

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The Central Highlands of Vietnam has long been a living place of different ethnic peoples. For the ethnic people, their living place is not only about natural resources, but also about their history, culture and identity. It is a place where the people have led their harmonious life with their own knowledge.

The Central Highlands and its ethnic peoples have experienced tremendous changes because of the state-lead development programs. According to the rhetoric of the state, these development programs are the means to bring the area and ethnic peoples to a higher stage of development. From the point of view of the ethnic peoples, these development programs are a tragedy. The development programs have not only taken away their resources, but also turned their peaceful living place into a contested place, an arena of conflicts and struggles causing both the loss of life and an irretrievably disrupted community.

What I have attempted to achieve in first six chapters of this thesis are related to four fundamental issues as follows: (i) social theory for development policies and programs for ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands in Post-colonial Vietnam; (ii) traditional ways of living of the ethnic people, including their worldview, livelihood, social organization and regulations; (iii) the implementation of policies and programs at the local level; and (iv) the practices of ethnic people in dealing with the negative effects of development policies and programs. For the purpose of concluding this study, in this chapter I will discuss the major findings, theoretical contributions of the findings, the significance of the findings as well as the limitations of the study.

7.1 Major Findings of the Study

There are four main findings that have been realized through the analysis of this study. The first finding is that all development initiatives of the socialist state have been developed based on the theory of universal linear progressive growth. For

the socialist state, all human societies progress from being backward and underdeveloped to the developed or civilized one. The stage of development that a certain society or group of people has been arrived at is manifested in their modes of production and vice versa. Different modes of production generate differences between peoples and their societies. When they achieve the same level of development or, to be precise, the same mode of production, and these differences in the stages of development will be abolished. In other words, people in the lower stage of development would obtain a higher stage of development according to the linear progressive path, if they learn more about scientific knowledge, apply new modes of production, and adapt to the culture of advanced people.

Based on the rationale of the theory of universal linear progression, the socialist state has classified its ethnic peoples into three different hierarchical stages of development. The ethnic minorities, whose stage of development stands right below the majority of the Kinh, are the Hoa (Vietnamese Chinese), Cham and Khme. The criteria for assigning these ethnic groups at the highest stage of development in comparison with the other ethnic peoples is that such groups had experienced one hundred years of living under the feudal mode of production with permanent living places, cultivated wet-rice, and with the use of the plough and buffalo to prepare land for their agricultural plantations. Because they had achieved a political economic system equivalent to what Marx and Engels termed “slave’s political economy”, the Thai, Tay, Muong and Nung are thought to be below the Hoa, Cham and Khme. The remaining forty-eight ethnic minority groups, most who are ethnic groups of the Central Highlands, are arranged at the lowest stage of development or the “primitive societies”. The most important features that have been considered in assigning these ethnic groups to be at the lowest stage of development are their practice of subsistent shifting cultivation and their social and political organizations that are classified as equivalent to a “primitive society”.

Then, the socialist state has attempted “to bring ethnic people into higher stage of development shortly” through various scientifically constructed development policies and programs (Dang Nghiem Van, 1986: 81). Because the ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands have stood at the lowest stage of development, the state’s attempts “to enable ethnic peoples in Tay Nguyen to stand on a par with nationwide

localities” have ranged from creating of “stable lives”, “transformation of rational agricultural production” to “construction of a new way of life and new culture” (Tran Duc Luong¹, 2006: 285). The state has also tried to help the highlanders to achieve a higher stage of development in a short period of time by moving “more advanced people” to settle in the ancestral land of the highlanders and establishing enterprises of the state which are supposed to extract natural resources through scientific knowledge. Recently, state’s development programs have made great attempt to replace the subsistence agricultural production of the ethnic peoples with cash crop production, under the rhetoric advocacy that people are allowed to enjoy the benefits from the effective utilization of their resources.

My second finding of this thesis shows the fact that ethnic peoples are neither “backward” nor “primitive”. In particular, my study of the Bahnar people has pointed out that they have their own system of conceptions and knowledge. For the Bahnar, the universe is divided into three worlds, which are: *Plêi plên*, a living world of natural spirits; *Plêi teh*, a living world of people and other biological entities; and *Plêi atou*, a living world of the dead. In this worldview, activities of one person are related not only to other people, but also to the natural spirits and the dead. More precisely, human beings are dependent upon supernatural beings. Supernatural beings determine the laws and govern human beings. Anyone who respects these laws will receive great support. On the other hand, anyone who breaks the laws will be punished. Furthermore, breaking of the laws by one person in a village is not simply a problem between the person and the supernatural beings alone, but also a problem between this village, or all of the villagers within the village with supernatural beings.

In the past, this system of conception had played a very important role in the use of natural resources, the organization of the ethnic village, the regulation of social relationships and the activities of people. As I have discussed, the Bahnar people carefully considered their everyday activities in order to avoid offending the laws and punishments of the supernatural beings. For instance, before people made use of any natural material (land, trees, natural animals and so on) to sustain their livelihood, special care was taken to seek the approval of the supernatural owners. People also

¹ Tran Duc Luong was former member of politburo and former president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam

made offering rites to the spirits when they had obtained good results. The offerings of the village were organized regularly in order to gain support from the spirits. Within the Bahnar's territory, certain areas were maintained carefully for residence of spirits.

According to Bahnar's worldview, the Bahnar villages were well organized. All villagers were supposed to be treated equally. Villagers were required to cooperate and help one another. The young respected their elders. The elders loved and passed their knowledge on to the young. Children respected their parents within the family. The parents were supposed to look after their children carefully. In short, everyone had a place that made for a harmonious life in the traditional way of living.

The third point relates to the actual practices of the development policies and programs. Based on my case study in Buon Luoi, I have found that the villagers had participated in development programs with a strong belief that their lives would be improved. Following the advocacy and guidelines of FCFS, the villagers had moved to a new settlement area designed by the FCFS. They had contributed their agricultural lands and organized their labor in an agricultural production team for practicing the new modes of production. Some of them had given up their customary practices when they learned more about the "scientific knowledge" that was instructed by the program, namely the CNWL&NC program. When the renovation process arrived to this small village, many villagers had made great attempts to develop commercial crops, such as coffee and maize with a hope that these crops would bring more income and better life to them.

Paradoxically, the more the Bahnar engaged in the development programs, the more they found themselves faced with difficulties. As I have shown in my analysis, most of the villagers had found themselves living under the great pressure of resource scarcity. In their homeland, the Bahnar did not have enough cultivable land for feeding their families even though presently there were abundant resources and favorable conditions for agricultural production. They could not collect woods for repairing their house. They had gradually lost the ability to maintain their remaining resources and this loss was a tragedy for a number of Bahnar people.

Besides the pressure of resource scarcity, the Bahnar had faced other difficulties due to the fact that they could not use their local knowledge. The poor

were becoming poorer because the practice of sharing resources among villagers had been declined. Conflicts had occurred almost in every family in the village. After three decades of being the beneficiaries of development programs, many of the Bahnar in Buon Luoi, did not see themselves as developed, but instead had chosen to move into the forests in order to avoid conflicts as well as to maintain their survival.

The forth finding is that ethnic people have not passively received the negative effects of the development policies and programs. Currently, in their everyday practice, the ethnic people have demonstrated that many of them are trying to rise up from their current difficulties and status. They actively negotiate with the people who are trying to extract their resources from creating domination upon them. Different ethnic people have applied different practices of negotiation in order to negotiate with these dominant people. Their practices of negotiation range from land invasions, resource extraction, to the silence of contempt or even becoming prostitution for some girls. The practices of negotiation are for both their current and future survival. As I have investigated, a number of families who had paid a great deal of attention to the education of their children with the expectation that the children would have better opportunities in the future.

In their practices of negotiation, the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi have articulated their traditional knowledge in combination with knowledge learned from their dominators to construct their practices of negotiation. My story of a Bahnar man, H'Mo, demonstrates an excellent example of this practice in his application of articulated knowledge in response to the imposition of state-led development programs. As I have stated in Chapter VI, his current practices for subsistence had benefited by the knowledge he learned from the Kinh people, who were the dominant group in So Pai commune today.

Importantly, the Bahnar in Buon Luoi have realized that their current status is resulted not only from the scarcity of resources, but also from the power to decide who they are and how they are treated. Therefore, the negotiations of the Bahnar at Buon Luoi are not merely negotiations about land, forest resources and property rights. They are also negotiations for gaining power in their commune.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions of the Study

At a theoretical level, this study shares three main arguments with other anthropological studies. The first argument is situated within the anthropological studies on development and discourse for ethnic people done by scholars, for instance Ducan (2004), Karlsson (2000), Harrell (1997), Salemink (1997) and Li (1999). As I have pointed out in chapter III and V, the actual goal of the development initiatives and the programs of the socialist state was to integrate the diverse ethnic groups living in these areas with diverse cultures, knowledge, social institutions and modes of livelihood to be under the state's control and national society. This goal was justified by a discourse, which projects ethnic peoples' livelihoods and cultural practices as primitive, traditional, backward causing their poverty, suffering and so forth. For the socialist state, such a development discourse was the condition upon which it secured the right to intervene and to manipulate peoples, societies and natural resources in accordance with a particular political agenda.

This development discourse is not fixed; rather it is constructed and reconstructed. However, whenever it is reconstructed, the socialist state gains more power to control the people and societies. As we have seen, during the period of the centrally planned economy, the state had convinced its people that the socialist mode of production was the only mode of production, which would create human equality and bring a better life for everyone. With this rationale, the state had nationalized all natural resources, brought farmers into agricultural co-operatives and established the State run organizations for scientific resource management. When the centrally planned economy collapsed, the Socialist State promoted its renovation policies which advocate that the market-led economy was the desirable mode of production by which people would enjoy a better life by their more effective use of resources. Hence, the state had allocated land and resources to farmers and encouraged people to develop cash crops.

In short, the development for ethnic peoples that the socialist state has advocated is actually a discourse upon which the state has obtained the rights to divide the national territory into complex and overlapping political and economic zones, rearrange the population within these units, and create regulations that have delineated how and by whom the natural resources should be used.

Secondly, the findings of my study contribute to the debate that ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands have their own knowledge, beliefs and subsistence ethics. Ethnic knowledge, beliefs and subsistence ethics are neither “backward” nor “superstitious”. Moreover, they are the principal elements that the ethnic people use in order to construct their social space. In this social space, ethnic people are equally treated. Humans and nature are seen as a totality. Relationships between ethnic people and nature are harmoniously regulated.

Thirdly, my study argues against the assumptions of the Vietnamese modern social researchers, who see the current problems (poverty, shifting cultivation or return to nomad life) of ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands as an outcome of ‘out-of-the-way places’ or ‘backward *habitus*’. The current problems of ethnic peoples, as I have learned through my analysis, are closely linked to their growing involvement in or entanglement development programs, which have tried to integrate them into state’s control and national society. In other words, it is their entrapment by the development programs of state hegemony that have not only taken away the resources necessary for their livelihoods, but also denied and subjugated their rights, cultures and aspirations, even to the point of eliminating the presence of ethnic peoples.

7.3 Implications of the Study

What are implications learned from my study about development programs and ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands of Vietnam? From my point of view, there are four important implications. First, development programs have been constructed with very little respect for the differences and desires of ethnic peoples, and they have caused not just the destruction of natural resources or environmental degradation, but also the disruption of the harmonious lives of the ethnic people. More precisely, regardless of the purpose of the development program, it will lead to human tragedy if the differences and desires of ethnic peoples are not respected. Second, the state and development workers should pay more attention to understand the results of the development programs based on the experiences of the beneficiaries, rather than to measure the results with quantitative criteria. Third, the ethnic practices of negotiation in the development process are not simply concerned about securing

the resources in order to maintain their livelihoods. They are also about how they are perceived and their behavior; or, in other words, they are about how to secure the rights to determine their own existence. The final implication of this study is related to understanding of social space of ethnic peoples. My study shares the same idea with Condominas that social space of ethnic peoples is an assemblage of significant relationship systems, which is generated from ethnic worldview and knowledge. While study by Condominas lacks of examination of changes in relationships, my study with examination of changes in the relationships under imposition of development policies and programs makes a contribution to theory of social space that the social space of ethnic peoples is not fix. Precisely, because the social relations and relations between ethnic people and the nature are negotiated and reconstructed, social space of ethnic peoples is negotiated and reconstructed.

7.4 Limitations of the Study

Due to the limitations of time and other resources, this study has two shortcomings. First, this study has not yet provided deep comparative analyses between the Bahnar people in Buon Luoi and the other Bahnar people in different places of the Central Highlands, as well as of other ethnic peoples, in order to provide a broader picture of the changes and effects created by the development programs of the Vietnam's socialist state. Second, there are a number of actors involved in the implementation of the development programs for ethnic peoples at the local level. However, in this study, a small number of those voices were collected for analyses.

It is not an easy task to understand the current problems of the ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands. This study cannot hope to provide a comprehensive understanding and point out the best solutions for solving the problems. Although there are shortcomings, this study, I believe, reveals a complex situation of an ethnic people in one place in the Central Highlands, which is linked closely to the larger political economic and ideological problem at the national level. Thus, it can be a good reference for more intensive social studies of ethnic peoples in the Central Highlands.