenever war resumed. Besides being trained as war elephants, they were also employed in peacetime tasks such as transport, land leveling, firefighting, and even the execution of condemned prisoners.

Even so, animal husbandry remained only a secondary activity. Raising livestock on a relatively large scale was common only among certain ethnic minority communities in the northern mountains, and even there production methods remained traditional and backward. Buffalo and horses were often simply left to graze freely. Each farming household kept one or two buffalo for plowing and harrowing. This animal was hardy and required only simple feed, able to live on grass it foraged for itself in the fields during periods of rest.

Other livestock such as horses, cattle, and goats were mostly left to graze freely and received little care, so their productivity and quality remained low. Poultry, however, was extremely abundant, especially ducks, which were raised chiefly for their eggs. These eggs were preserved under a coating of ash and salt and constituted a luxury product exported to China.

The mining industry

In Dang Ngoai, mining activity was directed chiefly toward copper, though this did not mean other metals were neglected. According to Phan Huy Chu, many mining centers that flourished after the uprisings of 1739–1740 had in fact already existed beforehand: for example, the Tu Long copper mines in Tuyen Quang; Trinh Lan and Ngoc Uyen in Hung Hoa; Sang Moc, An Han, Liem Tuyen, Tong Tinh, and Vu Nong in Thai Nguyen; the Kim Ma and Tam Long gold mines; the Con Minh zinc mines; the Vu Nong tin mines; the Thuong Da saltpeter (potassium nitrate) mines in Thai Nguyen; and the Nam Xuong and Long Sinh silver mines in Tuyen Quang, among others.

Mining operations were organized under a concession system. From the Restoration period onward, the provincial administrators (thua ty) were responsible for granting mining rights and collecting an annual tax in kind. These officials were not forbidden from personally engaging, in a private capacity, in the production of the very metals they were charged with overseeing, but in practice only a few leaders from ethnic minority communities made use of this privilege. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, mining concessions came to be granted preferentially to senior officials dispatched as managers and supervisors of the copper-administration offices in the districts and prefectures where mines were located. This policy of granting concessions served two purposes: reviving the mining industry and ensuring greater tax revenue for the state treasury. Mines operated by these officials were exempted from all taxes during their construction period (three to five years); after that period, mining sites had to pay tax as a proportion of output (which could be as high as 20 percent, as was the case for salt).

In the copper sector, this system also came with a transaction tax introduced in 1720. In addition to the fees they already had to pay, such as for the right to purchase (three bars of silver) and to pass through domestic customs posts (six quan going, ten quan returning), all merchants also had to hand over to the state 30 percent of the metal they purchased, valued at a fixed rate of fifteen quan per hundred can. This same rate applied to foreign merchants as well, except that instead of paying in kind they had to pay in cash. Moreover, foreign merchants were permitted to trade with local merchants only after having first transacted with the copper-administration office.

Family-based mining operations set up by local miners, though numerous, played only a minor role compared with the large-scale enterprises run by the Chinese.

Commerce

a. Domestic trade

Village markets: A large village, or a group of villages, would set up a market for exchanging goods; the market site was known as the “market hamlet” and was usually located near a ferry landing, in a spot with open ground convenient for travel. Such markets consisted of only a few simple bamboo-and-thatch stalls selling general goods and the food and provisions needed by the rural population, with farmers bringing their own produce to exchange there. Larger markets, organized on an administrative-territorial basis, were known as “tong markets” or “district markets” and served as the basis for the later formation of market towns, or “micro-urban centers.” To ensure an orderly flow of goods carried by merchants to sell to farmers under the difficult travel conditions of the nineteenth century, market days were staggered: evening markets, morning markets, afternoon markets, and so on.

Because transport was difficult and goods were scarce, some regions also developed periodic fairs. In these, in addition to the regular market days, merchants agreed among themselves on fixed fair days each month so that traders from distant places could gather to exchange goods between delta regions, between delta and mountain areas, and between upland and lowland areas. Unlike the large trading houses found in towns and cities, these periodic fairs featured only makeshift stalls where merchants conducted brisk business for the day. They would buy goods here and carry them on to sell at village markets and other fairs.

In the Tonkin delta, each district typically held one periodic fair. In densely populated areas, every three to five "tong" (a grouping of communes) had its own fair, so that throughout the year, somewhere in the Red River delta, a fair was taking place almost every day.

Urban streets and quarters: Both market towns (pho) and markets (cho) served as trading centers as well as residential and administrative areas. Under the feudal dynasties there arose such quarters as Pho Hoi, Pho Hien, Pho Thanh Ha, and Dong Ba–Gia Hoi, Dong Pho. The street names of Hanoi today still bear witness to this process of commodity production and urbanization in our country.

In the nineteenth century, the Nguyen dynasty's restrictive commercial policy and its monopoly over foreign trade left commercial activity in these urban quarters weak and fragmented. The capital, Hue, redeveloped its commercial district on the eastern side of the city, giving rise to the Dong Ba and Gia Hoi quarters and the Dinh market, among others, but these served mainly to supply goods to the local population and to court officials in the capital, rather than developing as an independent force capable of forming a national market for the whole country. After Hanoi ceased to be the capital, it became merely a district-level unit, Tho Xuong district; yet its urban character persisted, with each street devoted to its own trade and well-known market quarters such as Cua Dong, Cua Nam, and Huyen markets.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, because demand for goods remained simple and the expansion of markets was restricted, the production and circulation of goods remained weak. The state's practice of blocking rivers and closing markets, together with its monopolies and tight controls, deprived the domestic market of the conditions it needed to develop. The flows of trade in rice running north–south, and in forest, and marine products running east–west across the country, did not generate significant prosperity within the village markets.

b. foreign trade

Export goods: The state held a monopoly over export goods, especially rare specialty products such as ivory, swiftlet nests, and rhinoceros horn. However, because state oversight was lax and the bureaucracy was corrupt, merchants still managed to play a significant role in exporting goods, including contraband items and rare specialty products that were officially reserved for state export.

Besides trade with China, from the early Gia Long period onward, trade between Vietnam and several Southeast Asian countries developed in both the state and private sectors. In the state sector alone, between 1835 and 1840, 21 ships were dispatched to trade with Southeast Asian countries:

Year	Envoy	Ship name	Destination
1835	Tran Hung Hoa; Nguyen Luong Huy	Phan Bang	Ha Chau (Singapore)
1836	Nguyen Tri Phuong	Thuy Long	Giang Luu Ba (Jakarta)
-	Vu Van Giai	Linh hung	Ha Chau
-	Tran Danh Buu	Van Bang	Penang
-	Hoang Cong Tai	Thanh oan	
1837	Le Ba Tu	Phan Bang	Borneo (Indonesia)
-	Nguyen Tri Phuong	Thuy Long	Giang Luu Ba
-	Vu Van Tri	Linh hung	Ha Chau
1838	Dao Tri Phu	Thuy Long	Giang Luu Ba
-	Pham Phu Quang	Phan Bang	Giang Luu Ba
-	Nguyen Tri Phuong	An Duong	Ha Chau
-	Nguyen Van To	Linh hung	Ha Chau
-	Le Ba Tu; Le Viet Tri; Le Van Phuc; Phan Tinh; Le Van Phu; Tran Dai Ban	Tien Ly	Ha Chau
1839	Dao Tri Phu	Thuy Long	Giang Luu Ba
-	Tran Tu Dinh	Phan Bang	Tambelan
-	Tran Buu Chanh	Linh Phung	Lesser Western Ocean (Tieu Tay Duong)
-	Cao Huu Tan	Tien Ly	Ha Chau
-	Nguyen Duc Long; Le Ba Tu; Tran Dai Ban; Nguyen Du; Le Van Thu; Do Mau Thuong	Tuong Hac	Ha Chau
1840	Nguyen Tien Song	Thanh Duong	Ha Chau
-	Tran Tu Dinh	Thanh Loan	Giang Luu Ba
-	Dao Tri Phu; Phan Hien Dat; Le Van Thu	Thuy Long	Tambelan; Ha Chau

(Nguyen The Anh, The Social and Economic History of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty Kings, pp. 271–272)

Export goods generally fell into two categories: natural products and handicrafts. Natural products included forest products (dyewood, rosewood, musk, and so on), marine products (swiftlet nests, dried shrimp, sea cucumber, pearls, and so on), animal products (rhinoceros horn, elephant ivory and bones, and so on), and rare minerals. Handicraft goods included sugar, raw silk, and silk fabric, among others. Granulated sugar and rock sugar were among the goods most favored by foreign merchants.

Import goods: These consisted mostly of advanced manufactured goods such as weapons and Western equipment, as well as handicrafts from China and other countries in the region. Silk goods included brocade, damask, gauze, satin, gold-threaded crepe, fur coats, and monkey-fur garments, among others.

Under Emperor Tu Duc, imports also came to include various beverages and medicines, such as cold remedies, peppermint oil, imperial-scent oil, rose oil, peppermint cakes, ngoc-le wine, and camphor. Chinese porcelain was also imported in large quantities. According to the court records (chau ban) of the Minh Mang reign, on the seventh day of the sixth month of the first year of Minh Mang (1820), the emperor approved the transport of 30 crates of porcelain from the ship of Captain Phan Tay Ky to the capital, Hue.

The balance of exports and imports in Vietnam during the nineteenth century was shaped by the supply and demand of the market. However, because the state held a monopoly over foreign trade, domestic commercial activity was confined to a limited number of trades and to certain social groups, and so it failed to generate a strong enough force to drive the development of commodity production in line with the broader global trend, or to draw the engagement of society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, Vietnam's economy underwent many changes driven by natural conditions, the political context, and the process of territorial expansion. Agriculture continued to play the leading role during this period, while other economic sectors forest-product exploitation, mining, and commerce gradually developed, giving rise to a relatively diverse economic landscape. The expansion of trade both within the country and with the outside world stimulated the circulation of goods and contributed to the formation of commercial centers and important trading routes. Even so, economic development remained heavily constrained by the administrative mechanisms of the feudal state, particularly its policies of monopoly and control over foreign trade. Studying the economic sectors of this period not only helps to identify the characteristics of the traditional economy but also helps explain the preconditions for, and the constraints on, Vietnam's economic development before the early modern era. On this basis, the article has focused on analyzing the salient features of agriculture, mining, and commerce in order to clarify the picture of Vietnam's economy from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

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