As one approaches Ninh Hiệp after an 18-km ride on the main road from Hanoi to Bắc Ninh province, the side street to the village running along paddy fields underscores the rural character of the place. Long before reaching the village gate, clothing shops line both sides of the street. These shops are narrow on the side, but often reach far aback and sometimes are part of residential houses. In front of the shops, eye-catching clothes are displayed on steel racks and mannequins. Some traders sell outside the shops: either placing their merchandise on a small piece of cloth or of plastic on the ground or hanging them from a bar or rod welded horizontally into the exterior of the stall. There are clothes as far as the eye can see, predominantly for women but some also for men. This street leads straight to the old market in the centre of the village. The closer one gets, the more crowded and noisier it becomes, especially in the front and at the side of the old market, where vendors and customers on motorbikes, loaded with huge bags or bundles of clothes, jam the narrow streets.

Across the parking lot and food court in front of the old market are two new market buildings, where the commerce is less intensive than in the old market. In the street surrounding the old market in front of the
Nành pagoda is the village market held twice a day with vendors selling fresh vegetables, fruits, meat, fish, rice and noodles. Only the few vendors who sell kitchen items and votive paper for worshipping keep their stall open all day. Cloth traders usually visit the fresh market by motorbike on their way to bring the children to the day nursery in the morning or when taking them back in the late afternoon. The intra-village traffic is immense and adds not only to a constant relative high level of noise by motorbikes and transporters, but also to air pollution.

Yet, when getting away from the centre and walking through the village’s narrow, labyrinthine streets, one will unavoidably come across remains of earlier times, such as old-style wooden houses from the beginning of the twentieth century, ancient archways with lithic animals as guardians, pagodas, small temples and shrines to worship deceased ancestors. In front of some of these houses are small gardens with trees and singing birds in cages, giving a feeling as if time had stood still. Their old houses are hidden behind modern multi-storey houses that are built very close to each other. In sunny weather, pavements and public places such as the ground in front of the pagoda and the communal house (đình) are used to dry medicinal plants. The particular odour stemming from drying medicinal plants and processing them is very strong and noticeable and is spread over the whole village on windy days.

Ninh Hiệp is situated in the north of Gia Lâm district at the edge of Hanoi province, adjacent to the communes Phù Đổng, Đình Xuyên and Yên Thượng, and bordering Đình Bằng village as well as Phù Chẩn commune in Bắc Ninh province (Fig. 2.1). It is home to 23 historical sites, such as pagodas, temples and ancestral houses, of which 9 are certified as places of exchange of the ancient cultures of Kinh Bắc and Kinh Đô. With a population of 16,700 people in over 4000 households and an area of 488.86 ha in 2012, it is one of the most densely populated places in Vietnam. Of this area, 233.421 ha is agricultural land, 61.87 ha is residential land, 63.63 ha is industrial land, and the remaining 129.939 ha is non-agricultural land (UBND huyện Gia Lâm and UBND xã Ninh Hiệp 2013).
Fig. 2.1 Ninh Hiệp commune
Ninh Hiệp is well connected to the transport system and can be reached conveniently by the main road from Hanoi to Bắc Ninh, or by the National Route (QL A1), which was built by the French at the beginning of the twentieth century and runs through Vietnam from the Vietnamese–Chinese border in Lạng Sơn in the north to Cà Mau in the south, thereby connecting all major cities. The highway has been upgraded recently and underwent a crucial expansion right where it passes Ninh Hiệp. The new road was opened in January 2014 and leads to Thái Nguyên, and from there to the northern Vietnamese–Chinese border gate in Lào Cai. This means that Ninh Hiệp serves as the interface of the two main transport roads from China to Hanoi, which is of enormous importance for traders in Ninh Hiệp because they depend heavily on imports from China. In the past, the railroad played a significant role, and the fact that Yên Viên, a small town neighbouring Ninh Hiệp, was connected to the railroad system, was another crucial factor for the development and maintenance of trade networks throughout the country. Not only could traders from Ninh Hiệp commute easily between Yên Viên and Hanoi (and from there to the south), but also to the border in Đồng Đăng (Lạng Sơn) and Lào Cai while stopping at markets on the way, such as in Phú Thọ and Yên Bái.

As in the Red River Delta and other lowland areas, the population in Ninh Hiệp mainly consists of Kinh people, the ethnic majority in Vietnam. With the expansion of the market in the last 10 years, migrant workers from various places, some of them belonging to the Thái minority, came to Ninh Hiệp to make a living. Of the approximately 80 to 100 lineages, which are to be found in Ninh Hiệp nowadays, 40 are said to have been there since “ancient times” (ngày xưa). Ninh Hiệp’s immaterial cultural heritage is underlined by several famous scholars of earlier centuries, whose names are inscribed on steles in the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu) in Hanoi. The most famous person, however, whose genealogical reference relates to the Nguyễn Đình lineage in Ninh Hiệp, is the Princess Lê Ngọc Hân (1770–1799), who was the daughter of Queen Nguyễn Thị Huyền and King Lê Hiền Tông and the wife of Nguyễn Huệ (who became Emperor Quang Trung in 1788 (Nguyễn Khắc Quỳnh 2004).
Craft and Trade Villages in the Red River Delta

The Red River Delta, which is seen as the cradle of traditional Vietnamese culture, especially the area nowadays known as Bắc Ninh province, is a region where craft villages appeared early in history for the purpose of producing luxury objects for the imperial capital as well as everyday items for the needs of a village society (Fanchette 2012, 260). These craft villages were tightly linked to the so-called District of 36 streets and guilds in Hanoi and other national and international markets as well as to areas where raw material came from. Another reason why many villages in the Red River Delta developed handicraft production and engaged in trade was that before the eighteenth century, the majority of the villagers either had no land for farming or the plots they owned were not large for sustaining themselves (Nguyễn Quang Ngọc 1993). Thus, although some villagers did farming and combined it with occasional trading, which could help them through difficult times, most people in trading villages relied on trade as their main profession. When commerce prospered and traders could accumulate capital, they did not work in their fields anymore, but still kept the land and hired labourers to work on it. With the trend towards specialisation, craft villages started to form economic clusters, in which each village concentrated on one step in the production and marketing chain of a product. Interestingly, this local production system persists in the Red River Delta to this very day, although it has undergone changes due to modernisation and urbanisation processes.

During the period of high socialism (starting in 1954 in the North and 1975 in the South), agriculture was strongly promoted, but craft and trade activities were still carried out to varying degrees in the villages in the Red River Delta (DiGregorio 2001; Fanchette 2012). Đổi mới brought about important changes in regard to the easing of micro-economic restrictions of entrepreneurial activities, so that in the first years after the introduction of the economic reforms, traditional craft and trade villages experienced strong growth (Spitzenpfeil 1999, 136–137). Even villages that had not produced crafts in the past joined the trend.
However, a few years after the euphoric take-off, many of these villages met severe challenges that would eventually lead to the stagnation of the local economy and sometimes force people to turn to other sources of income. The main problem for most of these villages was the competition with state-owned and larger private companies, which were in a better position to produce goods of higher quality and larger quantities due to their advanced technologies and mechanisation. At the same time, the demand for cheap—not to mention low quality—goods propelled imports from China, making it even harder for small village industries to compete. Because products from craft villages were not of a quality or market value comparable to other available products, many of these villages soon lacked a market for selling their goods. Furthermore, many craft villages encountered difficulties accessing capital needed for professionalising production (Spitzenpfeil 1999, 143–152). Another issue was reputation: because of the above mentioned disadvantages, some craft workshops attempted to compete with their rivals by resorting to using less and cheaper materials than what they would declare. Whenever these scandals resulted in public outcry, the reputation of the respective villages was compromised and in many cases led to a sharp decline in the number of placed orders.2

Having said that, a few villages in the area, such as the pottery village Bát Tràng, the wood carving village Đồ Ng Kỵ as well as Ninh Hiệp, benefitted greatly from the changing circumstances. Bát Tràng was strongly supported and promoted by the state as an exemplar of economic growth through household production, whereas Đồ Ng Kỵ found access to foreign markets and successfully signed contracts with partners in Asia and overseas. Ninh Hiệp, finally, adapted to the domestic demand for cheap clothing by specialising in imports from China and distributing them to wholesalers and retailers nationwide.

Touching upon Ninh Hiệp’s history in the remainder of this chapter, I draw on a variety of sources of information. In addition to studies carried out by foreign researchers, most of whom are French, I rely mainly on books and documents produced by Vietnamese scholars as well as official reports of the socio-economic and cultural development of the commune. Three main authors are cited: Nguyễn Khắc Quỳnh, a local historian who wrote several books about Ninh Hiệp, mostly consisting
of stories and poems; the district-level Communist Party with a book on the revolutionary history of Ninh Hiệp between 1930 and 2005; and an anonymous student and a staff member from the history faculty of the Hanoi National University of Education, whose work is fittingly titled *The History of Ninh Hiệp*. Although these sources have proven to be of great importance in depicting the past of the village, they do at times tend to be somewhat problematic. For instance, they sometimes contradict each other when it comes to dates or they provide no or only a few references for the arguments they put forth. All in all, when held to the standards of modern anthropology, one should retain a healthy level of scepticism with regards to their “impartiality” or “scholarly” value. However, they are the only available sources, and, when consulted with care, they have a great potential to provide valuable insight into the village history.

**Introducing Ninh Hiệp**

**Local Economy**

Ninh Hiệp’s economy has been diverse from early on. In addition to agriculture as the main occupation, people in Ninh Hiệp lived from weaving and from processing and trading medicinal plants. In her study on Ninh Hiệp, the French historian Florence Yvon-Trân (2001) distinguished three main stages for the development of craft and commercial activities from the eleventh century to the nineteenth century: the emergence of craft activities during the Ly-Trân dynasty (1009–1400) and a “spontaneous” local market; the expansion of the craft sector together with a growing volume of trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; and the intensification of commerce from the eighteenth century on. Traditionally, agriculture was the task of men while women wove and engaged in petty trade, as an old saying in Ninh Hiệp confirms: “Nữ chức nam canh tương sơ phủ” (*Women weave, men farm, that’s how wealth is made*) (Yvon-Trân 2001, 222). After the First World War, the production of leather items became a major economic activity for about one-fifth of the villagers (Lịch sự Ninh Hiệp, 26).
Because stitching leather was seen as a male craft, women started to take over some agricultural tasks beside weaving and trading. In the following, I will give a more detailed account of the rise and decline of the three main products—medicinal plants, cloth and leather—Ninh Hiệp has been known for.

The processing of and trade with medicinal plants are an important occupation of people in Ninh Hiệp. According to the legend, a woman called Lý Nhữ Thái Lão came from Thanh Hóa to Ninh Hiệp during the Ly dynasty (1010–1125). She gained her knowledge of medicinal plants through her father, and when he passed away, she followed his example to lead a simple life and cure sick people. She left her natal village and went northward, passing Hanoi, until Ninh Hiệp, where the villagers asked her to stay and teach them how to use medicinal plants. From then on, villagers travelled to various places to collect medicinal plants and brought them back to process and use them, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Ninh Hiệp became a centre to study about traditional medicine. Lý Nhữ Thái Lão is remembered until the present day and paid homage on the anniversary of her death, the eighteenth of the first lunar month. At the beginning of the 1990s, a small temple was reconstructed on the place of her former residence with money from donations (Yvon-Trán 2001, 220–222). Pierre Gourou (1936) noted that it is the standard pattern of craft villages to develop thanks to the initiative of a single person who invented a non-agricultural occupation and was imitated by other villagers. This person is usually worshipped as the village guardian deity (Endres 2000, 42–44).

Jennifer Sowerwine (1999), who investigated medicinal plants’ trade before and after Đồi mỏi between the highland and the lowland, refers to Ninh Hiệp as a legendary centre of medicinal plants since ancient times. According to her, in the past medicinal plants could be gathered in the forests surrounding Ninh Hiệp, whereas nowadays herbs for northern medicines (thuốc Bắc) are imported from China, and herbs for southern medicines (thuốc Nam) are purchased from traders in northern Vietnamese provinces, such as Lào Cai, Thanh Hóa, Yên Bái, among others (Sowerwine 1999, 136). One of the main produce for which Ninh Hiệp is famous for is lotus, which is processed until
today and widely distributed in various forms, either to cure diseases or as a gift on special occasions, such as for weddings.

Women in Ninh Hiệp have been famous for “small cloth” (vải nhỏ) or “Nành cloth”, as is remembered by elderly people reciting the following poem: “Vải Nành tô Báng thì mua, Tam Sôn, Nội Duệ có cho chẳng màng” (Buy cloth from Nành and silk thread from Báng, don’t take the one from Tam Sôn and Nội Duệ) (Lịch sử Ninh Hiệp, 22; Nguyễn Khắc Quỳnh 2004, 190). Small cloths were made from a special kind of cotton yarn of high quality and were known to be thin and smooth (Đương Duy Bằng 2002, 556). The inscription on one of the walls of the temple to honour Lý Nhữ Thái Lão indicates that she did not only pass her knowledge of medicinal plants to the villagers, but also taught them weaving. Silk and cotton production expanded from the eleventh century, and weaving was a common activity in rural Vietnamese households according to observations of Chen Fu, an ambassador of Dai-Viet, at the end of the thirteenth century (Yvon-Trán 2001, 222).

Two reasons have certainly contributed to weaving becoming popular in Ninh Hiệp: first, cotton could be planted after the harvest of rice when most fields were not used, so it did not interfere with other agricultural tasks. Furthermore, cotton production and weaving did not pose technical obstacles. While women in Ninh Hiệp were skilled weavers, they were not professional in sericulture. Elderly women remember that only a few people had knowledge of it, while the majority of people bought silk thread in surrounding areas. In contrast to cotton, the growing of mulberries and the weaving of silk is complex and needs meticulous care. In addition, while cotton was produced for domestic use, silk was a luxury product and as such controlled by the state and was not allowed to be worn by common people as it was the clothing of the court (Yvon-Trán 2001, 223–224).

Besides the early knowledge of villagers of the textile craft and Ninh Hiệp’s favourable geographical position in terms of access to the transport system, a major reason for the development of the textile craft and trade in Ninh Hiệp was its intense economic exchange with the neighbouring commune Tiên Sơn, which holds one of the biggest wholesale markets in northern Vietnam, called Giàu market (Lịch sử Ninh Hiệp, 22). According to villagers, the weaving loom was a standard accessory in each
house until the beginning of the 1970s, but had not been used much since the 1930s or 1940s due to a shortage of raw materials towards the end of the colonial period (Đảng bộ huyện Gia Lâm [Gia Lâm district Party] and Ban chấp hành đảng bộ xã Ninh Hiệp [Party Executive Committee of Ninh Hiệp] 2007; Dương Duy Bằng 2002, 558). From then on, weaving experienced a rapid decline and was given up eventually. Trade with cloth, on the contrary, was carried out continuously and even experienced a “Golden Age” during these years (Abrami 2002).

In addition to textiles and medicine, Ninh Hiệp was famous for leather. It is said that the leather craft was brought from France by a villager from Ninh Hiệp, called Thạch Văn Ngữ, who served the French army during the First World War. Upon coming back to Ninh Hiệp, he started to produce leather items such as bags, suitcases, belts, saddles, shoes and sandals and opened the first leather shop in Hà Trung Street in Hanoi. As the demand for leather products rose from the 1920s onwards, he taught the trade to fellow villagers and encouraged them to open stores (Nguyễn Khắc Quỳnh 1996, 7). While most villagers opened shops to sell leather products in Hanoi, some went as far as Saigon (nowadays Ho Chi Minh City) to make a living from producing and selling leather items. Once in Saigon, villagers from Ninh Hiệp joined forces and founded an association with the aim to support each other and help newcomers (“Phù Ninh tướng tế hội”) (Nguyễn Khắc Quỳnh 2004, 324). When the war between China and Japan broke out in 1937 as a precursor of the Second World War, the leather craft in Ninh Hiệp experienced a peak as the Japanese needed leather products to equip their army and contracted with leather workshops in Ninh Hiệp. Later, during the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954, some villagers joined the resistance, while others stayed in their workshops to supply the military with products made from leather. In 1960, a craft cooperative (hợp tác xã thủ công) with over 300 members was established to equip the army in North Vietnam with leather items during the Second Indochina War. When the war ended in 1975, the demand for leather items sank drastically and the production thereof was only maintained on a small scale until the leather cooperative was finally dissolved in 1994 (Dương Duy Bằng 2002, 570).
The development of these three different crafts reaffirms not only the resourcefulness of Ninh Hiệp villagers and their ability to supply products that are sought after, but also their early and thorough integration into regional and superregional networks. Nowadays, like other craft and trading villages in the Red River Delta, Ninh Hiệp’s economic sector is composed of agriculture and a mix of different non-agricultural businesses (Tô Duy Họp 1995, 287). In 2012, the local economy was dominated by handicraft and small industry (59.6%), followed by trade and services (38.7%), and agriculture to a minor degree (1.7%) (UBND huyện Gia Lâm and UBND xã Ninh Hiệp 2013). Due to the strong and sustained economic growth since the year 2000 and especially from 2008 to 2013, Ninh Hiệp became one of the wealthiest communes in northern Vietnam (UBND huyện Gia Lâm 2008). There are no reliable numbers on how many households are involved in the cloth trade, but from all the people I got to know there were not more than a handful of families who completely stayed away from it. While these statistics and observations speak a clear language regarding the economic insignificance of agriculture, villager’s self-representation was more complex: according to my findings, and also in line with the account of Dương Duy Bằng (2002, 574), agriculture was often said to be the main occupation, while non-agricultural production and trade were considered as side occupations in households that usually rely on two to three different economic activities. Nevertheless, almost no household solely lives from agriculture, and those who do cultivate their fields usually hire workers for this purpose. Mr. Xuân, a hamlet chief, confirmed this point: “Nowadays, households which rely one hundred per cent on agriculture are very rare, because if they don’t sell one thing they sell something else. Nobody would go home and do nothing when farm work is done. Generally speaking, this does not exist”. Since agriculture is a seasonal occupation, those not involved in trade work as temporary labourers in small industries nearby.

I often encountered the seemingly paradox relation between agriculture and trade in conversations with villagers and therefore addressed the issue in interviews with hamlet chiefs, for example with Mr. Tịnh who said: “One hundred per cent of the households engage in trade [in this hamlet], there is nobody who does not work
as a trader, but agriculture is still said to be the main occupation”. It follows that villagers spend most of their time for and draw the main income from their so-called side occupation, as Mr. Cường assured: “The main occupation brings a minor income, and the side occupation, which is trade, brings the main income. Agriculture does not allow people to build houses like this with three, four or five floors. If one can live from agriculture, this is good already”.

Even if Ninh Hiệp has more agricultural land than other communes in Gia Lâm district, it is one of the most densely populated communes in Vietnam and the amount of land per person is decreasing and becoming fragmented. Besides elderly people who have always done farm work, there are only a few villagers who keep doing agriculture wholeheartedly. Yet owning a piece of land to plant rice and growing some fruits and vegetables, and sometimes raising a small number of chicken or pigs, is important to people in Ninh Hiệp, as Mr. Quang explained: “The income from farming is not significant. The purpose is not profit but a stable source of food”. In addition, land serves as a security net to fall back on. Economic strategies and the degree to which households rely on agriculture or are involved in trade differ between the hamlets. Hamlet Seven, where leather items were produced in the past, has the highest number of people working in agriculture (60% of the households) nowadays, while hamlet Six, which is almost fully covered by the market, has the lowest.

The fact that Ninh Hiệp people stress agriculture as the main occupation has several historical and contemporary practical and moral components. First and foremost, in the past as well as nowadays, agriculture, especially rice production, is of immediate importance for subsistence. Second, even though most people do not cultivate their rice fields themselves, it is preferred to hire labour to work in the fields than to buy rice at the local market. This is not only in order to be less dependent on others, but also because the quality of one’s own rice is usually seen as superior. An even more important reason is to keep land as property, in the hope that the state will allow to change its land use. Third, during pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times until very recently, trade was the least prestigious occupation and was placed at the bottom of the social order, while agriculture was considered as
honest and productive work and was therefore more valued (Labbé 2014, 29). Taking a closer look at the Vietnamese expression of “side occupation” (nghề phụ), the suffix phụ means not only “help” and “secondary to”, but also “minor”, and thus captures the subordinate position of trade within the household economy (Labbé 2014, 29). Fourth, and maybe most significant, is the self-perception of Ninh Hiệp people who conceive of themselves as a peasant community in the countryside, traditionally relying on agriculture. This issue will be discussed in more depth in Chap. 8.

**Administrative Structure**

The smallest administrative unit in Vietnam is the village (thôn, làng, phường) or commune (xã), consisting of hamlets (xóm) and lanes (ngõ). Ninh Hiệp is a special case in this regard as it lacks the category of thôn. Only the categories of xóm and xã are officially used in Ninh Hiệp. The difference between a village and a commune is not always clear, but most scholars use the term làng when referring to the life space of a rural population, while the term xã corresponds to the political space (Labbé 2014, 25). In this book, I will refer to Ninh Hiệp as a village except for when I am explicitly writing about its political structure as a commune.

Nowadays, Ninh Hiệp consists of nine hamlets, each of which has particular traits and specialises in one or two crafts, which often correspond to its traditional structure. Each hamlet has a house of culture (nhà văn hóa), where regular meetings of the hamlet chief (trưởng thôn) and the inhabitants of the hamlet are held. Hamlet chiefs are elected directly by household representatives. Once elected, they have to attend regular meetings at the commune, where general commune and particular hamlet issues are discussed. Serving as intermediaries between the people and the local state, they are in charge of representing the interests of the people of their hamlet as well as informing them about new policies and decisions made in the meetings. Moreover, they should help resolving conflicts in their hamlet, which arise most often around the issue of land inheritance. In these cases, the head of the patrilineage (trưởng họ) also plays a significant role.
The current hamlet chiefs in Ninh Hiège are all male and in their 50s or early 60s, except for one who is only 47 years old and just took over the position in 2012. Some of them were new to the position at the time I conducted research, while others have been doing it for nearly 20 years. Visiting each of them at their home, their different living conditions struck me. While some lived in small, rather old houses, others had big, multi-storey houses, equipped with modern television flat screens, massive ancestral altars and additional rooms full of Chinese and European antiques. All of them participated in cloth trade through their families, and most of them produced clothes at home. One even had a workshop on the second floor of his house, where his son and his daughter-in-law employed 10 workers.

When looking at the map of the commune (Fig. 2.2), one will recognise that the hamlets close to the old market were also involved to a higher degree in trading cloth (hamlets Four and Five), while the ones further away relied more on agriculture (hamlets One and Two, Six and Seven),

Fig. 2.2 Ninh Hiège commune by hamlets
produced leather items (hamlets Three and Four, Six and Seven) and processed and sold medicinal plants (hamlets Eight and Nine). The hamlet that has undergone the most radical change is hamlet Six. From being a rather poor and mostly agricultural hamlet, it turned into the richest hamlet with the highest land price since the expansion of the market that now covers almost the whole area of the hamlet. In the past, before the expansion of the marketplace, hamlet Eight used to be the wealthiest hamlet thanks to the steady demand of medicinal plants. In my daily conversations with villagers, hamlet Eight was often depicted as a closed subcommunity of people who used to marry only within the hamlet, had a certain way of speaking and did generally not interact much with people from other hamlets in the past. However, in recent years, since cloth and ready-made clothes experienced a much higher demand than medicinal plants and have therefore become more profitable, socio-economic differences between hamlet Eight and the rest of the community became less prominent. Also, the participation of some households from hamlet Eight in cloth trade was conducive for the opening up and integration of the hamlet into the wider community life.

The Markets

The Nành market, named after the village’s chữ Nôm name Kẻ Nành, is the oldest market in Ninh Hiệp. Determining the exact time of the establishment of the Nành market is difficult, but according to the local legend it goes back as early as the period of the Emperor Lý Thái Tông (1028–1054) (Lịch sử Ninh Hiệp, 27). Starting off as a place where people came to exchange goods for everyday consumption, the market grew bigger continuously and not only offered vegetables, rice, meat, fish and shrimps, but also thread, cloth and even buffaloes and cows. As the village specialised, products such as traditional Vietnamese and Chinese medicinal plants as well as silk and cotton cloths were traded, too. Two steles from the eighteenth century, which give an account of the market’s enlargement and of its change of location, hint at the Nành market’s importance in the region and suggest that it was very significant to the life of the local population (Nguyễn Khắc Quynthia 2004, 319).
In the second half of the twentieth century, from the socialist revolution to Đổi mới—when private trade was not permitted—the market was somewhat reduced as villagers sold cloth clandestinely in the streets instead of at the market. It was only a few years after Đổi mới that traders started to sell cloth at Nành market again. First, the market expanded around the Nành pagoda in the years from 1985 to 1990, and in 1995 the Nguyệt Trì pond was filled to get additional space for stalls. Finally, the establishment of a permanent market building in 2001 gave cloth trade a boost and marked the starting point for Ninh Hiệp to become the main provider of cloth and ready-made clothing in northern Vietnam and other parts of the country. With the expansion of the market area, fresh products and textiles were segregated physically from one another even more than before: the large covered market building became solely used for selling cloth and ready-made clothing, while fresh products are now sold on the small square in front of the Nành pagoda. When talking about the Nành market nowadays, one refers to the cloth and clothing market, not the fresh market.

In the village, the Nành market is called “Old Market” (chợ cũ) (Fig. 2.3), because of the traditional look of the market building and because it is the continuation of the first market in the village. It currently accommodates 1125 stalls, each of which is filled with rolls of fabric or heaps of ready-made clothes and is not bigger than 3 square meters. Sometimes clothes are hung up or lie on a wooden board for display. When the market closes in the evening, the goods are left at the stall, only covered with a piece of cloth. The old market is a one-storey building and comprises of two parts, which at first sight seem to seamlessly merge into each other. When taking a closer look, however, one will recognise that the roof of one part is higher and thus makes the hall more spacious, while the other part feels stuffy and gets unbearably hot in summer because the roof is considerably lower. Furthermore, the aisles that crisscross the first part run straight and parallel to each other whereas the aisles in the second part are more chaotic and look as if they have evolved spontaneously rather than having been planned on a drawing board. The reason is that the stalls in the second part already existed long before the market building was constructed. This older part of the market even houses a temple and a few private homes where people live.
and sell cloth. The more spacious part of the old market was built in October 2001 and eventually put into use 1 year later. Subsequently, the original parts of the old market were partly renovated in September 2003 and in December 2009 (HTX xã Ninh Hiệp 2012).

Before the old market was constructed, those villagers who wanted to have a stall were asked to support the building of the market financially.9 The stalls were then assigned to the traders by lot. As the stalls at the main aisle were a bit more expansive then the others, some people swapped their assigned stall for another. Thus, even if the assignment of the stalls was in principle a matter of luck, villagers with money could buy themselves into a better location if they found somebody to accept the deal. At that time, it may not have been foreseeable how much the land price would rise in the coming years and hence how valuable these stalls along the main aisle would become. What is certain, though, is that the location in the market laid the foundation for most traders’ careers in the coming years.
As only those villagers who had supported the building of the market were entitled to have a stall, the old market is perceived of as “in the hands of Ninh Hiệp people”. The few people from outside the village who came later as traders are therefore not stallholders, but usually subtenants. Stalls can be rented for 5 years; afterwards the contract has to be renewed. The old market was first managed by the local communal administration and since 2007 by the commune’s cooperative (hợp tác xã), which created a market management board for this purpose. The market management board collects fees to cover expenses for services (security, water, electricity, sanitation, cleaning) and is in charge of keeping the market in good condition. The rental fee for a stall depends on its location. When renting it directly from the cooperative, the prices range from 3 to 4 million VND (142–189 USD at the time of the research) per year for a stall inside the market to around 10 million VND (473 USD) per year for a bigger shop at the side of the market.

When paying a close look at the sellers in different areas of the old market, an interesting picture emerges: generally, the stalls far away from the main aisle are operated by middle-aged and elderly traders selling rather cheap merchandise, such as pieces of cloth, simple clothing for elderly people, leftover clothing from the previous season and the like. Many of these vendors are the ones who originally got the stall through the aforementioned allotment or through a deal in those early days. As these stalls are not in great demand due to their bad location, stallholders cannot make much profit, if at all, from renting these stalls to other traders. Therefore, if a vendor retreats from business, these stalls usually go back to the cooperative, which then rents them out to other traders. The situation for the stalls directly at or very close to the main aisle is completely different: as these stalls are extremely crowded with customers at almost any time of the day, they are much sought-after selling spaces and, therefore, stallholders can cash in on renting them out directly to fellow traders. When transferring stall use rights among one another, traders charge several hundred million VND per year for a stall inside the market and up to a billion VND (almost 50,000 USD) per year for a stall facing the main aisle. As a consequence, many of the original stallholders do not work as vendors anymore, but rent out their stall. Most of the traders along the main aisle
are young, as selling in such a crowded place is physically demanding. Moreover, because it is very competitive, one needs to be ahead of others in terms of setting trends and therefore frequently travel to China to import new merchandise, or design clothes oneself.

Opposite of the old market, across the parking lot which is lined with numerous food and tea stalls, are the two new privately owned, multi-storey commercial centres “Sơn Long” and “Phú Điền”, both established in 2011 (Fig 2.4). Until autumn of 2013, only the shops on the ground floor of both markets were open, whereas the shops on the second and third floor were partly rented out and were used as storage rooms. Although there are some market activities, they are not as busy as the old market. With their tiled floor, moving stairs and slight elevation above the ground they differ significantly from the old market.

These two markets are not only more spacious, but also cooler and cleaner. The shops here are bigger than the ones in the old market and have enough room to invite customers in. Instead of the merchandise lying in a pile, clothes are displayed on mannequins or hung on hangers to attract potential customers, and many of these shops are carefully decorated with wallpapers. As these stalls have iron shutters, they can be locked at night. The aisles between the stalls are large enough
for transport carts to deliver the merchandise directly to the stalls. Many traders in Ninh Hiệp agree that the new markets seem modern; some say that they are beautiful and convenient; however, most traders fault the new markets for lacking the usual hustle and bustle of customers. Clothes sold here tend to be slightly more expensive than at the old market. Traders can acquire stall use rights for a maximum of 50 years—the maximum time for lease of land in Vietnam—for 1.5–3.5 billion VND (70,000 USD–165,000 USD), again depending on the location of the shop. Alternatively, shops can be rented year to year with an annual cost of around 150–500 million VND (7000 USD–23,000 USD).

While most vendors at the old market are middle-aged women, the average age of vendors at the two new markets is much lower, and a remarkable number of them are men. Many of these vendors are the children of traders with a stall at the old market and do not have much experience as traders yet. Elder, more experienced vendors usually prefer to keep their stall at the old market, because they are afraid of losing their regular customers if they move to another stall. Younger traders, who have not yet an established clientele, like the new markets, because the shops are more spacious, comfortable and can be decorated. With their wooden floors, colourful wallpapers and additional decorative objects such as mirrors and lamps, these shops resemble fancy fashion boutiques in Hanoi.

Another difference between the old and the new markets lies in the merchandise: at the old market, cloth, home-produced clothing and low-quality Chinese-made clothes for men and women of all ages are sold, much of which end up at markets in the countryside all over Vietnam. In contrast, at the new markets fashionable and a bit more expensive clothes from China are sold, except for a few shops selling home-produced clothes or clothing from Ho Chi Minh City. The old and the new markets differ not only in appearance and the goods sold, but also in the form of management. Public markets, such as the old market, are subject to negotiations between the people and the state when interests diverge. Private management of a market, in contrast, is organised top-down without the involvement of the people. Furthermore, becoming a stallholder in the new market is a matter of money, as everybody who has the financial means, be it a person from Ninh Hiệp or outside, can purchase a stall.
In addition to the old and the two new markets, a fourth market is held on both sides of the street diverging from the main road between Hanoi and Bắc Ninh and leading to the commune and straight to the market halls. The first part of the market looks improvised with piles of cloth lying messily on a wooden board, only canopied by a piece of plastic which is spanned between wooden poles. This part existed even before the old market was constructed in 2001, but allegedly due to an issue over taxation traders at this market had to move to the old market, with only a few traders staying behind and still using the selling space. The remaining part of the market, however, consists of residential houses, which line the street and use the ground floor as a selling space. Villagers call this market simply “Xóm 6” because it is on the land of hamlet Six. Before the rapid growth of the marketplace, this street was a street like any other in the commune, lined with houses, which often had small shops or drugstores located on the ground floor. Due to the popularity of Ninh Hiệp’s marketplace in the region, a rising number of local villagers seized the opportunity to launch new businesses, which in turn necessitated a physical expansion of the market space. The residents of Xóm 6 were lucky because they could just turn the ground floor into a shop and sell textiles and ready-made clothes at home. The rising land price makes the renting out of a few square meters a very lucrative business for residents, in addition to the profit they make as traders. The ground floor of houses is often divided into two to three narrow shops, so that the house owner can sell in one shop and rent out the remaining space, including the front and side of houses. Shop rental prices are much higher in this area than everywhere else in the commune, and because competition is also much harsher, conflicts between traders are more likely to happen. Shop tenants in Xóm 6, most of whom are young or middle-aged women with selling experience, therefore have to be ahead of others in terms of fashion trends—that is why it is also called “Fashion Street”—and need to increase sales to be able to pay the very high and still rising rental fee.

Finally, there are two other markets: one is chợ Bazaar (Bazaar market), built in 2006; the other is just next to it, constructed in 2013. They are actually not built on the land of Ninh Hiệp, but of the neighbouring village, which belongs to Bắc Ninh province. Because of their
geographical proximity and due to the fact that most vendors are people from Ninh Hiệp, these two markets are briefly mentioned here, but were not part of my research. In any case, at the time of my research the stalls in Baza market were abandoned, except for the ones in the first row, directly along the main street. Consequently, the market was considered a failed market among villagers. One reason may be that the market is located too far away from the other markets and is thus not convenient for customers to reach. Another explanation relates to the rumour that there are ghosts, resulting in villagers not being eager to rent a stall there.

Notes

1. Since they are not registered as residents, they do not appear in official statistics and their number is therefore hard to estimate.
2. For a coverage of the topic in local online media, see Vietnamnet (2015).
3. What she calls a “spontaneous” local market is basically the exchange of goods of daily consumption and some of the crafts the villagers produced on a very small scale.
4. The average annual economic growth rate for the years 2008–2013 was between 15 and 16% (UBND huyện Gia Lâm and UBND xã Ninh Hiệp 2013).
5. In order to get a licence, traders have to register at the Finance and Planning Department of Gia Lâm district; unfortunately, the only list I could obtain is incomplete and inaccurate.
6. For more elaboration on this reasoning, see Nguyễn Phương Lê (2011, 98).
7. A more extensive discussion can be found in Papin (1997, 33–34) and Nguyễn Tuấn Anh (2010).
8. Chữ Nôm was the Vietnamese language based on Chinese characters before the usage of the Latin script. Kê means “ancient” as well as “land where exchange is done” (Lịch sử Ninh Hiệp, 8).
9. It is common practice in Vietnam that public markets are funded partly by the state and partly by traders who are guaranteed a stall in return. In the case of the old market, the state paid 1.7 billion Vietnamese Đồng
(VND) (around 116,000 USD in January 2001) while the people in Ninh Hiệp contributed the remaining 2.3 billion VND (157,000 USD).

References


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