

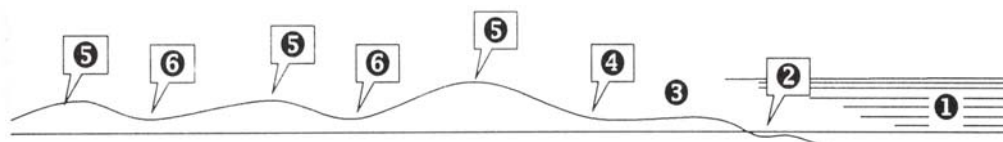
# CHANGES IN THE LIFE OF PHONG LAI VILLAGERS WHEN TOBACCO PRODUCTS NO LONGER PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE

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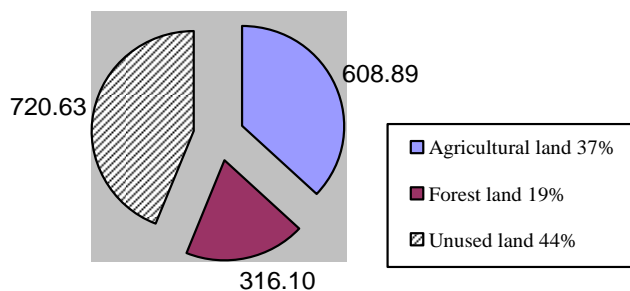
## I. WHERE ARE TOBACCOS PLANTED IN PHONG LAI VILLAGE?

Geographically, Phong Lai village is more than three kilometres long and lies north-south along Tam Giang Lagoon. The following charts provide general information about the soil of this village:

Profile of Phong Lai terrain:



*Note:* ❶: Tam Giang Lagoon (floating weed). ❷: Low field (rice) ❸: Field (rice, sweet potato) ❹: Residential place ❺: white sand bank (tobacco, bush, grave) ❻: Water ways



- 330.5 hectares of rice fields
- 130 hectares of land for other crops
- Most unused lands are white sand (number 5)

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I would like to analyse some elements as follows:

**1.1.** Phong Lai village has 284 hectares of water face, which is twice as large as the land available for planting crops. The village is located in the river mouth, which is suitable for the development of fresh and salty water products, such as fish and shrimp<sup>(1)</sup> and especially floating weeds. The latter is a good fertilizer source for tobacco plants (Tran Duc Hanh, 1997; Do Nam, 2003).

**1.2.** In the past, people planted one crop of rice a year. The fields included paddy (to plant rice, but the productivity was not high), and rich soil for planting sweet potato as a secondary food (supplementing rice and for raising pigs, with an emphasis on the use of pig manure for tobacco plants).

**1.3.** The residential space<sup>(2)</sup> is in between the west sand-bank and the field. It is a narrow piece of land on which only a few households live (not including Lai Ha and Trung Lang villagers who work in hydroelectric plant and live near Tam Giang Lagoon).

**1.4.** Currently, 720.3 hectares of land are unused and most of them are dry white sandy soil. This is the place for bushes and graveyards. In the past, it was where tobacco was planted.

**1.5.** The Niu river is about 2 kilometres long. It is formed by small waterways called Tram Ngang, Tram Sen, Tram Giet and Tram Nay that meet in Cua Khe (the mouth of the waterways) and flow to Tam Giang Lagoon through Cua Rao estuary. The Niu river plays an important role in transporting floating weed from Tam Giang Lagoon to ports, such as Trung Buom port, Thanh port, Mieu port, Dinh port, Cho port and Cua Khe port. From these ports, weed is carried to fertilise tobacco plants.

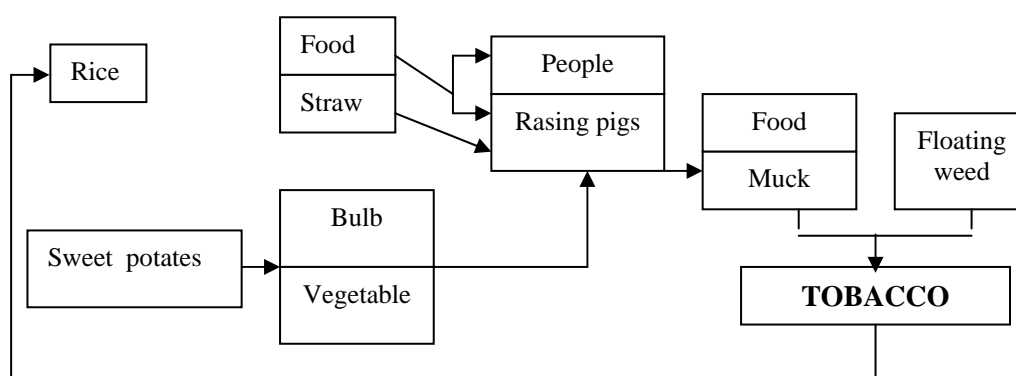
**1.6.** Phong Lai villagers choose three plants that are most suitable to the village's soil, including rice, sweet potato and tobacco. This is a perfect system for raising plants in poor and dry soil. This relation could be illustrated as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> See the result of aquatic productivities survey of Quang Thai commune in four years (from 1997 to 2000): 75.8 tones → 88.5 tones → 90.0 tones → 125.0 tones [Quang Dien Survey Division, 2001: 75].

<sup>2</sup> Up to December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003, Quang Thai commune has 1,075 households with 5,106 persons:

1. Dong Cao village has 123 households with 523 persons
2. Dong Ho village has 108 households with 531 persons
3. Nam Giang village has 116 households with 483 persons
4. Tram Ngang village has 134 households with 563 persons
5. Trung Kieu village has 152 households with 679 persons
6. Tay Hoang village has 159 households with 762 persons
7. Trung Lang village has 140 households with 790 persons
8. Lai Ha village has 143 households with 775 persons



## II. WHEN WAS TOBACCO FIRST PLANTED IN PHONG LAI VILLAGE?

I have been studying the village's history but I have not yet found any documents mentioning the time when tobacco was first planted in Phong Lai village. However, there is an evidence showing that tobacco was first grown in this village a long time ago and soon became a principal economic plant.

The research results and written documents show that people in Lai Trung and Lai Thanh have not planted tobacco. Tobacco was only planted and became well-known in Phong Lai. This is related to the system of exploiting Phong Lai land by the people, starting from Lai Trung.

According to legends, royal certificates and the tradition of the tutelary God, the founders of this village were Seven Families, including Van, Pham, Tran, Hoang, Ho, Le and Nguyen. Hoang, Ho, Le and Nguyen had orders to occupy a specific land, which is Phong Lai village. Though there are no documents mentioning tobacco plants, I was interested in the role of Mr. Nguyen Phuc Lang in exploring open water. There was a second community which lived on water, Trung Lang village<sup>3</sup>). It is these two groups that form the major labour source and who are specialised in gathering floating weed to sell to people who live on the mainland and plant tobaccos. They also planted tobacco.

Though documents do not say the exact dates, we can say that the process of exploration took place quite early. By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, retired scholar Ngo The Lan lived in this place (Le Quy Don, 1977:291). One researcher even had the

<sup>3</sup> Without specific dates, but at least, Trung Lang was formed in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by people coming from different areas, such as from Lai Ha, Ha Xuan (Phong Chuong), An Gia, Kim Doi (Quang Dien), Ha Trung (Phu Vang). During 1960-1970, they moved to live near Cua Rao (river's mouth). There are two suppositions explaining the name Trung Lang: (1) the land outside the village's Troong (waterway), according to people who live in the mainland; (2) village of people who live in troong (raft, boat). This name was misspelled and became Trung Lang (according to Mr. Tran Yem, 67 years old from Trung Kieu village, and Mr. Hoang Le, 69 years old from Trung Lang village).

interesting conclusion that Ngo The Lan planted tobacco while he was in Phong Lai (!) (Huynh Dinh Ket, 2000:146)<sup>(4)</sup>.

A map in *Nien giam Dong duong* (Indochina yearbook) in 1910 shows that tobacco from Phong Lai, called “tabac P. Lai”, was among famous and official products that were objects of taxation (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1997). Before 1945, the French collected tax in tobacco and wine from Phong Lai village. Village officers made a request to the higher-ranked officers to have one additional position for collecting a tax of tobacco and wine, in addition to five officials in the council. This illustrates that tobacco was extensively planted and become a main economic resource.

### **III. WHAT MAKES TOBACCO PRODUCTS OF PHONG LAI SO SPECIAL AND FAMOUS?**

According to Mr. Hoang Phat (82 years old, Tram Ngang hamlet), tobacco in Phong Lai village only grows in white sandy and soft soil which does not hold water but is always moist. That is the reason why people have to water tobacco plants everyday. Moreover, the most suitable fertilisers for tobacco are floating weed and manure. People do not use insecticides for they are afraid that they would affect the tobacco quality.

After gathering tobacco plants, people hang the leaves above the roof. The leaves dry through time in the air, and especially from the smoke rising from the hearth. Tobacco products from Phong Lai are in the form of raw materials, using whole leaves. The tobacco quality is determined by the resin content of the leaves. People put dry white sand on the leaves before tying them and the sand attaches to the leaves thanks to that resin. Phong Lai tobacco is well-known because of the resin quality that leaves from other places do not have.

### **IV. CONTINUE TO EXPLORE WHITE SAND AREA: FARMING MODEL**

The farming economic model was initiated as part of a national programme in 1997-1998. However, it was implemented later in provincial and district levels, especially at the commune level, in 1999 in Quang Thai commune, for example.

In Quang Thai, this farming model can only applied in a) white sandy areas in the west of the village where tobacco used to be planted, and b) on the water face of Tam Giang Lagoon, and in low fields. People here were dynamic and quickly moved from exploiting the open water to raise fish (this will be discussed later). The areas (a) mentioned above only had tobacco plants, bushes and graves. When tobacco was less

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<sup>4</sup> During my fieldtrip in the area of the Arem people (Tan Trach, Quang Trach, Quang Binh) which is isolated, old people told me that they planted tobacco and smoke it a long long time ago. The fact that in 1660, tobacco was brought to our country from Laos (Le Quy Don, 1962: 158-159), may refer to just one kind of tobacco, according to my opinion, or that was the first time it was noted.

planted, these areas stayed wild, and later became the main object of the farming economic model in Quang Thai commune.

In the implementation of PAM, 327 and sugar cane programmes (providing to the sugar company KCP which was developed during 1996-1999), manioc programme (serving a manioc company which was built in 2002, but not yet in action in April 2004), people tried different plants as pilot programmes such as cajuput (keo la cham), sugar cane and manioc. People had different attitudes toward the result of these programmes. The overall idea was that the bad result of previous programmes did not endear them to people. This is illustrated clearly by the numbers.

Up to March 2004, after five years of implementation, Quang Thai has only 22 households who participated in the programmes. Below is specific information:

Manioc: 37 hectares Peanut: 15 hectares Sweet potato: 4 hectares

Corn: 3 hectares Rice: 3.9 hectares Cashew: 10 hectares

Mushroom: 16 vaults Fish: raised on 4,500 square metres of open water

According to our survey, if people did not make agricultural products to serve the market, the model of a farming economy would not be successful. The commodity value of manioc, rice, corn, sweet potato, fruit trees, and cashew would not be high, while we could be sure that the productivity would be low because of dry soil and hard climate.

Thus, on the basis of a national programme, the model of farming economy is defined by Quang Dien district as a focus economic programme of the district (The People's Committee of Quang Dien district, 2003: 4,23). However, the programme's implementation in Quang Thai commune took place too slowly because the programme's result was not attractive to many people. More than anyone, people in Phong Lai village understand their soil and climate in their region; that is why so far, except for tobacco, this area has been unused and only bushes and grass grow wildly. I realised that the people here had different attitudes toward the new economic model through the way they welcomed and compared peanuts. They also received passively new elements in agricultural practices from the state's policy, but for peanuts, people in Phong Lai adapted and selected quickly and they replaced sweet potatoes only within five years. The farming economic model has not convinced people yet.

## V. CHANGE IN LABOUR DISTRIBUTION IN SOCIETY

### 5.1. Local Labour force

Before, tobacco plants, rice and sweet potato were main sources of income that influenced all activities of people in the community. I call them traditional form of economy. When the transportation system was still difficult and there was lack of modern machines, people carried things on their shoulders. Phong Lai tobacco plants created hard work as people carried water and manure, as in a folk saying (may be from neighbouring areas)

*Pitiful women of Phong Lai village*

*Fork of banana on the head and floating weed on the shoulder pole*

Planting tobacco requires lots of labour, careful and metaculous work, such as catching worms, gathering leaves, putting floating weed on tobacco plants, as well as good and health to carry manure and floating weed, and water plants everyday. This forms the basis for distributing labour according to sex, age and the work process. *Changing labour* groups are formed from relatives or neighbours.

No longer planting tobacco means breaking those relations. I would like to emphasise on some elements as follows:

**5.1.1. Diversification of Labour**

In a farmer family, the traditional economic form is broken, the labour force is distributed according to changes, loss, and the formation of some economic forms that are related to the economic role of tobacco plants. This leads to the diversification of economic activities, meaning they not only plant crops but also raise animals, do small business, and grow different plants that yield a high price.

First, there is a loss of some activities related directly to tobacco plants such as making shoulder poles and selling and buying rattan. Before, some people were specialised in these jobs.

Farmers grew different plants that have high economic value such as peanuts. After a successful period of exporting dried fruits (1980-1990), since 1998-2000, chili is planted to get fresh peppers. Farmers also raise fish, which is a new field to them. People who gather floating weed are still active but their purposes have changed: from selling weed to farmers who plant tobacco to gathering weed for raising fish. The number of fish dealers is increasing strongly thanks to the “coming to the throne” of aquatic products.

Niu market was called Phong Lai tobacco market because tobacco was its main product. The business was active thanks to the association of tobacco dealers which included different levels: people bring products to the market for sale, middle men buy products at home and bring to the market, middle men buy products at the market to sell in other places.

Niu market also attracts small businesses by young women when they have spare time, especially when they do not plant tobacco. This business activity contributes a great deal to the family expenses, particularly when farming products are cheap.

Thus, we talk about the movement of labour from zone I (countryside, agriculture) to zone II (urban, industry, construction) (Phan Huy Xu, Nguyen Kim Hong, 2001) and labour movement within zone I, from agriculture to aquaculture, and raising animals and plants for market.

**5.1.2. Hiring Labour**

The traditional system requires lots of labour in which *changing labour* was an appropriate model. It existed on the basis of sentiment (relatives, neighbours) to help each other finishing work on time. Exchange of labour took place in some activities that required heavy labour such as digging, carrying by shoulder poles, planting rice, gathering rice, making houses or planting bamboo, especially in carrying pig manure and weed to fertilise tobacco plants.<sup>5</sup>

The exchange of labour is counted by working day on the basis of helping each other, may be by inviting a fellow worker to a meal or a drink. There were no specific returns and time accounting, but if *we help others today, they will help us tomorrow*. For example, if a family has a funeral, relatives or neighbours would help. The owner would remember this assistance and will return it when the occasion comes, sometimes in the following year.

A simple form of hiring is by a *group*. Many people form a group to raise funds by working for families that lack labour, such as carrying floating weed or pig's manure to fertilise tobacco plants to get money or rice. At the end of the year, the group spends this money to buy a pig to prepare a party and distribute meat to its members for the Tet holidays.

Since 1990, the road system was developed in Quang Thai commune, with a new road to An Lo and a road through the sandy region and among villages. This is an important condition for the formation of transport services and ending a tradition of several centuries of transporting by shoulder poles in this tobacco village.

In contrast to the free labour of shoulder-carrying, people are now accustomed to paying for transport services. Tobacco lost its central role; agricultural activities changed in terms of quality and the practices of a market economy. Later, when services developed, this process was intensified, replacing labour exchange relations with hired labour relation. This process intensified as young people left their home village in large numbers, creating a lack of agricultural labour in the countryside.

Nowadays, farmers have favourable conditions for planting tobacco, including transport development, insecticide service, chemical fertilizer, and especially their hands are freed, but fewer people plant tobacco. This seems to be illegal, but it is true because tobacco products are cheap in the market. It is impossible now to "work to get benefit" as before because tobacco cultivation is considered out-of-date and difficult. Moreover, everything now has a service fee, including watering tobacco. Payment now is in cash, about 15,000-30,000 dong/person/day. All agricultural activities are counted on this basis, from rice to tobacco.

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<sup>5</sup> Before, people had to carry weed for 2-5 kilometres from the river to the field. Each time, the amount of weed carried were enough for about 20 plants. Thus, it took them 20 times to have enough weed for 1,000 plants. However, each person could only carry 10-15 times a day. That is why they had to ask one or two people for help. Later, they would help them in return.

Phong Lai village, like many other villages in the Centre, is influenced by the commodity economy when the multi-sector economy is officially recognised. Fee-for-service relations replace previous relations which were based on sentimental relations. The changing labour and group forms are replaced by selling and buying service. Tobacco and its related mode of production are both the reason and result of a changing process in relations of production, specifically in the labour force.

## 5.2. Phenomenon of Young People leaving their Home Village

Many young people leave their home villages, which shows a movement of economic scale as labour distribution moves from agriculture to non-agriculture, from the countryside to the city (John Clacmer, 2001). However, we found that in the countryside in the Centre in places such as Phong Lai, this process is more intense due to a poor agricultural potential and a poor basis for industrial development, which is not attractive enough to the local labour force.

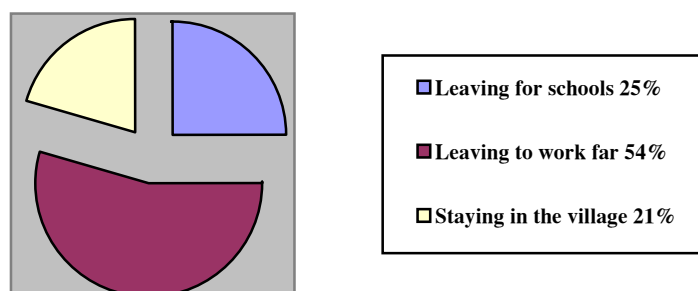
Besides, one reason is that young people do not want to stay in the village, do not work in agriculture but want to work outside to get higher income, to have better knowledge and to show that they are more *modern* than others. Tobacco, which was the principal economic source of Phong Lai people is now longer planted, the economic basis is broken to build a new one. This influences young people the most.

As mentioned above, I would like to emphasise the strong gap in the life of Phong Lai villagers who stay in the village in order to understand those who leave the village. When all changes that take place in the local village do not attract a labour force, it is obvious that there will be a movement of people, especially young ones.

We have heard about how the village's bamboo fence impedes the vision and mentality of the farmers (Phan Dai Doan, 2001, Bui Xuan Dinh, 1985...) However, I think the appearance of mass media and the improvement of the road system and means of transportation have influenced villagers to think about *leaving the village*.

I studied young people about 16-35 years old. The village population is composed of around 600 people. We can imagine the situation of the local youth as follows:

(Source: Youth League of Quang Thai village, December 2003)





I was lucky that my field trip was coincident with the New Year and I was able to meet with many people who came home for the holidays. What I found was that most of them went to the South, and did physical labour. This accords with other on the movement of the labour force from the countryside to the cities, and from the countryside to new economic zones (especially to the Central Highlands), from the agricultural economy to services and industry (Phan Huy Xu, Nguyen Kim Hong, 2001)

The survey result shows that young people leave their home village for several reasons, such as economic reasons: tobacco which was originally the main source of income of the family is given up, which means that many people now do not have work because tobacco requires a great deal of labour; and social reasons: leaving the family as an assertion of self, to wish for changes in their lives (in terms of both economics and social knowledge), and to avoid hard work in the countryside, which is considered out-of-date and poor.

Commonly, when asked, people talked about economic reasons first to explain their reasons for leaving, while social reasons are rarely mentioned, although this motivation for a better life gives people the courage to leave their home village (it could be because of their shyness or because of the interview methodology).

It could be said that Phong Lai village is poor and difficult, and that planting tobacco requires lots of hard work which make villagers strong. They are hard working and patient people who could overcome all obstacles and save the fruits of their labour. This is a good legacy for them in a new place. Otherwise, many difficulties will wait for them in the new areas: for those who pursue agricultural practices, their knowledge of tobacco planting does not apply in the new soil, business is not their tradition, they do not have experience and they are not trained in this field.

These advantages and disadvantages will be applied differently by the people and they will have different lives and works. What must be noted here is that it is difficult to have a criterion by which to measure whether a person who leaves their home village to be successful or not. However, starting from low economic condition in Phong Lai when tobacco no longer takes an important role, they are all successful.

The contribution of those who work far from their homes is expressed in many aspects. More attention is paid to their children's education. For farmer families, this is a big and long-term investment that it is difficult for them to afford financially. This difficulty is resolved thanks to the people who leave their home village.

## **Conclusion**

The process in which tobacco plants lost their principal role in economy could be a direct reason or an important catalyst to promote the process of economic and social changes in Phong Lai village. These losses and changes are indispensable to understanding the larger social context of the Vietnamese countryside today. The issue

here is whether this loss would happen rapidly or slowly. My opinion is that whether directly or indirectly, this is related to the fate of tobacco plant through history.

Changes in Phong Lai are different among farmers and fishermen, especially with respect to tobacco plants and fish. From this, the adaptation of Phong Lai villagers is expressed through the acceptance of giving up a traditional plant, which is tobacco, to welcome a new economic form (planting peanuts, raising fish for farmers) and develop new jobs (from fishing to aquaculture for fishermen).

The result of aquaculture contributes to changing the inborn view of farmers about the lagoon, and the fishing community and reduces the gap between farmers and fishermen.

Social changes in Phong Lai are found in different age groups: young people do not accept agricultural work and leave their home village to sell their labour in the cities within the country, and even to foreign countries, and most of them do not want to return to their original village. Old people who stay in the village adapt to the specialty of each region. Here, there is an alternative between old and new elements, including success (such as peanuts, sweet potatoes and fish raising) as well as experiment (farming model, tobacco).

Social changes in Phong Lai are different in the ways different people respond them: active (people are active in aquaculture and leave their home village) and passive (implementation of government's programmes, such as peanut planting and farming models).

Thus, Phong Lai is a Viet village that is not totally closed with an *economic tradition of paying attention to land and more emphasis on agriculture* (Phan Dai Doan, 2001, 83, 267). Within a new economic context, this characteristic ("tinh mo") (Nguyen Huu Thong, 2003) of the villages in the Centre could well develop. It is the dynamism in side the process of adaptation: the more a valuable thing disappears, the more it promotes changing process, as through the case of tobacco plants.

Finally, I would like to mention my concerns about the irretrievable loss of a heritage, which was tobacco in the life of Phong Lai villagers; the achievement of the adaptation process in the area is not attractive enough to young people (those who leave their home villages would not come back regardless of how hard their life is in the new place). Hence, how to get a labour source for the implementation of the industrialisation and urbanisation of agriculture and countryside? Thus, who are future owners of the villages?