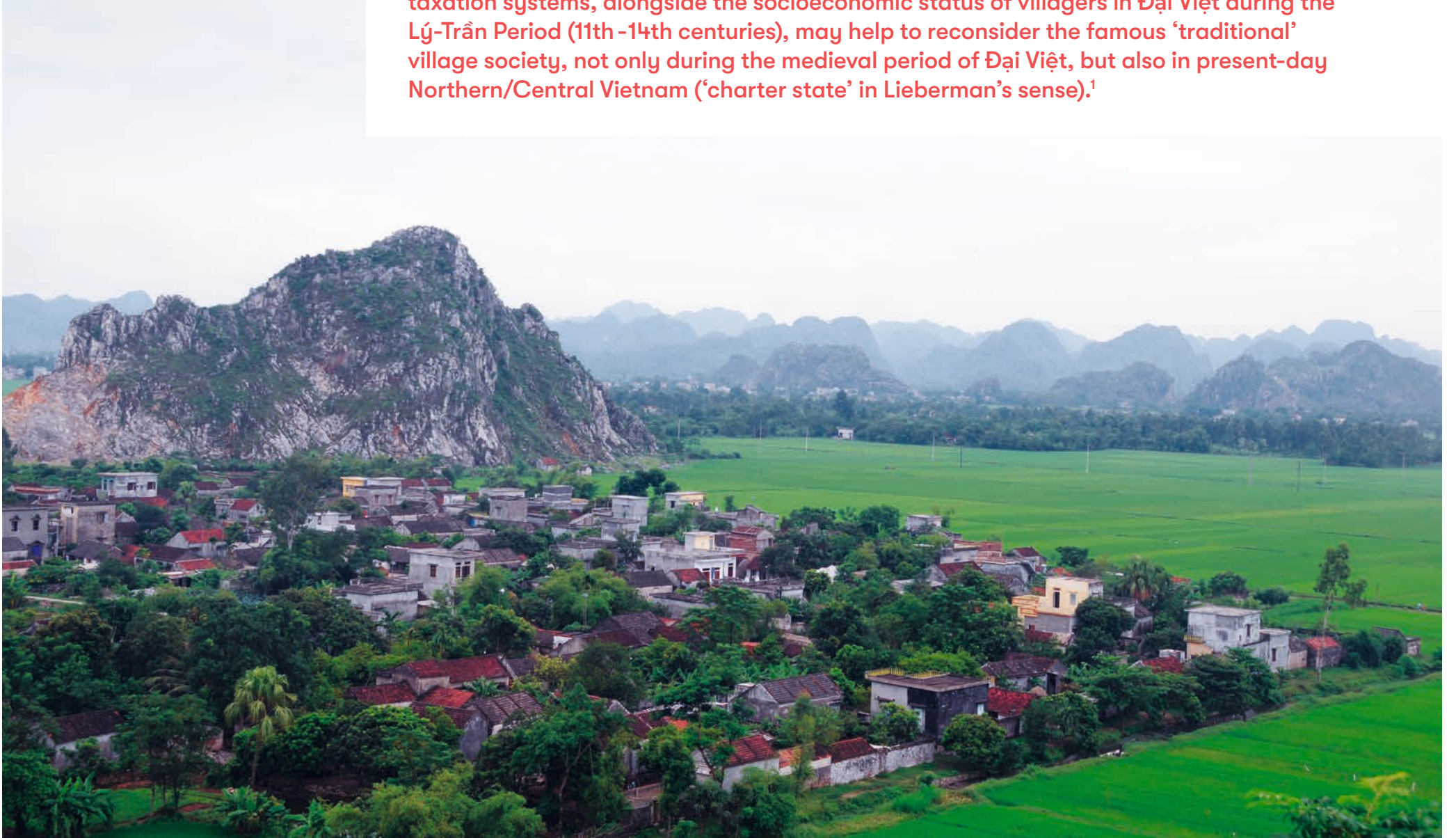


# Land categories and taxation systems in Đại Việt (11th-14th centuries)

Momoki Shiro

Reexamining land categories (such as ‘public’ and ‘private’ paddy fields) and their related taxation systems, alongside the socioeconomic status of villagers in Đại Việt during the Lý-Trần Period (11th-14th centuries), may help to reconsider the famous ‘traditional’ village society, not only during the medieval period of Đại Việt, but also in present-day Northern/Central Vietnam (‘charter state’ in Lieberman’s sense).<sup>1</sup>



A village in Ninh Binh Province (photo: Momoki Shiro)

## A new understanding of ‘public’ and ‘private’ lands

The ‘traditional’ village in present-day Northern/Central Vietnam is famous for its collective character, accompanied by a system of communal land: *công điền* [public paddy field] and *quan điền* [government paddy field]. Because it often played a crucial role in both anti-colonial resistance and socialist revolution, the traditional village has attracted many sociologists and historians in the world. It is widely believed that the communal land was formed in a remote past and that it survived throughout the period of Chinese domination (111 BC- 938 AD), from the Han to the Tang. However, the records of *công điền* and *quan điền* in the sources of the Lý-Trần period (approx. 1000-1400 AD), including

*quan điền* mentioned in later-Trần inscriptions (1407-1413), do not appear to be referring to paddy fields possessed by collective villages.

Previous studies should have paid more attention to commoners’ fields [*dân điền*], which occasionally appear in Trần inscriptions and annals. In China, after the Tang Dynasty (618-907), commoners’ fields were categorized as private fields. However, it is quite likely that Đại Việt before the end of the Trần period had a different system which was rather similar to that of the medieval Kingdom of Koryŏ (918-1392) in Korea, and partly to that of Japan after the decline of the Tang-modeled *ritsuryō* system. In Koryŏ, commoners’ land (for which farmers had to pay rent to the state) formed a part of public land along with plots under the direct control of the state or administrative offices. Private land was also

under the ownership (often nominal) of the state, but the right of collecting rent was conferred to officials, soldiers, or temples. Here, the opposition between public and private did not concern ownership, but a taxation structure. In Korea, commoners’ land became regarded as private land only in the 18th century – under the Yi Dynasty (Chosŏn Kingdom) – as the social rights of commoners were strengthened.

In the case of Đại Việt, however, it appears that commoners’ land was already categorized as private land by the end of the Trần period. In 1398, according to *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* [Complete Annals of Đại Việt], Emperor Hồ Quý Ly ordered people to declare their land ownership to the local authority; land that was not claimed was confiscated as public land. People’s land became private

property, as was the case in China at that time. Nevertheless, only in the 18th century did the government of Đại Việt start levying a regular tax on the private paddy field [*tư điền*], almost at the same time as Chosŏn (Korea).<sup>2</sup>

## The change of taxation system and peasants’ burden

According to *Annanzhi* (a record of the Ming rule of Đại Việt), the government during the Lý-Trần period (approx. 1000-1400) collected heavy taxes (or rent) from public fields, especially from the *quốc khố điền* or lands under the direct control of the state, while commoners’ paddy and dry fields were levied only a very small amount (see Table 1).

Table 1: From *Annanzhi*

Categories	Rent per <i>mu</i> ( <i>mẫu</i> )	
Public paddy fields	‘field of national treasury’ ( <i>Guokutian/quốc khố điền</i> )	Upper class: 6 <i>shí</i> ( <i>thạch</i> ) 80 <i>sheng</i> ( <i>thăng</i> ) Middle class: 4 <i>shí</i> Lower class: 3 <i>shí</i>
	‘field of throwing sword’ ( <i>Zhuodiaotian/thác đao điền</i> )	Upper class: 1 <i>shí</i> Middle class: 1 <i>shí</i> on 3 <i>mu</i> Lower class: 1 <i>shí</i> on 4 <i>mu</i>
Commoners’ paddy field	3 <i>sheng</i> Note: 1 <i>mu</i>	

Note: 1 *mu* (*mẫu*) = 0.36 ha; 1 *shí* (*thạch*) ≈ 94.88 litres; 1 *sheng* (*thăng*) ≈ 1.0737 litres

Judging from the demographic stagnation after the 16th century, the agricultural development reached the natural limit earlier in Đại Việt than in Korea and Japan.

## The traditional village often played a crucial role in both anti-colonial resistance and socialist revolution.

Table 2: Regulation in 1242, from the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*

Acreage of land (in mẫu)	Copper cash (in quán)	Rent (paddy) per mẫu (in thăng)
0	0	100 thăng per mẫu
1-2	1	
3-4	2	
5-	3	

Table 3: New regulation promulgated in 1402, from the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*

Acreage of land (in mẫu)	Paper cash (in mán)	Rent (paddy) per mẫu (in thăng)
0	0	5 thăng per mẫu
0-0.5	0.5	
0.6-1.0	1.0	
1.1-1.5	1.5	
1.6-2.0	2.0	
2.1-2.5	2.6 (?)	
2.6-	3.0	



Stone pedestal of Hường Trai Temple (Hoài Đức District, Hà Nội), which recorded villagers' donations three times during the late Trần Period (photo: Momoki Shiro)

In the *Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, tax regulations are recorded for the years 1242 and 1402. In both entries, male adults with paddy or dry field had to pay cash and paddy annually, while those without land were exempt. Although the Annals do not mention the specific category of land (or people) for which the paddy (rent) and copper cash (substitute for poll tax) were levied, it is likely that it concerned the majority of land (and people). This system seemingly followed the model of the southern variation of the Chinese Two-Tax system, which had been enforced since the late-8th century.

Judging from the amount of 100 thăng per mẫu collected from the land holders, the burden stipulated in 1242 for all fields is similar to that of the first class of so-called *thác đao* field in *Annanzhi*. In the case of *thác đao* field, the paddy (rent) seems to have conferred to nobles, officials or soldiers, as was the case of private fields of the Koryŏ Kingdom. Another problem here can be pointed out with the example of Cào Xã village, studied by the author in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*: 100 thăng of paddy was levied on both commoners (in the 1242 regulation), and 'criminals', a category that is not further explained (in the entry of the year 1230 in *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*). This category may have meant a low status, quasi-slave for instance, of commoners. For the Chinese author of *Annanzhi*, however, it must have been natural to regard this category of 'criminal' land, the beneficiary of which did not have a real property right, as a 'public' field. On the other hand, the low rent of paddy field stipulated in

1402 is seemingly identical with the amount levied on commoners' fields recorded in *Annanzhi*. As shown above, commoners' land seems to have already been classified as private land in 1398. The heavy commoners' rent during the early-Trần period appears to have become a nominal one by the end of the Trần dynasty.

### Epigraphic sources and the rising status of villagers

Epigraphic sources prove this change. Most epigraphs incised before the end of the Later Lý Dynasty (1009-1225) were tomb inscriptions of aristocrats or records of temple buildings sponsored by aristocrats. There is very little financial information. However, among the 60 inscriptions from the Trần Dynasty (1225-1400), 37 inscriptions (of which 34 from the 14th century) tell about properties of Buddhist temples or donations to temples or shrines. Most of the donations are small-scale ones by villagers, often less than one mẫu wide. The *Thanh Mai viên thông tháp bi* inscription, however, records around 2,800 mẫu of large-scale donations made by imperial family members.

Among more than 300 donors, only a small number bear an aristocratic title, while many males bear a civil or military title, such as *thư gia* or *thư nhi* [secretary] or *thị vệ nhân* [palace guard]. Some women bear a title of the court, like *dưỡng mẫu* [wet nurse]. These people appear to have been upper class villagers. The fact that their donations

were incised shows their rising social status. They probably first appropriated private paddy fields conferred to them for their arbitrary control. Then, they may have moved their privatized commoners' fields outside the subject of taxation on the public land. It is likely that the 1402 regulation meant the state owned a considerable amount of land therefore could be content to levy a light rent in kind on commoners' private land. In the mid-14th century, many peasants rebelled and even formed gangs. Slaves or subordinates of nobles' estates were known to flee to join the rebels and gangs. This must have been another expression of the socio-economic transformation of the farmers' society.

### Conclusion

The experiences of Đại Việt during the Lý-Trần period are comparable with many other "charter" polities not only in Southeast but also in Northeast Asia. As was the case in the Koryŏ Kingdom (Korea) and early medieval Japan (from Insei to Kamakura periods), Đại Việt had to localize and modify overwhelming Tang territorial and land management models against new regional background after the collapse of the Tang. Judging from the demographic stagnation after the 16th century, however, the agricultural development reached the natural limit earlier in Đại Việt than in Korea and Japan. The advance of commoners and peasants in 14th century Đại Việt appears to have been accompanied by a too rapid

growth of the population and a fractionation of arable lands by privatization, judging from the small scale of donations. The large-scale reclamation of lower delta regions and commercialization of village economy do not appear to have mitigated the land scarcity to a large enough extent. This situation may have deepened the general crisis in the 14th century, due to which the state of Đại Việt collapsed.

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### Notes

- 1 See Lieberman, V. 2003/2009. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830 (2 vols.)*. Cambridge University Press. Charter polities or charter states is a terminology coined by Victor Lieberman to describe the early empires in Southeast Asia, such as Pagan in Upper Burma, Angkor in Cambodia and Đại Việt in northern Vietnam. These states are called 'charter states' because they provided their political and territorial charter for subsequent generations and had a foundational role in future evolutions.
- 2 This could be seen as an expression of the Lê government's insistence upon the glorious 15th century system, in which the taxation system was centred on the public land. The Lê government could nationalize a great amount of lands after they repelled the Ming.

Table 4: The number of donations of 19 selected epigraphic sources, involving more than two donors

Males	Females	Husband and wife	Other groups*
125 persons	64 persons	51 couples	27 groups
149 lands of 0.18 ha	21 plots of lands of 0.276 ha	37 plots of lands of 0.17 ha and more	13 plots of lands of 0.29 ha
+ other 41 plots of land	+ 34 other plots of land	+ 18 other plots of land	21 other plots of land
+ 734 long string of copper coins and so forth	+ 464.5 string of copper coins and so forth	+ 955.5 long string of copper coins and so forth	+10 long string of copper coins and so forth

\* Mother and child, grandmother and grandchildren and so forth.

This must have been another expression of the socio-economic transformation of the farmers' society.