

CHAPTER 2

Mekong Delta Village in Can Tho, Vietnam

FUJIKURA Tetsuro

Restricted Agricultural Environment and Easy Access to Industry

Although Can Tho is the most urbanized and industrialized municipality in the Mekong Delta region, agriculture still has a considerable presence there. The outstanding presence of agriculture in Can Tho is a gift from the fertile soil of the Hau River, a distributary of the Mekong River. However, as Can Tho is located in the tide-flooded zone of the Mekong Basin (Briesen and Vo 2021: 28), the flooding process of the river not only benefits rural livelihoods but also brings challenges and disasters to the locals. For example, the city annually suffers from flooding due to the mixed effect of seasonal rising waters and tides from July to November.

The surveyed village is about 15 kilometers northwest of Can Tho's city center. It belongs to the O Mon district. To be accurate, the village has been classified as an urban area with other neighboring villages since 2004. Nevertheless, when I conducted the first survey in 2012, due to the predominant agricultural landscape and the fact that nine out of ten households were classified by the local administration as farming households, I considered this surveyed site a rural entity.

The village is located on the floodplain of the Hau River, approximately 8 kilometers from the riverbank. In general, the inundation depth in this area is even shallower than that in the upper area of the city. However, as FIG.1.2 illustrates, the village is in a hollow with flooding from 0.75 to 1.00 meter. This hydrological environment restricts the village's agricultural potential. In fact, as of 2012, some farmers suffered from the withering of perennial plants, such as fruit trees, due to flooding. Moreover, the wet conditions of the rice fields made it challenging to use harvesters.

On the other hand, the village has an advantage regarding road access. The main road connects with the national road 2.5 kilometres from the village center. The national road allows villagers, especially the younger generation, to access non-agricultural employment in the city's largest industrial zone, Tra Noc Industrial Park, established in 2005.

Socio-economic Situation as of 2012

The survey in 2012 interviewed about 105 household heads in a subdivision of the village. The following is abstracted from the analysis published in Fujikura (2013). Among households surveyed, the average land holding was 0.56 hectares, and nearly half had less than 0.5 hectares for cultivation. Taking the household size, 4.5 people per household on average, into account, its scale had reached its limits in terms of self-sufficiency. The small farming scale was related to the local custom of inheritance of land. Since land was distributed equally to household members of the next generation, demographic expansion would directly impact the land scale in the future. As for household heads born in the village, while their parents had held 1.17 hectares of land on average, they inherited no

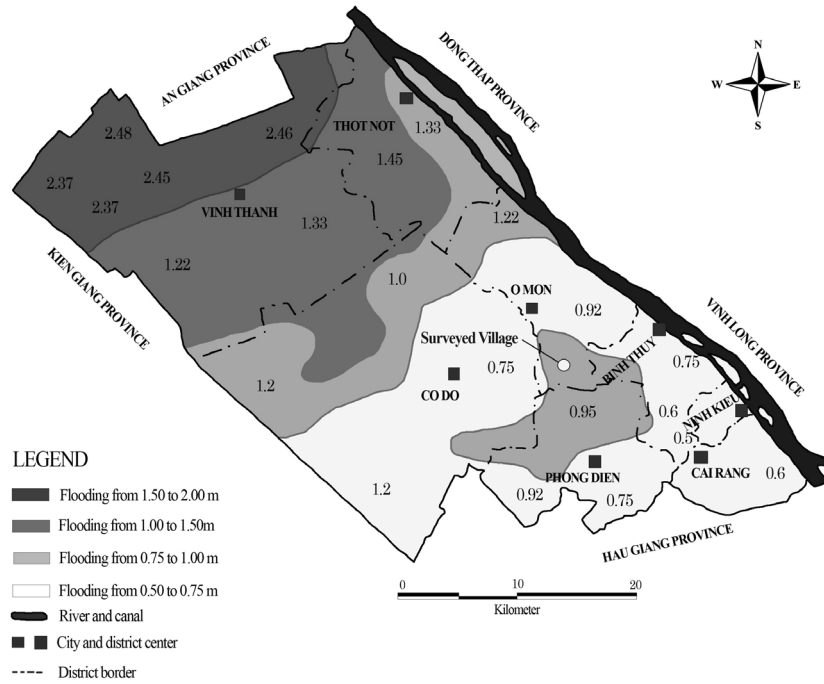


FIG. 2.1 Inundation map in Can Tho city

Source: Pham 2011: 67 (The location of the surveyed village is pointed out on the map by the author)

more than 0.35 hectares on average. Adding the spouse's land and, in some cases, purchased land to that, the size of farming land finally had reached its size at the time of the survey.

Almost eight out of ten households surveyed engaged in farming. Wet rice cultivation was the main activity. The estimated annual income from rice cultivation was about 10% less (29.4 million VND) than that of wage labor. As mentioned above, the hydrological environment restricted agricultural development. Flooding harms perennial plants, and soggy fields prevent the villagers from using heavy machinery, such as combine harvesters, owing to the fear of sinking due to the weight. In fact, except for tillage, almost all cultivation processes were conducted manually. These manual processes aggravate agricultural productivity in the conditions of labor shortage. The costliest harvesting was subcontracted to ethnic Khmer seasonal migrants to offset the shortage caused by the younger generation's non-agrarian employment. The estimated wage standard for these manual workers exceeded the subcontract fee for machinery harvesting.

In addition, the non-agrarian activities of villagers, except wage labor, only supplemented agricultural income. Only 25 out of 105 households surveyed were involved in non-agrarian activities, such as groceries, small eateries, barbers and motorbike repairs. Among those, 21 households conducted them only as a supplement to their main economic activities. Of the other four households, only one specialized in the local duck transport business, which exceeded other farming households' average income.

Given the village's limited potential, wage labor played the most significant role in the household economy. In many cases, household heads engaged in agriculture. Therefore, the local administration, which classified households by their heads' occupation, acknowledged that most households in the village were farming. However, 145 out of a total of 250 members of households surveyed who had

jobs were involved in wage labor, particularly factory work in a nearby industrial park (TABLE 2.1). Almost nine out of ten young people aged 15 to 34 were wage workers, and they commuted from their homes to factories. Their average wage was about 10% more than the average household income of rice cultivation. In more than half of the households, income from non-agricultural activities exceeded that from agricultural ones. Those households' average income was much more than those of the other types of households and twice that of farming households with only agricultural income (TABLE 2.2).

TABLE 2.1 Wage employment of household members

	Number of people	Average age	Average school years	Average monthly income (VND)
Factory Worker	96	27.2	9.2	3,150,284
Plasterer	12	35.2	5.9	2,342,083
Agricultural Labourer	10	40.6	5.1	682,492
Rural Cadre	6	48.8	10.5	1,170,000
Car Driver	3	24.0	10.3	3,666,667
Transportation Subcontractor	3	36.3	4.7	2,000,000
Accountant	2	24.0	15.5	3,400,000
School Teacher	2	34.5	14.5	3,650,000
Security Guard	2	54.5	7.5	1,950,000
Vehicle Mechanic	1	29.0	7.0	1,500,000
Other Mechanic	1	29.0	0.0	2,650,000
Military	1	21.0	16.0	2,000,000
Bank Subcontractor*	1	55.0	11.0	300,000
Other Informal Worker	5	42.2	5.4	1,808,000
Total	145	31.0	8.6	2,722,300

Source: Compiled by the author

Note: *Collecting interest on bank loans in rural areas

TABLE 2.2 Number of households by farm type and

	Number of households	Average annual income (VND)
Total	105	79,890,027
Non-Farming household	17	45,983,647
Farming household	88	86,440,123
- only with agricultural income	(10)	42,242,658
- with non-agricultural income: A*	(15)	65,333,061
- with non-agricultural income: B*	(61)	100,529,644
- n.a.	(2)	-

Source: Compiled by the author

Note: *Type A: Income from farming exceeds that from non-farming

*Type B: Income from non-farming exceeds that from farming

Considering the de-agrarianization process in employment, land tenure has become a less critical factor in determining household income. Farming landholding with less potential is expected to generate only limited extra income. In contrast, the demographic structure of households can be a more critical factor than land tenure. The more people in a household get to a factory, the more income they can get. However, the income analysis at the time of the survey indicates that the landholding of households from which wage workers came was reflected in their wage levels through education levels

(TABLE 2.3). Though the agricultural environment in the village was restricted, land-holding disparities of the former generation indirectly influenced the latter generation's employment and income.

TABLE 2.3 Household land tenure, average school years, and average monthly income of wage workers

Class of land tenure (ha)	Number of wage workers	Average school years	Average monthly income (VND)
0.00	24	6.3	2,147,727
0.01~0.50	45	7.8	2,519,815
0.51~1.00	44	9.5	2,741,977
1.01~1.50	30	10.0	3,300,664
1.51~	2	12.0	4,500,000
Total	145	9.1	3,042,037

Source: Compiled by the author

To summarize this section, as of 2012, none of the actors involved in rural development succeeded in creating agricultural opportunities for the villagers surveyed. On the other hand, top-down industrialization, such as industrial park construction, offered non-agricultural opportunities for them. The massive levels of factory employment in the early 2000s provided an escape route from the agricultural development limit under demographic pressure within the village. Generally speaking, agriculture in the Mekong Delta region experienced the initial wave of re-commercialization in the 1990s after *Đổi Mới* (renovation) in the late 1980s and has been further progressing since the 2000s. However, the village surveyed entered the de-agrarianization process without experiencing agricultural intensification in the time of commercialization. Regarding present income standards, these non-agrarian opportunities favored more affluent households in terms of land tenure.

Drastic Change Post COVID-19

Revisiting research has been conducted since 2023 to analyze the ten-year transformation of the surveyed village. Its landscape has changed dramatically. In 2012, the author reached the surveyed village along a bypass with rice fields on both sides. Now there are rows of buildings, such as car repair shops, restaurants, and wholesalers. It is difficult to see any rice fields from the window of a car on the road. Also, alongside the local road in the village, the number of small shops has increased. Around the village, lots of former rice fields have been turned over to the production of perennial plants, particularly durian trees. Vietnam has been experiencing a durian boom for a few years. According to the head of the village, illicit conversion from rice to fruit trees is rampant. Relatively affluent households build concrete-enclosed embankments to plant durians.

Regarding the agricultural environment, several years ago, the village leader took the initiative to gather money and build sluice gates to control the waters during the flood season. This encouraged mechanization and eliminated the need for manual rice harvest labor. This happened not just in the village but throughout the surrounding area. As an agricultural expert of local administration says, agricultural migrant workers during rice harvest season no longer exist.

However, despite the gates, some farming fields remain unsuitable for fruit cultivation because of floods, and the situation is said to be worse due to the current local urbanization and durian boom. One villager attributes the undrained water in his land to concrete-enclosing in residential areas and fruit fields. Without any incentives to invest, he is abandoning his farmland. Also, in other areas of the Mekong Delta, the development of commercialization in agriculture benefits those who can afford additional investment while excluding others who are not so affluent from agriculture or forcing high-risk modes of agriculture on them. In another survey in Tien Giang province, we saw that dragon fruit planting, which prefers roadside sites, makes rice cultivation surrounded by the fruit fields impossible.

On the other hand, the villagers surveyed are facing massive concerns. One is the city's large-scale Can Tho Western Belt Road Project, which the City People's Committee approved in 2021. The road is planned to connect Can Tho with another regional city, Long Xuyen, as an alternative to the current road, which is plagued by traffic congestion. The high-standard four-lane road is being built across the middle of farmland in rural areas of the city, and it's already reached the surveyed village (FIG. 2.2). It's said that the road project will affect 130 out of about 4,500 households.



FIG. 2.2 Road Construction Site in the Surveyed Village

Source: Photo taken by the author in December 2024

Another significant concern is a new commercial center project, which will require 500 hectares of land and influence at least 2,853 households (64% of the total). As a villager says, the project was previously for an industrial park, but the plan was changed a few times, and such uncertainty has made the villagers more concerned.

An economic division officer of O Mon district, which the surveyed village belongs to, explains that one of the goals of the 500-hectare project is to accelerate the de-agrarian process in the district's lowest commercialized and industrialized areas. This administrator also says it is part of a plan to get 27,000 local people, including the surveyed village residents, out of farming. The land acquisition is planned to involve the construction of a new resettlement area with urbanized infrastructure. In contrast, one of the village leaders explains that the villagers worry about whether they can adapt to a new lifestyle there. There would be neither gardens nor fields to cultivate.

According to the village leaders, since the road project began, affluent residents in the city's urban center have purchased land in the village. It is believed that half of their intention is speculation,

and the other is to invest in opening shops or such like in the village. On the villagers' side, one of their intentions in selling their land is to cope with farming-related inconveniences caused by the road construction. As a result, the land price has been skyrocketing for four or five years. A village leader points out that the price of land alongside roads is four or five times higher than ten years ago.

Moreover, the village's demographics suggest increased social mobilization, although more concise research is needed. In 2012, the village had 18,800 people and 3,812 households. As of 2023, the population has decreased to 16,997 people, while the number of households has increased to 4,480. The head of the village considers the background of these opposite-directed changes as follows: even amid the overall population outflow, there has been an increase in young people who moved out of the village and then returned to the surveyed village after marriage, and in people who purchase land in the village for commercial purposes and settle there. Although these inflows do not balance the population because their household sizes are small, they contribute to the increase in the number of households. The district's officer also points out the inflow of migrants pulled by commercial and labor opportunities in the area, which has the industrial park and the expanding commercial area surrounding it. This officer expresses the difficulty of administrative observation of residents, which has become increasingly complicated.

Authoritarian Solution to Rural Transformation

As discussed in the section summarizing the 2012 survey, the village's agricultural development bottleneck was resolved with nearby top-down industrialization without agricultural intensification. Although the capital accumulation background for high-cost farming after the COVID-19 pandemic, such as durian planting, has not yet been researched, as for households interviewed in 2012, their agricultural capital accumulation was insignificant. In 2012, most household economies already depended on non-agrarian income, particularly from factory work.

The fact that the road project is being constructed through the village surveyed is a coincidence. Nevertheless, road construction has caused a surge in commercial demand for land and skyrocketed land prices. As in other areas in Southeast Asian countries, such as in this paper's northern Thailand case, non-agrarian land use demand can prevent local people from exploiting rural resources. Moreover, in the case of the village in this chapter, the planned commercial center threatens the very existence of the village. Local government officials have decided to remove people from their farming lands through a resettlement scheme.

From the mid-2000s to the 2010s, industrialization provided rural people with employment opportunities. However, at least in the surveyed village, it merely offered an escape route from rural areas where population pressures had narrowed livelihood opportunities rather than diversifying them for villagers. Nevertheless, villagers could continue to hold their land to hedge some kind of risk.

On the other hand, what the people of the surveyed village are currently facing is leading to completely removing them from agricultural land use. Even though policymakers can explain that the planned resettlement project will provide people with abundant commercial or employment opportunities, opportunities do not always accompany certainty. To consider issues of knowledge, skills,

age, family composition, life stage, etc., it is unclear whether the opportunities that are supposed to be offered to resettled people of all ages would be flexible enough to be taken advantage of, or whether they would lead to improved living standards. These uncertainties and equivocality provoke people's concerns. The impoverishment of former rural people after they could not effectively use compensation for land acquisition is reported across the country. These reports indicate that exploiting opportunities requires appropriate experience, knowledge, skill, and social network. Therefore, the development policy accompanying the removal of people must face even more challenges. It offers people no opportunities and only delivers risks caused by losing farmland.

I refer to this case in the Mekong Delta as the authoritarian solution to rural transformation. It results from a mixture of strong state initiatives over rural development with restricted agricultural potential and easy access to commercial and industrial areas. The road project is in the land acquisition process, and the commercial center project will be in the coming years. However, with land prices soaring, acquiring land from farmers will be arduous. Conflict between the state and the villagers is likely to erupt, and rebuilding the villagers' lives will remain challenging for both sides. If rural people are removed from their agricultural environments, policy challenges would become increasingly similar to urban policies.

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