



The social relations of catfish production in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The growth of intensive export-oriented *Pangasius* catfish production in Vietnam's Mekong Delta is unparalleled in terms of rapidity and scale by any other agricultural sector, with production climbing from a low base to more than 1 million tons in a single decade. This paper examines the effects of this remarkable change on the rural class structure in locations where catfish farming has boomed, and analyses the role of local state-society relations in mediating outcomes resulting from the integration of local actors into the global value chain. We conclude that private economic activity is deeply embedded in informal relations with the state bureaucracy in Vietnam, with the result that the expansion of catfish aquaculture has generally acted to reproduce and entrench existing class relations rather leading to a radical reconfiguration of the rural class structure.

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1. Introduction

The rise of intensive export-oriented *Pangasius* catfish production in Vietnam's Mekong Delta has been virtually unparalleled by any other agricultural export crop in any other location in terms of sheer rapidity and scale. Between 1997 and 2007 output of *Pangasius*, which had previously been cultured mostly for local or subsistence consumption, increased 45-fold by volume and 55-fold in export value (Dung, 2008). Production estimates for 2008 suggest that the value of Vietnamese *Pangasius* exports is likely to have matched or exceeded those for Vietnamese rice, coffee and shrimp (Dung, 2008; FAO, 2009). Almost 90% of this expansion has occurred in just 5 years between 2003 and 2008. Production (which is confined to nine adjoining Delta provinces and most heavily concentrated in three – An Giang, Can Tho, and Dong Thap) now approaches the total global output of farmed salmon. Vietnam has become the third largest producer of farmed aquatic products in the world and reports the second fastest growth rate in aquaculture output of any country (FAO, 2007). *Pangasius* has been a major contributor to this growth, accounting for approximately one third of national aquaculture output, and half that of the Mekong Delta (Loc et al., 2009).

Pangasius shares many features with the Southeast Asian 'boom crops' analysed by Hall et al. (2011) and Hall (2003). Much like shrimp and Vietnamese coffee, *Pangasius* has emerged in response to the concurrence of technological innovation and growing mar-

ket demand, has provided market entrants with very large returns comparative to alternative crops, has brought about long lasting transformations in land use, has proven vulnerable to the capriciousness of international commodity markets, and has made significant contributions to foreign exchange revenues. Booms in non-traditional agricultural exports, 'destined for affluent capitalist markets' have often caused 'rural economy and society' to become 'radically restructured' (Murray, 2001, p. 136). For Murray, writing of the growth in exports of exotic fruits and vegetables from the Pacific Islands, this has meant that 'although some material benefits are visible... smaller growers have found it difficult to survive', and has resulted in a 'concentration of leaseholds in the hands of a number of more successful growers'. This pattern, although common (see for instance Gwynne (1999) in relation to Chilean fruit exports and Fold and Gough (2008) for pineapple growers in Ghana), is by no means inevitable: the nature of agrarian questions being highly dependent on the vagaries of historical contingencies and local settings, and the manner of their resolution thus subject to potentially almost endless variation (see, for instance, Friedman, 1978). Even across different locations in Vietnam itself, transitions from collective to private and peasant to capitalist agriculture have been characterised by both diverging and overlapping features, with correspondingly diverse implications for differentiation and class relations (c.f. Sikor, 2001; Adger, 1999; Luong and Unger, 1998; Trung, 2003).

Despite its significance on variety of fronts, the rapidity of the *Pangasius* boom means that it remained poorly documented until very recently aside from the seafood trade press and Vietnamese academic literature, with the majority of other coverage focussed on technical and, to a lesser extent, economic issues. Much less

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Table 1
Location, type and number of informants.

Location		Informant category						Total
Province	District	Hatchery	Nursery	Growout farm	Processor	Seed trader	Government official ^a	
Dong Thap	Cao Lanh	2	8	4	–	–	1	15
	Hong Ngu	15	3	–	–	–	1	19
An Giang	Tan Chau	8	4	–	–	1	3	16
	Long Xuyen	2	3	6	1	–	2	14
	Chau Thanh	–	4	7	–	–	2	13
Can Tho	Thot Not	1	2	16	–	–	1	20
	Vinh Thanh	1	1	–	–	–	1	3
Total		29	25	33	1	1	11	100

^a District division and provincial Department of Fisheries/Department of Agriculture and Rural Development officers, Commune People's Committee officials.

attention has been paid to the broader political economic context that shaped the industry's development (although see Bush and Duijf, 2011; Loc et al., 2009; Sinh, 2007 for recent exceptions), and empirically based accounts of the changes experienced by those actors engaged in or affected by the industry have been almost completely lacking. Moreover, whilst there is a wealth of academic literature addressing various aspects of agrarian change in Vietnam post *doi moi* (see for example Kerkvliet and Porter, 1995; Boselie, 2002; Yamazaki, 2004), much of this omits attention to the issue of how micro level state-society relations have shaped development.¹ This paper therefore aims to furnish a more comprehensive history of this extremely significant commodity production system, to unpack its workings and implications in somewhat 'thicker' terms than are commonly to be found elsewhere in the literature, and to locate this work within the wider discourse on agrarian change.

The paper is divided into a further seven sections. Firstly, it details the circumstances under which the research took place and their bearing on the data generated. Secondly, it outlines a general history of *Pangasius* culture in Vietnam from its origins to the present day. Thirdly, it describes material features of intensive *Pangasius* growout which affect its production economics and, consequently, its social characteristics. Fourthly, it examines the social and economic characteristics of those who engage in the activity based on an assessment of farm ownership disaggregated by size of landholding. The fifth and sixth sections extend this analysis to unpack how social capital inhering in various networks and relationships shapes outcomes for those engaged in catfish production, and explores how access to flows of benefits accruing from resources including land, credit and extension services is mediated by these social relations. The final section synthesises findings from preceding sections and addresses their broader implications.

2. Research methodology

Primary research that informs this paper was collected over a 3 month period in late 2008 during 5 week-long field visits to the three most important catfish producing provinces in the Mekong Delta; Dong Thap, An Giang, and Can Tho. This effort was carried out as part of a research project investigating issues affecting the quality of *Pangasius* catfish seed (the juvenile fish used to stock growout operations). The scope of this work was primarily technical in nature, and dealt mainly with issues pertaining to hatchery, nursery and growout farm management practices, and producer and user perceptions of *Pangasius* seed quality. Supplementary investigations into agrarian change associated with development of the catfish industry form the basis of this paper. Thus, of the 100 interviews listed in Table 1 below, it is primarily the 33 relat-

ing to growout farms which inform this paper, although relevant material collected during interviews with the other actors listed is also drawn upon.

Scott et al. (2006), reporting on their experiences as foreign researchers attempting to conduct qualitative social science fieldwork in Vietnam, note that 'despite our intentions, restrictions [imposed by local cadres] on time and the nature of our research activities in communities meant that our original research strategy and methods had to be adapted' (p. 31). This observation matches closely the experience of conducting the present study, during which the highly sensitive and politicised climate we encountered and the extent of state bureaucratic control extended over the research activities placed limits and boundaries, explicit and inferred, on topics of conversation which could be productively explored with respondents. This milieu generates 'a tendency in Vietnam for the positivist paradigm to dominate empirical research design and practice, as reflected in a bias toward 'apolitical' quantitative methods' (Scott et al., 2006, p. 31). Complying with these expectations and constraints therefore made it necessary to adopt a somewhat more structured interview format and less flexible approach to informant selection than was initially intended. Two major surveys of the status of *Pangasius* production in the Delta were also conducted in 2008 (Lam et al., 2009; Sinh and Hien, 2010) and results from these are drawn on in subsequent sections of this paper for the depth of complementary quantitative data that they add to the principally qualitative information generated by the study reported here.

3. A brief history of *Pangasius* culture in Vietnam

The Pangasiid catfish *Pangasius bocourti* (*ca basa* in Vietnamese) and *Pangasianodon hypophthalmus* (*ca tra*) have been farmed in the Mekong Delta since the 1960's. Their culture was originally reliant on wild fry harvested during May/June in the specialised 'bagnet' fishery on the Hau and Tien branches of the Mekong River in Cambodia and in the Vietnamese provinces of An Giang and Dong Thap (Van Zalinge et al., 2002). A north to south cross-border trade in wild seed developed as inhabitants of several communes along the two rivers close to the Vietnamese side of the border developed specialised nursing techniques for rearing wild riverine seed in ponds. Successful techniques for the artificial propagation of *basa* were developed in 1996 through a European Commission funded research project carried out through a partnership between Can Tho University, AGIFISH (a provincial state owned enterprise in An Giang), and the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (Phuong and Oanh, 2010; IRD, 2000). The supply of privately produced *Pangasius* seed became established in 1998 after existing nursery operators paid AGIFISH staff to work as unofficial consultants, allowing them to quickly adopt hatchery-based spawning techniques (Belton et al., 2008). This proved

¹ Lutterell (2001) and Trang (2010) offer notable exceptions to this observation.

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