Introduction

Like virtually all other rural communities in the Red River delta of North Vietnam, the village of Sơn-Dương, lying behind a bamboo hedge, is well hidden from the paved provincial highway. In order to get to the village, one has to turn off the provincial highway onto a pothole-ridden dirt road. A one-mile ride along this road into the village leaves a vehicle completely covered either with dirt or red mud from the potholes, depending on whether the road has been baked in the hot sun or watered by a tropical summer downpour. The dirt road continues well beyond Sơn-Dương, plowing through the rice fields of this small fertile plain and turning back toward Việt-Tri, the provincial capital of Vĩnh-Phú and one of the three major industrial centers of the north. Familiar eyes can recognize the village of Sơn-Dương from afar among other bamboo clusters dotting the rural landscape by tracing the road against a background of mountain peaks rising in the west on the other side of the Red River. Arriving in Sơn-Dương, one leaves behind the main delta of North Vietnam to enter the midland district of Lâm-Thao in the heartland of the first Vietnamese kingdom, the kingdom of the Hùng dynasty (which lasted up to the third century B.C.E.). In the courtyards of many houses in the village are huge haystacks for oxen and buffalo, the draft animals used in the rice paddies. Towering over the cultivators’ dwellings are the areca palm trees. These provide the highly valued nut, chewed with betel leaves in a long-existing practice that is widespread in the southeastern part of Asia. The physical landscape may seem at first glance to have been frozen since time immemorial.

Such an impression is misleading. Events behind the bamboo hedge have been partly shaped by the Chinese and Western capitalist world systems in the course of their economic, political, and ideological expansion.
Son-Dương has withstood repeated foreign ravages throughout the past century, first by the Chinese, then by the French, and finally by the Americans. At the same time it has undergone fundamental ecological, demographic, socioeconomic, and political changes in one the most important revolutions of our time.

As early as June 1965, three months into the sustained U.S. air war against North Vietnam, many young Son-Dương villagers experienced for the first time the bitter taste of modern technological destruction:

The sky was vividly blue above the village of Son-Dương, Lãm-Thao district, in the afternoon of June 24, 1965. Members of the [agricultural] cooperative all prepared to leave for the field, when two American “pirate” planes zoomed into sight. Incomprehensibly,
bombs exploded in the village. Fires instantly erupted. Smoke billowed into the blue sky. The burning smell of bomb powder filled the air. The earth shook...

[As soon as the bombing was over] the ground surrounding [the] bomb craters became the informal meeting place for almost 200 people denouncing [the] crime of [the] American “pirate.” The mourning cries of little Hồ’s father [over his bombing-victim son] and sister Ái’s five small children, now rendered motherless...registered deeply in the hearts and minds of every villager. (Phú-Thọ, July 9, 1965)
This article in the provincial Communist Party newspaper, **Phú-Thọ**, was a harbinger of tough days ahead for Sơn-Dương villagers, even though they had heard of the U.S. bombing along the North Vietnamese coast in the summer of 1964. On July 24, 1965, the intensified second Indochina War struck home to the people in Sơn-Dương personally (estimated 1965 population 2,700). Bombs heavily damaged the village’s
junior high school and a few nearby houses. They also left deep craters in the surrounding rice fields. In the eleven years of the intensified armed conflict that followed (1964–1975), the village sent to the front, in both the north and the south, 360 of its own sons, of whom 41 died in the war in this period. Their names are engraved on tombstones in the village’s war memorial cemetery, which honors the 73 village sons who died between 1930–1983 for the Vietnamese revolution and defense of the country. The bitter memory of war lives on in the minds of many villagers. During my research in the village in the summer of 1987, for example, a ranking village cadre referred obliquely to the unforgettably devastating impact of B-52 bombing on his battalion in the south during the war. He remained openly suspicious and hostile to my research throughout my visit. To this
Sơn-Dương had endured many foreign ravages during the seven decades of French colonialism in North Vietnam (1883–1954), and many other ravages well before that. Firmly supporting Hồ Chí Minh’s Vietminh forces during the first Indochina War (1946–1954) against the French, the village was bombed four times in 1951 by the French colonial air force. The bombing reportedly killed over thirty villagers and destroyed seventy-eight houses. In early 1930, in what was then Phú-Thọ province, the village had been a hotbed of anti-French activity. In retribution following an abortive anticolonial uprising in the provinces of Phú-Thọ and Yên-Báy, colonial troops burned the majority of the houses in Sơn-Dương. They also guillotined a native son in the town of Phú-Thọ, then the provincial capital, and the colonial government sent nineteen others to penitentiaries, some as far away as French Guiana in South America. Earlier, in the first wave of resistance to French colonialism (1884–1895), Sơn-Dương had also been active. In the turmoil of the first anti-French resistance movement, Chinese troops who initially participated against the French at the request of the Vietnamese court reportedly massacred about 120 villagers due to personal animosity between the anti-French guerrilla leader in Sơn-Dương and certain other anticolonial leaders (TTLTQG1-PT 534, cf. Sơn-Dương 1987).

Sơn-Dương has not only suffered from war. Caught in a precarious balance between a rapidly expanding population and millennium-old rice fields, its socioeconomic structure has also undergone a fundamental transformation. Despite the impression of a physical landscape frozen in time, the irrigation canals along the provincial highway and the road leading into the village were only constructed in the 1950s. Prior to this major water-control project, large portions of the low-lying village fields were inundated in the tropical summer and fall monsoons, and the high-lying sections were too dry for winter and spring cultivation. Before the completion of the canals in 1957, most village fields yielded only one staple crop annually, and some even lay fallow for the entire year. By 1987 the same land was yielding at least two, if not three, crops. These ecological changes came not a moment too soon. From 1954 to 1987 the cultivated area shrank from 1,009 mẫu (363 hectares, or 908 acres) to 820 mẫu (295 hectares, or 737 acres). In the same period the village population increased from 2,144 to 3,828, not counting the increasing number of villagers temporarily residing elsewhere for advanced schooling, armed service, or other government service.
The most significant changes remain the land-reform campaign and the cooperative program that Hồ Chí Minh’s government launched after its consolidation of power in the north in 1954. The land reform of 1954 redistributed approximately 300 mẫu (108 hectares, or 270 acres) of rice fields from landlord and rich peasant households to other members of the village of Sơn-Dương. The formation of agricultural cooperatives five years later was the first step toward the communal ownership of virtually all the cultivable land in Sơn-Dương. Despite a significant policy shift in 1981—a radical decentralization of the production process, which raised the rice crop yield by more than 100 percent in the 1982–1988 period—this collective ownership of land remains the fundamental principle in the socioeconomic structure of the village.

As an administrative unit, under Hồ Chí Minh’s government, Sơn-Dương is a commune (xã) that was formed through the merger of the three villages of Sơn-Dương, Dụng-Hiền, and Thuỵ Sơn. The trend to merge many villages into communes began accelerating in northern Vietnam in the late 1940s and 1950s. In most localities in northern Vietnam this is simply an administrative merger, and rural dwellers still strongly identify nowadays with their villages (làng in vernacular Vietnamese, or thôn [hamlet] in administrative terms). However, over time, for historical reasons (discussed below), in Sơn-Dương, the boundaries separating the three villages of Sơn-Dương, Dụng-Hiền, and Thuỵ-Sơn have lost their significance to villagers. The terms “village” (làng) and “commune” (xã) are now interchangeable for the people of Sơn-Dương and are used interchangeably in the following analysis of the socioeconomic structure and historical events in Sơn-Dương.

The following study examines the revolutionary processes in the village of Sơn-Dương over the past eight decades as discovered through the voices of elderly villagers, the findings from archival and field research in France and North Vietnam, and a survey of village households. As a study of the interplay of structure and history in a Vietnamese community from the colonial to the socialist era, including the current period of re-integration into the global capitalist system, this book differs from the few Western-language village studies of Vietnam in some important respects. Studies before 1992 examined a Vietnamese community either in ethnographic or sociological-statistical terms without including an in-depth historical dimension (Hickey 1964; Houtart and Lemercinier 1981) or from a historical perspective without a detailed microscopic investigation of structure in the colonial or socialist era (Phạm-Cṛông and Nguyễn-văn-Bá 1976; Trullinger 1980). The following study also differs from important
anthropological and historical research on rural Vietnam in the past decade and a half because it closely examines how local structure in a village on the one hand, and anticolonial historical events and market development on the other, have mutually shaped each other (cf. Kleinen 1999, Gammeltoft 1999, Nguyễn Tùng 1999, Malarney 2002, Papin and Tessier 2002, Taylor 2007; see also Luong 2006).

I was not aware that anticolonial resistance had simmered in Sơn-Dương for a large part of the past century when I selected the village for study. I chose the community through a chance encounter with an exiled octogenarian revolutionary from there, Nguyễn Đắc Bằng. Originally a member of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNP), Bằng had participated in the VNP-organized uprising in North Vietnam in 1930. Having obtained a copy of Mr. Bằng’s memoir on the major events of his political career, I found fascinating his life trajectory, which spanned different corners of the French and British empires and bridged the colonial and socialist eras of twentieth-century Vietnam. With Bằng’s collaboration and with his memoir as my starting point, I decided in 1985 to undertake a study of how historical events in Bằng’s life in particular and in Sơn-Dương in general interplayed with both the microstructure of Sơn-Dương village and the French colonial system. With the encouragement of Vietnamese diplomatic authorities, I planned a research visit to Bằng’s native village in order to complement archival research in France and interviews in Canada in the summer of 1985. I hoped to combine the life-history method and archival research in order to illuminate the interplay of local tradition and history—an interplay seen both in the continuity and discontinuity of a community and in the lives of community members.

My field research in Sơn-Dương was conducted in the summer of 1987 under difficult circumstances. Although the U.S. war in Vietnam had ended twelve years earlier, tension and hostility lingered on both sides. The United States continued to maintain a trade embargo on Vietnam, had refused to normalize relations, and had exerted pressure on its allies and international organizations for widespread economic sanctions. As a researcher from the United States, I was viewed with suspicion by certain cadres within the community as well as by Vietnamese officials in Hanoi responsible for national domestic security. Vietnamese academic authorities were also cautious, although more understanding. Through the arrangements of Vietnamese social science authorities a member of the provincial Party leadership personally introduced me to Sơn-Dương Party leaders and informed them that my study had provincial authorization. Although I had visited the village earlier in the summer as a fictive
kinsman of Nguyễn Đắc Bằng, a relation structured by the use of kin terms common among unrelated Vietnamese, with this formal introduction I was able to gain access to a wider network of villagers, including the Party leaders. I selected most of my interlocutors through informal consultations with acquaintances and through my past research on the village. The interview sample included males and females of different class backgrounds, whose lives involved different degrees of political activism. Despite the hostility of one ranking Party member, the village leadership consented to all my interview requests. One Party leader was assigned to coordinate my research and to introduce me to the requested villagers in their homes. After an initial meeting or a formal interview, I visited many of my interviewees again informally, at times unexpectedly, for follow-up inquiries. The duration of my field research in 1987 was limited by national security officials as well as by the common practice among Vietnamese ethnologists and sociologists of spending no more than six weeks in any particular community at one time. I extended my research briefly to include a two-day research revisit to the village in the summer of 1988. In my three visits to Sơn-Dương in the late 1980s, relying primarily on the life-history approach, I interviewed in some depth sixteen mostly elderly villagers.

In the summer of 1998, I revisited Sơn-Dương in order to donate the royalties from the publication of my book Revolution in the Village to a worthy local cause and to learn what changes had taken place in the village over a decade of market-oriented reforms in Vietnam.

In 1997 the province of Vĩnh-Phú in which Sơn-Dương had been located was divided into Vĩnh-Phúc and Phú-Thọ, and Sơn-Dương now belonged to the latter. In the village I was startled by the profound crisis that had arisen between the local population and the commune administration. As a reflection of the magnitude of the crisis, between 1993 and 1998, under strong local social pressures, three Communist Party secretaries and three presidents of the People’s Committee had quickly succeeded one another. Relations between the local population and the government of Sơn-Dương reached a boiling point during my visit: local families were reportedly refusing to pay not only their irrigation fees but also commune taxes. These arrears had totaled US $18,000 for half a year. As a result, Sơn-Dương’s cumulative debt to the state irrigation authorities had spiraled to approximately US $15,000. Peasants reported that the flow of irrigation water to the commune had slowed significantly, causing them considerable hardship during the rice cultivation season. Nor, for half a year, had commune cadres received their salaries because of this politi-
cally rooted financial crisis. At a major meeting during which the Party secretary reviewed commune activities in the first half of 1998, one villager was reported to have asked publicly who had elected this political leader to a position of authority. About half of the local Communist Party members sided with the protesters in their prolonged confrontation with commune authorities. From the time I first visited Sơn-Dương in 1987, relations between the local population and the state seem to have undergone a fundamental transformation, one that paralleled the proliferation of village- and kinship-based local associations. Because Sơn-Dương was considered a political “hot spot” in 1998, my visit there was closely monitored by provincial authorities. I proceeded with formal and highly informative interviews on the village’s economy and society, while in informal conversations with a number of villagers being told in rich detail about local tensions. However, within a few days I became aware of the very close surveillance of my research in the village by provincial security agents. I was not allowed to take any picture in the village, not even of the village pagoda, despite the intervention of a major figure in Vietnamese academia in Hanoi. The local atmosphere in the summer of 1998 was clearly not conducive to an in-depth restudy of Sơn-Dương. I decided to end my research after one week, for continuing my research would have caused complications for my academic sponsor in Hanoi and led to unnecessary questions from the Vietnamese security authorities about my academic work.

In the summer of 2003 I discovered a number of French colonial archival documents about Sơn-Dương and its two neighboring villages of Dụng-Hiền and Thuỵ-Sơn in the Vietnamese national archives. Then in 2004, when relative calm had returned to Sơn-Dương, I returned for a restudy. By then, the district of Phong-Châu had been divided into the districts of Lâm-Thao and Phù-Ninh, and Sơn-Dương was made part of Lâm-Thao again.

Besides conducting in-depth interviews with numerous villagers from all walks of life, I also commissioned a survey of 321 households (29 percent) selected on the basis of a random probability sampling of 1,093 village households. All members of 38 of the selected households had already migrated elsewhere but still maintained their houses, land, and registration status as village residents. From their closest relatives in the village, we obtained the most basic information on the members of these households, such as name, age, relationship to the household head, dates of most recent departures from Sơn-Dương, and current place of residence. A full survey was conducted on the remaining 283 households. Quantitative survey
data provided a rich complement to the interview and archival materials, especially on village life under market-oriented reforms. The vivid narratives of elderly villagers bridged the different historical eras of twentieth-century Vietnam, spanning the transition from French colonialism to nationalistic socialism and global market participation. The significant people with whom they interacted ranged from the French colonial masters and the last generation of Vietnamese Confucian literati to the Marxist cadres of socialist formation and to capitalist entrepreneurs. I have used their narratives at some length to provide a detailed ethnographic portrait of village structure as it bears upon the major historical events of the past eight decades, especially since no nonfictive in-depth accounts were available on the structure of any Vietnamese community in the French colonial period.

Although shaped by the historically constituted context of the narration and inextricably linked to the narrator’s reconstruction of his self, the narrative of the major interlocutor (Nguyễn Đức Bằng) is substantiated by available archival and newspaper accounts, except for a small number of details that will be noted (see also Luong 1991; cf. Knudsen 1990). Other Sơn-Dương villagers related the events of their lives within this tightly knit community where their life histories are part of public knowledge. However, due to a sharp conceptual distinction between village members and outsiders, a few influential members of the Sơn-Dương community were concerned that villagers might relate politically sensitive developments to a researcher whom they considered a part of the alien outside world. In order to protect those narrators, I have not presented their stories in full. For the same reason, many interlocutors of the postcolonial period cannot be identified except in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

The following study has two basic goals. First, in examining the socioeconomic structure and historical events in a north Vietnamese village through eight decades of Western encounter, the study seeks to highlight the dynamics of a major revolution of our time. Given the research objective and the fieldwork constraints, the book does not attempt to provide a full ethnographic description of Sơn-Dương village. It is less concerned with the structure and events of a microtemporal order presented in standard ethnographies than with the interplay of tradition and events in historical time. In the metaphor of the well-known French historian Fernand Braudel, the book situates historical events—the surface ocean waves—in the major undercurrents of socioeconomic formations, more specifically, in terms of the encounter between Western colonialism and capitalism, on the one hand, and a Chinese-influenced indigenous system, on the other.
Second, since ethnohistorical and fieldwork data bear upon the debates on the dynamics of the Vietnamese revolution and market-oriented reforms, the study also seeks to refine theoretical models of modern revolutionary processes in agrarian societies—theoretical models that are firmly embedded in the major traditions of contemporary Western social theory represented by John S. Mill, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Ferdinand de Saussure. The following survey of these major theoretical traditions provides the background for my analysis of tradition and historical events in the 1925–2006 period in the village of Sơn-Dương in particular and in Vietnam in general—an analysis that is most critical of the Millean tradition of inquiry.

**Revolutionary Processes in Agrarian Societies: Theoretical Models of Structure and History**

In the Millean tradition of inquiry, structure is assumed to be derived from the goal-directed acts of self-interested individuals. The significance of structure is thus rendered peripheral in the analysis of historically embedded revolutionary processes and of human action in general. In the literature on revolution and agrarian unrest, the political scientist Samuel Popkin’s rational-choice model offers a good example of this theoretical framework (1979). The human act and historical events are examined not in systematic relation to the structure of the capitalist world system and the native sociocultural framework but primarily in terms of the logic of individual self-interest. In his study of the Vietnamese revolution, Popkin examines the behavior of the peasantry and the elite in their search for individual material gains. He emphatically rejects the view that modern agrarian movements involve defensive reactions to the violation of precapitalist normative structures by the colonial and capitalist order. In Popkin’s argument the incorporation of indigenous agriculture into the capitalistic world market, the establishment of the colonial regime, and the expansion of state power are not necessarily deleterious to peasants’ welfare. The single-stranded relations of the market actually free peasants from dependence on monopolistic local lords. According to Popkin, colonialism brings vital stability and an improved communication system that keeps prices from fluctuating widely and thus keeps peasants alive in times of local famine.

Along the same line of analysis, Popkin argues that modern revolutionary movements such as the Vietminh do not succeed because of the decay
of an old normative order. Rather, these movements succeed because, as political entrepreneurs, their leaders can offer peasants concrete welfare improvements and effective organization against marauding lords and notables. Popkin’s analysis of revolutionary movements develops as a direct corollary to Mancur Olson’s neoclassical thesis that “class-oriented action will not occur if the individuals that make up a class act rationally” (1965:105).

According to Olson, since the provision of collective good as by land reform benefits all the members of a group (this is, the peasant class), rational individuals will not incur the heavy cost of that collective good in order to further group interests unless there also exist selective incentives available only to active contributors to the collective cause. Popkin’s rational peasant actors are primarily projected as Hobbesian men who act in an environmental and sociocultural vacuum and who, beyond family circles, engage in a war of all against all for maximum personal gain. Underlying Popkin’s model of revolutionary processes and his analysis of the Vietnamese revolution is the tradition of Western thought that has dominated economics and shaped major theoretical endeavors in sociology (for example, Homans), political science (for example, Riker, Frohlich), and anthropology (for example, Malinowski, Barth).

In contrast, the Marxist tradition seeks to situate revolutionary movements and historical events in general within the structure of conflict-ridden class relations. The Marxist analyses of class relations and revolutionary dynamics in the past century were strengthened by the development of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-system theory, which seeks to situate them within a broader international context—the context of unequal exchange between the core and the periphery of the world capitalist system. A new phase of core-periphery relations emerged in the nineteenth century, when the different states within the capitalist core began to compete with one another on a global scale as they sought territorial expansion. The competition did not necessarily arise because of the immediate profitability of colonial conquests: it arose at least in part out of the concern of many states that they would be denied access to potential markets and resource bases in Asia and Africa (Murray 1980:10–15).

Instead of defining capitalism in terms of one particular method of labor control (wage labor), Wallerstein views capitalism as essentially involving “the maximization of surplus creation” (Wallerstein 1979: 285). Since wage labor is more costly in the capitalist core than in the periphery, and given the unequal exchange relations between the core and the periphery, the capitalist world system utilizes a variety of labor methods
in the periphery, including coercive labor, in order to maximize surplus appropriation. In the capitalist world system, the proletariat is either largely located in the periphery or composed of “ethnicities” originating in the periphery; the bourgeoisie is heavily concentrated in, although by no means restricted to, the core. Within the world-system framework, class conflict takes on an international dimension, and revolution is seen as originating in the periphery, where proletarian class interests emerge most clearly. As Wallerstein puts it, “The primary contradiction is between the interests organized and located in the core countries and their local allies on the one hand, and the majority of the population on the other. In point of fact then, an ‘anti-imperialist’ nationalist struggle is in fact a mode of expression of class interest” (Wallerstein 1979:200). In other words, ethnonationalism can serve the interests of the oppressed classes within the capitalist world system despite its frequent manipulation by an indigenous elite. On the relationship between class interest and ethnonationalism outside the capitalist core, Wallerstein suggests:

It is no accident that the great social revolutions of the twentieth century (the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban) have been at one and the same time “social” and “national.” To be “social,” they had to be “national,” whereas those “revolutions” which claimed to be “national” without being “social” (for example, that of the [Chinese] Kuomintang) could not in fact defend “national” interests…. The fundamental political reality of that [capitalist] world economy is a class struggle which however takes constantly changing forms: overt class consciousness versus ethno-national consciousness, classes within nations versus classes across nations. (Ibid.:230; see also Ngô-Vĩnh-Long 1978b)

Within the same Marxist framework, although he does not explicitly adopt Wallerstein’s key concepts of core and periphery, the sociologist Jeffery Paige examines in depth the greater historical probability of revolution outside the capitalist core, especially in areas of the underdeveloped world that export agricultural products:

The expansion of the [agricultural] export sectors led to vast population movements, including the international slave trade, massive appropriations of traditional landowners, the creation of armies of agricultural laborers, and the replacement of traditional communal social ties with commercial market relations. The new forms of export
agricultural organization created new social classes and destroyed old ones and introduced new patterns of class conflict. Conflict developed between the foreign owners of the new agricultural organizations and their wage laborers, between the new agrarian upper class and the old pre-industrial landlords it replaced, and between landlords converted into commercial entrepreneurs and their former tenants now bound by ties of wages and rent. The strength of colonial and imperial political controls long prevented the political expression of these conflicts, but with the decline of colonial power in the postwar era, the commercial export sectors of the underdeveloped world have become centers of revolutionary social movements. (Paige 1975:3)

Assuming inherent conflicts between agricultural producers and the dominant class, Paige attempts to construct an overall model of the forms that class conflict takes (Paige 1975; 1983). Paige deduces behavior patterns and the form of agrarian unrest from the income sources of the involved actors. More specifically, he proposes, on the one hand, that the economic base of the landed dominant class is narrower, more static, and less efficient than that of its commercial and industrial counterparts. The former’s economic weakness gives rise to zero-sum class conflict as well as to its tyrannical political control of the means of production (both land and labor). On the other hand, the broader, more dynamic and efficient capital base of the commercial or industrial upper class can expand nonproducers’ resources. This factor facilitates the adoption of more compromising solutions by the dominant class. In this context class conflict involves the economic distribution of goods and products rather than the political control of labor and land. Adopting Marx’s theoretical arguments in his analysis of the French peasantry (Marx 1963; cf. Mitrany 1951), Paige further hypothesizes that cultivators’ dependence on land as their main source of income gives rise to a conservative, competitive, and structurally dependent peasantry. In contrast, their dependence on wages would result in a more radical, solidary, and structurally interdependent cultivator class.

Based on the premise of inherent class conflict and with its focus on the structure of class relations at the expense of both individual choices and the native sociocultural universe, Paige’s model predicts that agrarian unrest will take the form of rebellion only when both cultivators and noncultivators derive their incomes from land, as is the case in north and central Vietnam. Furthermore,
a combination of non-cultivators dependent on income from land and cultivators dependent on income from wages leads to revolution. Such a combination of income sources is typical of sharecropping and migratory labor estate systems. In sharecropping systems [as in South Vietnam] the dominant ideology is likely to be Communist, while in migratory labor systems [for example, Kenya] the dominant ideology is likely to be nationalist. Revolutionary socialist movements are most likely in decentralized sharecropping systems, and revolutionary nationalist movements are most likely in colonial settler estate systems. (Paige 1975:71; also Paige 1983:706)

In contrast, although they have been influenced to varying degrees by the Marxist approach, anthropological analyses of agrarian revolutions and of historical events in general have paid closer attention to the dynamic interplay between capitalism and indigenous noncapitalist social formations as sociocultural systems (E. Wolf 1969; Smith 1984; see also James C. Scott 1976). For example, Carol Smith suggests that political unrest involves not necessarily and not only class conflict within the local system but a clash between Western capitalism as a sociocultural system and native organizational frameworks. In her examination of the ongoing Guatemalan revolution, Smith argues,

It cannot be accidental that wherever closed corporate peasant communities have formed, the social formations holding them have been plagued by the ‘agrarian problem’—peasantries that refuse to be easily proletarianized—as well as by countless peasant rebellions, control of state apparatus by powerful landed oligarchies, and persistent ethnic divisions that shape the way in which regional and national political processes operate.” (Smith 1984:195; cf. Luong 1985)

In James C. Scott’s moral-economy model, agrarian unrest is examined in terms of the reactive response of the peasantry in a precapitalist social formation to capitalism and colonialism. In the context of the world market and the colonial state, the subsistence ethic of the precapitalist order by which lords and the state are supposed to respect peasants’ right to subsistence in exchange for legitimacy is often violated. Given the peasants’ concern with subsistence and the precarious relations between nature and the production process, they are hypothesized to prefer a variable to a fixed tax and rent policy. Scott’s framework defines exploitation not merely in
terms of the amount of resources extracted, but in fact, more importantly, also in terms of the nature and timing of this extraction from the peasantry. The expansion of Western capitalism and the establishment of European colonies eventually lead to the violation of the subsistence ethic through the erosion of patron-client ties and the existing welfare mechanisms in the relation between cultivators and noncultivators. As a corollary, Scott suggests that peasant rebellions essentially involve a conception of social justice. Peasant movements are seen as quintessentially defensive reactions of a moral nature—defensive reactions against the violation of the subsistence ethic and the increasingly serious threat to their survival during subsistence crises. Under this threat and violation, any significant natural or human-induced disaster can spark agrarian unrest. The prominent role of third-world peasants in twentieth-century political movements, Scott argues, involves a dynamic interplay between a precapitalist sociocultural order, on the one hand, and colonialism and capitalism, on the other. Unrest is thus defined, within the Durkheimian tradition of social thought, in terms of a breakdown of the normative framework during a period of transition (cf. Gran 1975).

From a different analytical angle, while still situating modern anticolonial movements in the context of the structure and processes of Western colonial expansion, the political scientist Rupert Emerson deemphasizes the significance of class conflict:

Save in the sense that Western-inspired changes in the economic structure underlay much of the disruption of the older societies, it is doubtful that the economic aspects were as significant as the political and social in turning the new colonial elites to nationalism…. [The ample grounds for hostility to colonial economic systems, such as the favoring of metropolitan interests over indigenous enterprises] were not generally the original source from which the more basic hostility sprang…. The more fundamental elements were the sense of inferiority inherent in colonialism, the indignation aroused by determination of status on racial grounds, and the gnawing consciousness of being a second-class citizen in one’s own country. (Emerson 1960:54–55)

Emerson suggests two major conditions for the rise of nationalism in the colonial context: the disruption of the precolonial order and the emergence of a Westernized bourgeois elite—an elite who are particularly sensitive to the incongruity between Western egalitarian and democratic ideals and the colonial structure of racial and ethnic inequality.
In the first place, the greater the disruption of the old society under the impact of the intruding Western forces—assuming that the disruption takes the form of a development of modern enterprise and administration and not merely the suppression of the native population—the speedier and more complete the assertion of nationalism is likely to be. . . . The elements of . . . [the] population which have been most drastically divorced from the close-knit pattern of their traditional society are the most susceptible to the appeal of nationalism. (Ibid.: 44)

Emerson suggests that it is nationalism that serves as the major basis for both the emergence of anticolonial movements and the integration of the modern nation-state. If the colonial encounter initially provokes a xenophobic reaction on the part of the indigenous system, the anticolonial movements of a later stage tend to involve both a nationalist ideology and a progressive orientation (ibid.: 11). Emerson proposes that the nationalism emerging from colonial contexts has stronger democratic roots than the nationalism in comparable noncolonial societies for two reasons. First, the modern anticolonial and nationalist leadership comes not so much from the traditional elite but from the ranks of the Western-educated intelligentsia, whose world view is shaped, at least to a certain extent, by Western democratic ideals. Second, democratic emphases enable the anticolonial leadership to gain greater legitimacy and mass support (ibid.: 213–237).

According to Emerson, Marxism owes its appeal among the anticolonial leaders in the (former) colonies of European empires not to the inherent class conflict between workers and the owners of the means of production, but to the nationalist ideology onto which it is grafted. To the extent that Emerson’s thesis centers on the notion of an integrated normative order—an order that colonialism disrupts and nationalism serves to achieve—it is also under a Durkheimian influence.

On a general theoretical level both the Marxist and Durkheimian approaches stand in sharp contrast to J.S. Mill’s utilitarian framework in that they examine historical events and revolutionary dynamics in structural terms, either in terms of the structure of class relations or the disjuncture between an expanding Western capitalism and local indigenous systems. In this respect all the models in which the notion of structure constitutes a fundamental analytical concept are generally congruent with Fernand Braudel’s situation of historical events within deeper socioeconomic undercurrents. The critical difference among these models of the relationship of structure to historical events lies in the extent to which they pay attention to the structure of native categories. Paige’s model, for
example, focuses almost exclusively on the structure of class relations at the expense of the ideological dimensions of capitalism and indigenous noncapitalist formations. In contrast, within the Saussurean-Durkheimian tradition, Marshall Sahlins, for example, situates historical events in the conjuncture of different systems of meanings. In the case of the early period of contact between Westerners and the Hawaiian kingdom, he analyzes how the arrival of Captain Cook was metaphorized within the supposedly integrated Hawaiian scheme of conceptual categories (Captain Cook as the Hawaiian god Lono) and how the historically specific conjuncture of Western and Hawaiian systems shapes the latter through the mediation of events and practice (for example, the murder of Captain Cook in accordance with Hawaiian categories; see Sahlins 1981 and 1985). The theoretical issues emerging in the three major theoretical approaches to historical events constitute the background for the following analysis of tradition and history in the village of Sơn-Dương in the 1925–2006 period.

Part I of the present study examines in microscopic detail the interplay of anticolonial events in the 1884–1930 period and the colonial social structure in the village of Sơn-Dương and the district of Lâm-Thao. The second part of the book analyzes the rise of Marxist power and the socialist revolution in the village in the past eight decades. The third part of the book examines the dynamics of local economic, sociocultural, and political changes as Vietnam shifts from a command economy to an era of market-oriented reforms and global economic integration since the late 1980s. I argue that the events in Vietnam during the most violent phases of the Western colonial and capitalist encounter (1930–1975) cannot be fully understood by applying a narrow cost-benefit analysis to historical agents, as emphasized in Popkin’s model and the Millean tradition of inquiry. As emphasized respectively in Wallerstein’s work and the aforementioned anthropological analyses of agrarian unrest, those events should instead be situated both in the structure of Western capitalist imperialism and in the indigenous sociocultural framework—a framework in which the kinship-centered model of hierarchical relations exists in a dialectical tension with the collectivistic ideology. More specifically, the Vietnamese revolution is rooted in two sets of conditions of the native system. First are the fundamental inequality and contradictions in the relationship between the European metropolis and the capitalist core on the one hand and the colonies and the periphery of world capitalism on the other. It is a relation in which the racial diarchy of the colony stands in sharp contrast to the discourse of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” of the European metropolis. It is a system in which, at least in the perception of anticolonial leaders, the policy
of the colonial state is geared more often than not toward the process of capital accumulation by and for the capitalist core. Second, and equally significant, is the degree of divergence of local tradition from the practice of capitalist imperialism as well as the strength of this tradition in providing the ideological support and organizational resources for revolutionary movements. Against Paige’s analysis of the Vietnam case (Paige 1975 and 1983), I argue that, throughout the past century, the greater divergence of local tradition in northern and central Vietnam from the imperialist capitalist framework accounts both for the generally greater intensity of armed unrest against French and American intervention and for the greater receptivity to a mild form of collectivism there than in southern Vietnam. In other words, the greater degree of armed unrest and receptivity to collectivism relate to the greater strength of both the collectivistic ideology and the kinship-centered model of hierarchical relations in the local tradition of the center and the north. I suggest that these forces also underlie the trajectory of Sơn-Dương villagers’ participation in the market economy and their responses to many events in the village in the two decades under market-oriented reforms in Vietnam. In sum, I suggest that the structures of both the capitalist system and the indigenous social formation have powerfully shaped historical events in Vietnam in the past century. And these structures are in turn themselves shaped by historical events.