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Bloh, Hannah von

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Small Towns as Interfaces for Interaction, Exchange and Transition in Vietnam

HANNAH VON BLOH¹

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies II, University of Passau, Germany

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Small towns present a critical link between urban systems and rural landscapes and are thus relevant for the understanding of regional development processes. In this context, an integrative analysis of the dynamics of interaction and negotiation on the local level and their correlation with higher-level structures and processes is insightful. The analysis draws on the concept of the social interface which is here applied to encounters between actors of various fields and levels within the arena of the small town. This approach is exemplified by an outline of processes of negotiation and mediation along political and economic interfaces in small Vietnamese towns. While the approach remains to be verified and elaborated in practice, it promises to provide a more complex and holistic view of current development trends.

Keywords: Small Towns, Vietnam, Regional Development, Social Interface, Urbanisation

Kleinstädte stellen eine entscheidende Verbindung zwischen städtischem und ländlichem Raum dar und sind somit wichtig für das Verständnis regionaler Entwicklungsprozesse. Hier verspricht eine integrative Analyse des Zusammenhangs zwischen lokalen Interaktions- und Verhandlungsprozessen und überregionalen Prozessen und Strukturen aufschlussreiche Einsichten. Die Analyse verwendet das Konzept der „gesellschaftliche Schnittstelle“ (social interface) in Bezug auf Begegnungen zwischen Akteuren unterschiedlicher Bereiche und Ebenen innerhalb von Kleinstädten. Dieser Ansatz wird beispielhaft anhand von Interaktionsprozessen entlang politischer und ökonomischer Schnittstellen in vietnamesischen Kleinstädten skizziert. Dieser Ansatz bedarf noch einer Überprüfung und Ausarbeitung in der Praxis, verspricht aber eine komplexere und vollständigere Erfassung aktueller Entwicklungstrends.

Schlagworte: Kleinstadt, Vietnam, Regionalentwicklung, Schnittstelle, Urbanisierung

¹ Hannah von Bloh is research assistant and lecturer at the University of Passau. This article presents some initial thoughts from the author's Ph.D. thesis.

Introduction: Small Towns, an Underrated Category of Regional Development

Current publications on global urban trends tend to emphasize an “invisible but momentous milestone” (UNFPA 2007: 1). This is namely the (now well-worn) fact that over 50 percent of the world population today lives in urban areas. A different fact, however, receives much less attention: the global urban trend is not restricted to the large metropolises. Today 52 percent of the urban population worldwide resides in urban centres of less than 50.000 inhabitants (UNFPA 2007: 9). Not only the size of the population living in such smaller urban centres indicates that their role is widely underestimated. The growth rate of these centres, too, suggests that there are dynamic processes on the local level which potentially have far-reaching consequences for regional development. Between the years 2000 and 2015, small and intermediate urban centres are expected to account for about half of the urban population growth (UNFPA 2007: 9). This population increase will be concentrated largely in low- and middle-income nations (Tacoli 2004: 2).

Small and intermediate urban centres are particularly important for regions undergoing rapid transformation. Due to their size and structure, such centres have the potential to deal with problems of urbanisation and development in a more flexible way than megacities. Given the necessary resources, they are, for example, more adjustable concerning territorial expansion, questions of decision-making, the usage of local resources and in using the advantages of their respective location to attract investment (UNFPA 2007: 10; Satterthwaite & Hardoy 1986: 401).

While rural development projects require a longer time to have a visible impact on the living conditions of the target group, smaller urban centres are quick to take up impulses for development. Rapid urbanisation is then accompanied by accelerated economic growth and a change in lifestyle. Various new chances open up to the local population with regard to education, employment, health care etc. As increasingly important regional nodes of political, economic and social networks, the development of smaller urban centres in consequence has an impact on its rural hinterland. A focus of the discourse on smaller urban centres thus presents itself as a promising new approach for developmental policies.²

Small towns present a critical link between the progressively more interwoven rural and urban regions, engaging in regional and global flows of people, goods, finances and information (Hoang et al. 2005: 6). Secondary centres and their linkages are in consequence increasingly regarded as playing an important role for spatially even development, with the potential of making a substantial contribution to the creation of opportunities for poverty

² This idea is present in recent publications of various institutions dealing with questions of development. See UNDP (2000), UNFPA (2007: 43), Pedersen (2003), Satterthwaite & Tacoli (2003a), Tacoli (2004).

reduction, economic resilience and equal development (Douglass 2001: 5). By virtue of their intermediate position in the cities' system, the development of small towns can make these centres attractive alternative destinations for migrants, keeping them in their region and thus reducing pressure on larger urban centres. Small towns as a linkage between urban and rural worlds can promote the development in the rural hinterland by enhancing the integration of rural areas into the regional flow of resources. They play a crucial role in supplying their respective region with administrative, economic and social goods and services (Titus & Hinderink 1998: 212; Satterthwaite & Hardoy 1986: 398). Small towns generate off-farm employment opportunities, on which an increasing number of rural households depend to secure their livelihood (Satterthwaite & Tacoli 2003b: 13). As a service centre for the rural hinterland, small towns also provide access to educational, health and administrative facilities which in turn allows for a more equal access to goods and services. In addition, small urban centres are politically relevant as nodes of exchange and encounter. They are places of decision-making, gathering of information and channels to voice local demands and interests. As small urban centres represent the local administrative level, they also play a key role in the processes of interaction and negotiation between the state and the people. On the local level, the state institutions and its representatives are commonly known in person. Such face-to-face encounters between citizens and state have far-reaching implications, not only concerning participation, but also with regard to the question of who will assert their interests and who will not. An analysis of local processes in small towns thus not only promises a better understanding of the dynamics of regional development, but also of processes of decision-making and power structures on a level which directly affects the everyday life of a large percentage of the population.

In the following, the article will provide a brief overview of the academic discourse on small towns before proposing a new approach to the analysis of secondary urban centres. In this context, the concept of the social interface will be introduced. The third part of the article will illustrate this alternative approach using the example of selected interfaces in small Vietnamese towns.

Small Towns in the Academic Discourse

Two approaches to small towns dominate the academic discourse. On the one hand, there are various studies with a macroeconomic or developmental thrust, discussing the role of small towns within a wider cities' system. Depending on the dominating development discourse, the

studies come to different conclusions concerning the character of small towns.³ However, they all share a common perspective: they regard small towns as an object of external dynamics which is primarily shaped by external economic impulses and the repercussions of national politics rather than by local actors and resources (Satterthwaite & Hardoy 1986; Titus et. al. 1998). The weakness of this approach is that it provides highly generalized statements based on a dichotomic view of urban and rural worlds. The approach does not account for the complex interrelations between actors of various levels and the increasingly blurred boundaries of urban and rural worlds. Furthermore, this perspective presents a static view of correlations between different units of a system and provides little insight into the on-going processes of interaction between and within the units.

A second set of studies approaches small towns from the sociological, ethnological or psychological angle. These studies focus on social stratification, patterns of behaviour and social interaction within selected western communities.⁴ They provide valuable insight into structures and processes of interaction within communities. However, they do not take into account external factors, interdependencies with external structures or how the given community is imbedded within a larger context. The approach consequently does not offer insights into possible interrelations between local processes and larger-scale structures.

The author would like to propose a more integrative approach, linking local and regional perspectives in order to analyse the correlations between local dynamics within small towns and the centres' role within regional development processes. In reference to A. Giddens' concept of the duality of structure, this approach is based on the assumption that local processes of interaction influence and are in turn influenced by developments outside the respective community (Giddens 1988: 215). An approach which enables the integration of structural and actor perspectives is the concept of the social interface. The train of thought which N. Long follows in introducing the concept can very well also be applied to the questions raised concerning small towns:

“A more dynamic approach to the understanding of social change is therefore needed which stresses the interplay and mutual determination of ‘internal’ and ‘external’ factors and relationships, and

³ The modernization theoretical approach emphasizes the positive role of small towns as regional service clusters and growth centres. According to this perspective, innovations, services and other prerequisites of modernity spread through the urban hierarchy via small towns down to the rural areas due to a trickle-down effect (Rondinelli 1983b). A different approach in line with dependency theory, on the other hand, regards small towns as “parasitic islands of privilege in a sea of rural poverty” (Schatzberg 1979: 173). They are said to contribute to the urban bias, enforce the exploitation of the rural poor by political and economic elites and thus impede rural development (Southall 1979; Titus & Hinderink 1998; van Lindert & Verkoren 1997: 12; Tacoli 1998). More recent studies, in turn, avoid a generalizing statement concerning the role of small towns and focus on individual case studies (van Lindert & Verkoren 1997: 12). They consider these centres as territorial entities in their own right, whose role within the respective region depends on the given local conditions, resources and demands (Titus & Hinderink 1998; Satterthwaite et. al. 1986).

⁴ See Warner on “Jonesville”/ USA (Warner 1949), Warner and Lunt on “Yankeetown”/ USA (Warner & Lunt 1942), Laumann on “Alteustadt”/ Germany (Laumann 1976), Arensberg and Kimball on “Ennis”/ Ireland (Arensberg & Kimball 1968) and Elias and Scotson on “Winston Parva”/ Great Britain (Elias & Scotson 1990).

which recognises the central role played by human action” (Long 2001: 13).

Long regards social interfaces as a “critical point of intersection between life worlds, social fields or levels of social organisation where social discontinuities [...] are most likely to be located” (Long 2001: 243). Such interfaces are characterized by disparities regarding the distribution of resources and differences in lifestyles - attributes also applying to the intermingling of urban and rural life in small towns. The concept of interfaces can thus help grasp the impact of linkages between the small town and other centres within the urban system, these linkages being flows of people, money, goods or information (Hoang et al. 2005: 6). Whereas Long regards social interfaces primarily as “social situations”, viewing small urban centres as interfaces also implies a spatial dimension (Long 2001: 241). Interfaces with and within small urban centres then become concrete in space as place, object and expression of interaction and power differentials.

In focus: Small Towns and Social Interfaces in Vietnam

Vietnam presents itself as a suitable location for an exemplary study on small towns. During the past two decades the country has been undergoing a rapid transformation. The challenges emerging from this situation and which, as has been argued above, make the role of small towns a particularly relevant question, are markedly visible here. Current policy debates in Vietnam concerning spatial planning also deal with the role of small towns within the cities' system. With the “Orientation Master Plan for Urban Development to 2020” of 1998, the Government of Vietnam set itself the goal “to manage rural migration by promoting economic development in secondary cities” (Coulthart et. al. 2006: 1)⁵. Steps towards more decentralization which grant the regions more autonomy and scope of action are part of this strategy (Coulthart

⁵ The planning of urban development processes involves various actors at different state levels. Spatial plans, one of the government's main planning tools, are drawn up at four levels of administration for the area the respective authorities hold responsibility for. These include “orientation plans” (national policy), “regional plans” (introduced in 2005), “master plans” (province or city), and “detailed area plans” (ward, industrial zone, or project) (Coulthart et al. 2006: ix). The development of “The Orientation Master Plan for the Development of Vietnam's Urban Centres until 2020” in 1998 was the result of an effort on behalf of the Government of Vietnam to formulate an integral national urban development strategy. The document states that “medium and small centres shall assume the functions of economic, cultural and service hubs of regions” and that “townships shall be economic, cultural and service centres for communes or clusters of communes in order to step up the process of rural urbanization and building of new rural areas” (Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Decision No.10/1998/QĐ-TTg, reviewed in Coulthart et. al. 2006). The master plan also formulates the objective “to manage rural migration by promoting economic development in secondary cities” (Coulthart et. al. 2006: 1). However, rather than establishing feasible and clear guidelines, the Orientation Master Plan appears in many ways to contain primarily the authorities' and planners' idealized visions. There are no detailed policies as to how the formulated objectives should be achieved. The task of working out detailed strategies is left to the administration at the regional, provincial and local levels, which, however, for the most part lack the necessary resources, capacities and authorities to realize the plan. In addition, in order to improve both skills and experiences, officials at the local levels would need to be taking on more responsibilities and tasks (Coulthart et. al. 2006). Presently, few organisations concern themselves with capacity-building at local level, one being the Association of Vietnamese Cities.

et. al. 2006: ix). For these government incentives to have the desired effects, however, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of small towns, their potentials, local dynamics and the factors which make them attractive sites for citizens and investors alike. Despite their potentially important role, there has not yet been much research on small urban centres in Vietnam and their linkages on local, national and regional levels. This problem is not uniquely Vietnamese. As stated by Satterthwaite and Hardoy more than twenty years ago, but still valid today:

“There is a relatively poor understanding of, for instance, how public action can steer urban growth and development away from the major cities, of the very real limitation faced by governments in market or mixed economies in being able to do so, of what measures must be taken to stimulate the growth and development of small and intermediate urban centres, of the costs and benefits of doing so, and of who benefits from the proposed measures” (Satterthwaite & Hardoy 1986: 5).

Vietnam is currently experiencing a swift urban transition. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) predicts an urbanisation rate of 3 percent annually for the years 2005 to 2010 (UNFPA 2007). Large urban centres benefit from the influx of capital and resources which currently accompanies the rapid economic development in Vietnam. However, the swift urban development and the inflow of migrants are placing the urban administration under increasing pressure. Non-registered migrants from rural areas currently pose 15 to 25 percent of the urban population in larger urban centres (Coulthart et. al. 2006: 6). The rural areas, on the other hand, are experiencing a drain of capital, manpower and other resources. Due to the promotion of mono-cropping, the rural livelihood is increasingly dependent on and vulnerable to external influences. All this contributes to the danger of spatially unequal development (Douglass 2001: 11; Hoang et. al. 2005: 5). Despite rapid economic development, the poverty rate in the countryside remains significantly higher than in the urban areas (General Statistics Office 2005). Presently, 70 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in Vietnam is generated in urban centres, although these only account for 27 percent of the country’s population (Coulthart et. al. 2006: v). The still comparatively low level of urbanisation in Vietnam⁶, however, offers the chance for new policies to impact on geographic and demographic trends in favour of more sustainable and equal development.

The national classification system for urban centres⁷ assigns small towns a key role as “provincial centre to promote the district and/or rural centre development” (Coulthart et. al. 2006: 58). According to official calculations, small urban centres of the category “Class

⁶ In comparison, the average degree of urbanisation in South-East Asia is currently estimated to be at 45 percent (UNFPA 2007).

⁷ The national classification system distinguishes six categories of urban centres based on criteria such as population size and density, structure of income sources, infrastructure as well as regional role of the centre. Small towns represent the category of the smallest urban centres or “Class V”-urban centres. These are centres of 4.000 to 50.000 inhabitants, a population density of more than 2.000 per km² and more than 65 percent occupation outside the agricultural sector.

V” represent the bulk of urban centres within the national classification system: 612 of the 703 recorded urban centres in Vietnam belong to this category. While small towns do not accommodate the mass of the urban population nor experience the highest urban growth rates, they are nevertheless, due to their wide dispersal and close proximity, crucial for the integration of the countryside - which still is home to 73 percent of the Vietnamese population. Hence in Vietnam, too, small towns are potential critical interfaces at which rural and urban life worlds, state and citizens meet and negotiate.

A highly relevant interface also with regards to transformations within the Vietnamese society is the encounter between the state and its citizens. The district level, on which small towns are located, represents the lowest level of jurisdiction. In accordance with their assigned administrative role, small towns, especially district capitals, feature a sizeable public sector. Local state representatives link local and national levels, translating and implementing many of the laws, programmes and policies issued by the central government. Due to their central position between the central government and the population in the exercise of state power, the local government is thus attributed “a significant level of influence” (Sikor 2004: 168). Historically,

“the district magistrate (tri huyen) was at the coalface of Vietnam’s monarchical system, expected to enforce quotas set by higher echelons, dispense local justice, monitor economic conditions, look for signs of unrest [...] (A) resourceful district magistrate made himself part of the local political scene, [...] cultivating allies, dispensing as well as receiving favours” (Marr 2004: 33-34).

Today, civil servants and representatives of the Communist Party function as mediators between the local population (which they themselves are a part of) and the state (which they represent) (Sikor 2004: 189). They are in charge of developing programmes and policies according to local needs as well as implementing reforms (including the important task of allocating land use rights to rural households). In this context, they interpret government guidelines according to their own priorities and can thereby create space for personal interests (Sikor 2004: 189). Balancing personal, state and local interests becomes challenging when they conflict with each other. Whether local level or state interests are given priority in the case of conflicting interests depends on whether the horizontal linkages to the local level or vertical linkages to the central authorities are stronger. A common background or shared ethnicity, common economic and social interests or a shared view on legitimate authority can strengthen horizontal ties (Sikor 2004: 169). In sum, local state representatives and the population interact in what has been termed the “mediation space that exists in the penumbra of party-state domination” (Koh 2006: 15). Recent studies provide examples of such processes of negotiation between local authorities and the population⁸.

⁸ One example is presented in a study conducted in a rural district in the Northwestern highlands. It describes

A second interface within small towns which qualifies for further scrutiny concerns encounters in the economic sector. The economic sector within small towns is crucial for their role as regional centres of production and distribution. Especially the small trade sector is an important source of off-farm income and thus vital for the economic development of small towns and the surrounding rural region. For much of the local population, off-farm employment is a necessity, rather than a way to increase profits (Rigg 1998: 502; Hoang et. al. 2005: 1). It is likely that participating in small trade requires access to key resources and at the same time makes available certain important resources. An analysis of the small trade sector can thus give insight in structures of power, distribution of resources and social organisation in small towns. The economic sector features both vertical linkages between central state, local authorities and citizens as well as horizontal linkages such as between the political (legislative and executive organs) and economic (suppliers, industrial consumers, local customers, kinship supplying capital etc.) sectors.

At social interfaces, those actors hold key positions which can make external knowledge available locally (Burt 2000: 1). Entrepreneurs are one group which qualifies for the role as mediator or broker. They rely on good networking in order to secure access to financial capital, labour, information and other strategic resources - resources, which appear to be particularly scarce in small towns (Long 2001: 135). The linkages entrepreneurs establish allow them to act as economic brokers between networks which link the local market to regional and national structures, local consumers to supra-regional producers (Long 1977: 121). Small enterprises and those in the informal sector often form clusters in order to secure their position on the market. Larger, supra-regional enterprises, on the other hand, revert to the local networks of small-scale enterprises to improve the distribution of goods and services (Pedersen 2003: 41). These linkages allow entrepreneurs to act as economic brokers between producers and consumers of various levels and destinations. This is particularly important for rural regions in which the majority of the population commonly lacks mobility and has few supra-regional links of its own to draw upon. If actors functioning as brokers along interfaces, e.g. entrepreneurs, are well-integrated in local social structures, they not only benefit from the social capital gained from their position between networks, but also from their position within local networks. As local actors with various social linkages to draw upon, these actors can also benefit from network closure, an important source of social capital (Coleman 1990). Network closure has the effect of facilitating sanctions, thus strengthening mutual trust and improving cooperation within the group (Burt 2000: 8). Network closure, however, also implies

how the People's Committee of the district "reinterpreted" the guidelines of the province against logging (according to which larger areas were to be exempted from agricultural use) by excluding paddy from the regulation (Sikor 2004: 182). For further examples see Koh (2006) on mediation space at ward-level and Fforde (2004) on the interaction between farmers and rural planners/extension service.

the possibility of exclusion. As Elias and Scotson show, social cohesion can become an important local resource, when certain actors use this as an instrument of power to exclude others as outsiders from networks and the distribution of resources (Elias & Scotson 1990: 11; Coleman 1990). In this context, the structure of the economic sector in small towns points towards clear power differentials. The labour market in small urban centres is highly fragmented regarding qualifications, income, security etc. There is a strong competition for attractive positions, which are often distributed according to kinship relations, ethnicity or other criteria within a small elite (Titus & Hinderink 1998: 212). Socially marginalized households are at a disadvantage here, as the access to employment opportunities depends to a large extent on social networks. Actors who lack access to crucial social networks may be forced to engage in more unprofitable occupations and thus be excluded from the opportunities and benefits of regional development (Tacoli 1998: 10). Who remains outsider and is largely excluded from the distribution of key resources, may be based on various criteria. Groups may be excluded based on their ethnicity, education, income or duration of stay in the community etc. (Elias & Scotson 1990). These processes of interaction, exclusion and integration also impact on the surrounding region in so far as they determine how resources are distributed within the region, and how the rural population is integrated into the development.

Outlook

An assessment of the role and developmental potential of small towns should be an integral part of any comprehensive urban development strategy. This requires not only a closer look at present government policies and administrative structures, but also at the dynamics within the urban centres themselves and their relations with their hinterland as well as with national and regional levels. The analysis of power differentials and the distribution of resources in small towns can indicate challenges and potentials of regional development. This in turn may indicate a starting-point for development policies that can influence the given dynamics in favour of more equal, integrative and sustainable regional development. For this analysis, an approach is needed which can integrate both complex local interrelations as well as take into account the broader regional context. It should allow for the local particularities in processes of interaction but should still be able to provide results of general validity. In this context, a promising concept is that of the social interface. How interaction along interfaces takes place has an impact on the distribution of resources and consequently power both within the urban centres and between the urban centres and their respective hinterland. In the analysis, rather than trying to grasp the complex dynamics and forms of interaction within small urban

centres as a whole, it makes sense to pinpoint a smaller field or node within a given centre for further scrutiny. This was exemplified here by a brief outline of local-level encounters along political and economic interfaces in Vietnam. Vietnam, in its current phase of rapid transition, provides a good example of the potentials and challenges inherent in small towns as a rural-urban link interface. In addition, changes in policies and on-going administrative reforms in Vietnam demand for a better understanding of local-level dynamics and how these are connected to higher-level processes and structures. This article presents only a brief sketch of possible correlations. Further research and in-depth studies with a more narrow scope will be necessary needed to validate the theoretical approach and deliver more concrete insights. In this context, a comparative study of conditions in China may be revealing.

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