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Dynamics of social inequality in Vietnam

- Philip Taylor, ed. 2004. *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 392 pp., ISBN 981-230-275-1 (soft cover) 981-230-254-9 (hard cover)

Phuong An Nguyen

After nearly two decades of reform, Vietnam today enjoys relatively fast and steady economic growth. Increasingly liberal social, cultural, and economic environments are conducive to integration into the world economy, encourage foreign direct investment, and allow citizens to move both within and beyond national borders. All induce further economic growth and improvement in the Vietnamese standard of living. However, an apparent, less-desired effect of the market economy in Vietnam has been social inequality, which is visibly on the rise but has been partially overlooked by social scientists and insufficiently addressed by the socialist state and aid agencies.

Philip Taylor's edited volume *Social Inequality in Vietnam and the Challenges to Reform* thus provides insightful reading, particularly as it offers viewpoints from both local Vietnamese and overseas scholars. Authors of the 11 chapters cover most aspects of social inequality, from the urban-rural divide and inter-ethnic and gender inequalities to inequality among social classes. Many of these issues have been discussed before, but only incompletely and from the perspectives of governmental institutions and international agencies whose work focuses on 'development'.

Following Philip Taylor's introductory chapter, which provides an excellent overview of social inequalities, the first two chapters address the political and economic aspects of Vietnam's reform process. Vo Tri Thanh and Pham Hoang Ha's chapter serves as background reading for what follows, while David Koh's analysis of Vietnam's recent political developments pres-

ents considered thought on the future of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) given its position as the sole political party. It is not a new discovery that political dynamics affect social inequality and, conversely, that social inequality can challenge and even topple political systems. But Koh demonstrates how an awareness of this dynamic has been driving the VCP leadership to improve the efficiency and accountability of the party and its top-ranking personnel in order to satisfy popular demands for good governance and consolidate the regime's legitimacy. At the same time, as governance is increasingly meritocratised, political capital will gradually lose its value, especially in enabling people to attain elite jobs, tap into limited resources and accumulate power and wealth. However, as Jee Young Kim indicates later in her chapter, under the current conditions of the market economy in Vietnam, it is not yet clear whether social, political or human capital will be the most important in enabling people to gain opportunities. In a chapter focusing on a small ethnic Muong village, Tran Thi Thu Trang asserts that those who possess social and political power continue to excel economically, widening the economic gap among villagers.

Other chapters collectively proffer a multifaceted depiction of issues and realities of social differentiation and disparities among social groups and across regions and locales. Steffanie Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen demonstrate that despite recent poverty reduction programmes, the disparities between rural and urban, lowland and upland areas, between ethnic groups, and between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors have all increased. Nonetheless, while socio-economic differentiation can potentially cause conflict between regions and

between ethnic groups, it opens up opportunities for increased inter-regional interactions (for example, through migration) and development initiatives.

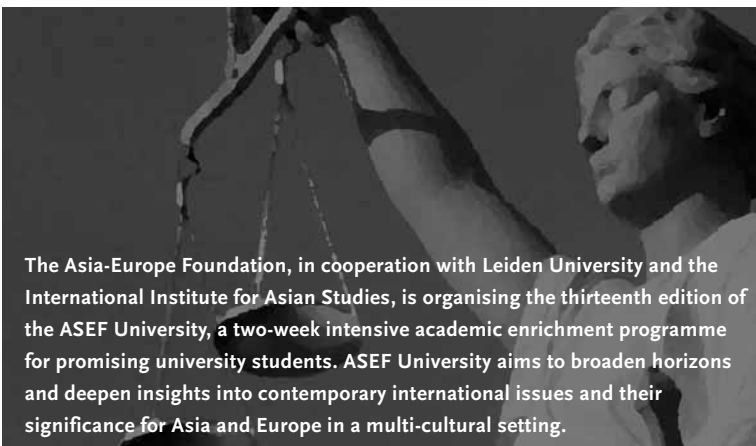
Vu Quoc Ngu and Philip Taylor draw attention to institutional interventions and local people's actions to redress specific aspects of inequality. Be it the improvement of living conditions, educational attainment, or access to land and infrastructure, state policies and development agencies do not always bring the intended results. Often, local people's actions and initiatives are more effective. Underlying this is the problem of assumption: state and development agencies assume a loose definition of 'poverty' and impose poverty reduction policies that do not always suit local circumstances. A lack of connection to a locality in formulating and implementing policies, exacerbated by poor performance and corruption on the part of local officials, might result in a lack of support, discontent and even violent protests from local residents, as Nguyen Van Suu demonstrates in his chapter. Even in contemporary literature, the gap between agents of development and their ideals on the one hand and realities of peasant life on the other are clearly evident. Montira Rato argues that the reason for this gap is that writers are often urban-based, middle-class and detached from the peasant way of life.

Another form of social inequality in present-day market-oriented Vietnam is unequal access to consumption and recreation, which express aspirations for higher social status and confirm its attainment. The two chapters by Nghiem Lien Huong and Catherine Earl, respectively, demonstrate that whether it is rural young women drawn to Hanoi to work in garment factories or educated migrant women in Ho Chi Minh City, they all have in common a liking for fashionable clothes, cosmetics, and a desire for leisurely urban lifestyles. Created by the popular media, the image of the urban woman who can afford recreation and travel is both attractive and impressive; hence many women and/or their families are prepared to put their resources into attaining and showing it off.

Although the uneven and inconsistent use of section headings throughout this volume gives it the appearance of a rather rushed compilation of presentations straight from the 2003 Vietnam Update conference, this collection of papers makes for a useful and stimulating read for researchers and anyone interested in present-day Vietnam. Significantly, it also calls attention to the need for further, more coherent and comprehensive research on the dynamics of social inequality and consequent social phenomena, such as class formation, in a globalising Vietnam. ◀

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