

Alternative Intimate Spheres for Women in Vietnam

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Introduction

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This research unit focuses on the increasingly blurred boundary between the public and private spheres in contemporary Vietnam, within the context of the expansion of the private sphere during the *Doi Moi* (Renovation) era beginning in 1986. Within this frame, the unit exchanges research results on alternative intimate spheres for Vietnamese women by analyzing the roles of women in the three realms of family, religious activities, and political institutions. Based mainly on case studies of women's life stories, we have discussed the nexus of women in these realms and the role of womanhood in the construction of the nation-state and the reconstruction of a welfare regime in Vietnam.

This volume includes papers from a workshop as well as a seminar organized by the research unit in December 2011.

A workshop entitled "Alternative intimate spheres for women in Vietnam" was held at the School of Letters, Kyoto University, on December 17 and 18, 2011. While being advised by senior anthropologists of Vietnamese society, four young anthropologists and sociologists from Japan, the U.S., and Vietnam gave presentations on the two realms of religious activities and political institutions, discussing conflicts between the private and the public for women in these realms, women's solidarity and the counter publics emerging from close relationships among women in these activities, and the iconizing of women and its relation to ethnic identity and nation-state building in Vietnam.

Another seminar, entitled "Current anthropology on Vietnam," was held the next day at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, with collaboration from the museum. Two of the commenters from the workshop in Kyoto presented papers on the revival of kinship relationships in rural areas and transgender affairs in spirit rituals in Vietnam.

Our research project can be thought of in terms of four topics related to socio-economic changes in the *Doi Moi* process.

The first is the revival of the family in Vietnam's period of "compressed modernity" (Chang 1999). "Compressed modernity" is marked by the simultaneous progression of First Modernity, characterized by the emergence of the nation-state and industrial capitalism, on the one hand, and its rapid reconstruction in the process of "catching-up" in Asia (Ochiai 2010), on the other. "Compressed modernity" forces people to experience both the hastened assemblage of modern society and its rapid collapse under the pressure of the new global economy. This process brings about changes in welfare regimes in Asian countries (Ochiai 2009). Being asked to build welfare states with an insufficient state welfare system, the governments of these societies often try to empower the family as an effective social unit responsible for taking care of the disadvantaged. Such socioeconomic pressure on the family results in many informal attempts to create nexuses of people for mutual support outside the family by, for example, extending familial and kinship relations and strengthening local communities, religious activities, and civil society. These efforts bring about the construction of alternative intimate spheres outside the family, on the one hand, and structural changes in the public sphere, on the other (Ochiai 2010: 6-7).

In Vietnam, the reduction of the socialist welfare system brought about the return of the household as the unit of production and consumption (Bélanger and Barbieri 2009). For women in Vietnam, this revival of the family has several negative aspects. Though many studies indicate the ongoing liberalization of Vietnamese women during the *Doi Moi* process, reflected in changes in notions of sexual morality and marriage (Bélanger and Khuat 2002), scholars on gender studies also suggest that Vietnamese women are still struggling with the "traditional" gender roles (see also Tran Thi Minh Thi's paper in this volume). Some authors even report the reappearance of the "traditional" feminine role in the family for young urban women and the tendency of housewivization of young women in the emerging industrial socioeconomic structure in Vietnam (Bélanger and Khuat 1996).

Supposing that religious organizations and women's associations in Vietnam provide women with channels to escape from family and kinship relationships, and to reconnect them to society through close relationships among women in these organizations, and that those organizations can become bases for women to negotiate with the dominant state and social ideology of being "good" women in the family, our research unit named these organizations alternative intimate spheres for Vietnamese women. In fact, many academic works on Vietnamese women's religious activities explore how religious activities help women to overcome difficulties in their family life and integrate into peer communities and society (Pham Quynh Phuong 2009; Endres 2011). We started our project as an inquiry into the constitutive principles of these intimate spheres that substitute for the family, from the women's point of view.

However, the discussion in the two workshops required us to reconsider the framework above, though we could not answer all the comments raised in the workshops in the final version of our papers in this volume.

First, a discussion arose about the idea of the "traditional" family. Some of our papers point out that Vietnamese women are still struggling with traditional gender roles under the strong influence of the male-centered Confucian family ideology (see the papers of Ito Mariko and Tran Thi Minh Thi). For example, based on her quantitative and qualitative analysis of the domestic and social roles of female officials in political institutions, Tran argues that Vietnamese women face a dilemma between familial duties and social obligations.

However, the Vietnamese "traditional" kinship system itself had a bilateral character and provided relatively independent social realms for women within the kinship relations. Furthermore, we need to recognize that the Vietnamese male-centered Confucian family system is a historical phenomenon that became popular during the pre-modern period in Vietnam.

Another discussion emerged over the nature of close relationships in these organizations. Though these organizations strengthen solidarity among women and provide women with connections to society, they cannot be analyzed as "intimate" spheres that substitute for the family. Rather, these organizations can be better understood as counter "publics" from below by focusing on the way women identify with the concepts of "nation," "citizen," or "Vietnamese" through activities in these organizations.

The second context is the reconstruction of the public and "civil society" in Vietnam. We try to clarify the features of a social space between the state and the family from the viewpoint of the women who have crossed and re-crossed the boundary between the intimate and public spheres.

Generally speaking, secondary groups such as religious and political organizations are locus of conflicts between the public norms those institutions are expected to embody (ideologies of political parties, doctrines of religious organizations) and the internal rules of those groups as informal friendship organizations. For example, Ito Mariko's case study of a Cao daist temple describes conflicts between the elder female priest who insists on the doctrine of "*ho dao*" (the sect) and requires ordinary members to participate in rituals regularly, and ordinary female members who put more emphasis on informal mutual concern among members as the practice of "*dao minh*" (their way of doing things). Kato Atsufumi's paper analyzes debates at the village level among members of the Women's Union, an official mass organization, over whether they should help a troubled village woman because of the women's mutual love and affection ("*tuong than, tuong ai*"), or should not help her as the collective action of a state-affiliated organization because

her household is defined by the state as "uncultured."

Furthermore, Kato's paper discusses the important role of state-affiliated secondary associations, such as the Women's Union, in the reconstruction of the public sphere during Vietnam's period as a "transitional" society (see also Endres 1999; Vasavalul 2003; Wishermann and Nguyen 2003; Salemink 2006). We need to work on better understanding the reconstruction of the public in Asian societies: are they (1) public spheres based on or appropriating the public domain made by the state, (2) public spheres based on transnational civil societies that often bypass the state institution, or (3) radical counter-publics which cannot be absorbed by state values or civil virtue? It is a realm of inquiry that challenges the conventional understanding of civil society. At the same time, the discussion in the workshops also revealed that we need to work on researching the formation of public opinions through informal interactions (such as gossips in the kitchen) among women.

The third context is the increasing global flow of people and information during the Doi Moi period. This change brought about not only an increase in women's mobility in contexts such as international labor migration and international marriage, but also an increase in the circulation of images of Vietnamese womanhood, as Thien Huong Ninh's paper suggests.

The fourth context is the revival of religious activities. Some of the papers refer to the way in which private religious activities are connected to public developments such as the construction of ethnic identities and the national image. What is interesting here is that these practices are not necessarily caused by the state's mobilization. Ninh's paper describes the "Vietnamization" of the statue of Maria, through actions such as putting "ao dai" (Vietnamese traditional clothes) on it among Vietnamese Catholics in America and the re-importation of the icon from the US to Vietnam as a symbol for Vietnamese Catholics when the bilateral relationship between the two countries reappeared in the 1990s. Kirsten Enders' paper provides us with a case study of a woman who opens a private temple ("*phu*") in her house to practice spirit rituals. She then voluntarily starts gathering money to conduct a memorial service for famous female war dead in front of their memorial tower (cf. Endres 2011: 149-152). These activities are not only related to top-down transnational movements such as the Vatican's directives, changes in the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and the US, and the promotion of nationalism by the Vietnamese government, but also to autonomous public (or civil) activities emerging from below.

Lastly, we need to mention the issue of the Vietnamese translation of the term "intimate." For example, in Ito's paper, she describes ordinary female members of the Caodaist Hanoi temple using the term "*than mat*" [親密] to explain relationships among the members in which they talk freely about their personal matters in the waiting room of the temple or on their phones. However, it is open to further discussion whether it is common to use the word in this fashion. In general, the

word "than mat" implies extramarital affairs, the same as the word "intimate" in English. In the Western academic discourse of social science, the term "intimate sphere" is used to refer to the modern nuclear family and its variations and alternatives. However, if we try to analyze the intimate sphere in the contemporary Vietnamese context, we need to select proper words for "familial sentiments," "sexual love affairs," and "friendships," respectively. The difficulty in translating the word "intimate" suggests a discrepancy between the idea of intimate and public in the Western context and ideas about these terms in Vietnam and other Asian societies.

Though our research unit uses the term "Vietnamese," some of the papers provide more complicated perspectives on this category; these include Ninh's focus on the Vietnamese diaspora and Luong's emphasis on the regional differences between villages in the North and South. Also, Enders' paper on the transgender issue in spirit rituals questions the very category of "woman."

This working paper is indeed a volume of papers in the process of being elaborated. We have several issues that require further discussion, such as the temporal nexus of women in daily interactions, institutionalized organizations as a potential locus of alternative morality, and the usage of the terms "intimate," "private," and "public" in the Vietnamese context. We also need to explore what kind of roles the idea of womanhood, which is fermented in these activities, has in the nation-building and reconstruction of social values in the contemporary context in Vietnam. We welcome any kind of comments and advice to improve our papers and we hope that this working paper will start an exchange among scholars of Vietnamese studies in Japan and in the world.

Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the Kyoto University Global Center of Excellence Program for the Reconstruction of the Intimate and Public Spheres in 21st Century Asia for supporting our project. Especially, we thank Professor Ochiai Emiko, the leader of the GCOE program, for participating in the workshop in Kyoto for both days, and Professor Matsuda Motoji, for supervising our research unit.

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“Mother Looks Like Us!”: Gender Convergences and Complexities in Marianism among Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S., Cambodia, and Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

“Just as Our Lady of Fatima has saved Russia from communism in 1989, so she will too save Vietnam,” a father said in his Sunday mass sermon at the 2011 Annual Marian Festival in Carthage, Missouri. On the altar next to him and facing toward thousands of attendees were statues of Our Lady of Fatima in a white robe and Our Lady of Lavang in Vietnamese as a Vietnamese woman dressed in Vietnamese traditional clothes and headdress. This was no ordinary Catholic event. The three-day festival attracted more than 700,000 people. They were mostly Vietnamese Catholics who drove from the two coasts to this small town of approximately 15,000 people. Many also flew in from other countries such as Vietnam, Canada, France, and Australia. They are the children of Mary who have been dispersed throughout the world, isolated from each other, and are now reconnected through her. They have come together to pray for her blessings to heal the historical wounds that have fragmented their community and placed their country-of-origin under communism.

This paper traces the global dissemination of various forms of Marianism (in terms of beliefs, practices, and visualization) and the ways in which they mediate ethnic collectivity in the public and private spheres of Vietnamese living in the U.S., Cambodia, and Vietnam. It argues that Marianism was not synonymous with ethnic identity until re-connections among Vietnamese Catholics in these countries within the past 15 years, when Vietnam and Cambodia liberalized their economies and opened their borders to international exchanges. The Vietnamization of Marianism further expands Vietnamese Catholic life from the private realm shared by only members to a transnational public space that dynamically crosses cultural, economic, and political differences. However, as the paper shows, local ethnic reception and global economic forces have created uneven trajectories of Marian ethnicification among these three countries.

Furthermore, the paper illustrates how the female Marian figure reflects particular ideas about

gender within the context of Vietnamese ethnic identity, one that is not only “made” in the country-of-origin but also reconstituted and negotiated across national borders. Scholars have generally argued that economic liberalization since 1982 in Vietnam, which heightened during the late 1990s after the U.S. lifted its trade embargo, have brought about radical social transformations and unpredictable changes in gender relations and roles in the country. In particular, the lax in policies toward religious practices that occurred in tandem with marketization has given rise to the popularity of different forms of Mother Goddess worshipping (Taylor 2004; Pham and Eipper 2009; Fjelstad and Nguyen 2006). Whether the goddess is the Lieu Hanh in the north, Thien Y Ana in the central, or Black Lady and Our Lady of the Realm in the south, she has attracted thousands of pilgrims to her sacred homes and spurred an exponential growth in the number of temples built for her.

How and why have female religious figures become so popular in bringing both Vietnamese men and women to the same space of worship? Some studies have pointed out that the cult of the Mother Goddess reflects a yearning for the historical legacy and tradition of Vietnam as a matriarchal society. However, scholars have pointed out that her popularity is not only internally driven but also stirred by influences from overseas Vietnamese. For example, as Fjelstad (2006) has observed, Vietnamese Americans have elevated the worshipping of the Mother Goddess in Vietnam to a status of wealth and social standing with their overseas money and materials. Moreover, the appeal for the matriarchal past is contested by the similarly rise in the popularity of Saint Tran, a famous Vietnamese commander who is paired with the Mother Goddess to represent the “ideal” mother-father dyad in Vietnam (Pham and Eipper 2009).

Therefore, it appears that prominence of female sacred figures in contemporary Vietnam does not simply evoke continuity, yearning, desire, nor demand for particular traditions or norms about men and women. Instead, almost on the contrary, the phenomenon attracts individuals of both genders who seek the comfort of a female icon to address their “abnormalities” in relations to daily and historic norms. As many studies have shown, women who follow the Mother Goddess are able to re-examine and re-interrogate gender norms, by for example, being able to put on “masculine” uniforms and act “manly” during spirit possessions (Hoskins 2009; Norton 2006). Among the limited observations of male participants, research has shown that men who come to worship the Mother Goddess also bend sexual and gender expectations through, for example, expressing their “feminine” behaviors or flirting with married female participants (Norton 2009).

Thus, the question remains as how and why female rather than male religious icons have emerged to comfort Vietnamese living on cultural margins? Studies of a different form of mother goddess, the Blessed Virgin, have suggested that perhaps it is the “mothering” aspects of sacred

feminine figures that have a large following. As a mother, Mary conveys sympathy, acceptance, and solace to her children and mediates relationship between them and their spiritual Father. This partly explains why, for example, she has also been localized with black faces in southern Europe and as a Mexican woman in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe (Horsfall 2000; Duricy 2008). The visual transformation creates and solidifies blood, cultural, and physical bonds between Mary and her followers, as if the former is truly latter's biological mother.

This paper contributes to the contemporary body of literatures on gender and goddess worshipping in Vietnam by creating a theoretical bridge with studies on Marianism. It aims to understand how the visual reconstitution and symbolic representation of Mary reflect particular ideas about mother-child relations between her and her followers. In turn, with the focus on mothering, the paper seeks to broaden our theoretical insights on gender roles and relations in contemporary Vietnam.

OUR LADY OF LAVANG: HER APPARITION AND EUROPEAN IMAGE AS OUR LADY OF VICTORY (1798-1998)

According to an oral tradition, in 1798, Mary appeared in a small village named Lavang, 80 miles north of Hue, the former capital of Vietnam (Tran 2009). She comforted several Vietnamese Catholics who were praying for protection from anti-Catholic persecutions. Mary appeared three to four more times within the next twenty years and became locally known as "Our Lady of Lavang." About a century later, on the occasion of the first Lavang Convention in 1900, Bishop Louis Casper placed a French-modeled statue of Our Lady of Victory (Notre-Dame des Victoires) in the first newly-built church for Our Lady of Lavang. For nearly than a century, this statue of a Western-looking Mary was associated with Our Lady of Lavang.

Although she gradually grew in popularity, Our Lady of Lavang was not as widely known among Vietnamese Catholics as Vatican-endorsed Marian figures such as Our Lady of Fatima and Our Lady of Lourdes until 1954 (Hansen 2009). During this year, communist North and anti-communist South Vietnam were divided at the 17th parallel, about twelve miles north of the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary. This historic event forced approximately 60% of a million Catholics in North Vietnam to relocate to South Vietnam, where they would receive support from the U.S.-backed Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem regime (Tran 2005, 427-49). While some of them traveled by planes or boats, many also migrated by foot to escape communist surveillance. Among these individuals, some resettled in the Lavang area between 1954 and 1956 (De Jaegher 1962, 8). They rebuilt their religious communities and often renamed them after Our Lady of Lavang. The

Vatican expressed support for their struggles by elevating the Lavang sanctuary's rank to a national Marian center of pilgrimage in 1959 and to a minor basilica in 1961 (Tran 2009).

While Our Lady of Lavang symbolically united Vietnamese Catholics across the 17th parallel through her national status, she also reflected their struggles and hardships during one of the most violent periods in Vietnamese history. Between 1954 and 1975, within international Cold War politics, Soviet Union-supported North and U.S.-supported South Vietnam fought over the unification of the country. The war escalated to the “Red Summer Battles” (Chiến Thắng Mùa Hè Đỏ) of 1972, which nearly extinguished the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary and killed a large number Vietnamese Catholics in the surrounding area (Tran 2009).

After the war ended in 1975, Vietnamese Catholics slowly rebuilt the pilgrimage center and constructed another statue of Our Lady of Lavang modeled after the image of Our Lady of Victory (Archdiocese 2009). Religious life gradually resumed and the number of pilgrims continued to grow, as reflected by the attendance of more than half a million people at the Jubilee Year closure mass in 2011 (No Name 2011a). These collective acts of reconstruction and religious practices not only commemorated their history of suffering and separation. They also spoke volumes about Vietnamese Catholics' resilient faith under continuing harsh treatment from the new communist-led government and isolation from the Catholic church outside of Vietnam. These are locally situated meanings that shaped the Vietnamese Catholic community toward its own distinctive trajectory of development, tangential from the Vatican II transformations that had fundamentally re-interpreted Catholic practices and beliefs in many parts of the world during the 1960s.

HOW OUR LADY OF LAVANG BECAME VIETNAMESE: MARY AS A SYMBOL OF VIETNAMESE ETHNICITY ON AMERICAN SOIL RETURNS TO VIETNAM

Demographic Background

The communist takeover of South Vietnam in 1975 had forced more than two million Vietnamese to flee the country, not counting possibly another million that did not survive their flight (Coughlan 1998, 175-201; Robinson 1998; Tran 1997). While a small group of elites departed by planes, the majority fled by boats that left from ports along the southwestern coast of Vietnam (Tran 1994, 299-323). In 1975, about 125,000 Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. (Zhou and Bankston 1998). This group included approximately 200 priests and 250 sisters (Luong and Hien 2011). By 1980, the Vietnamese refugee population had doubled (U.S. Census Bureau 2011).

Among those who arrived in the U.S. during the 1970s, Catholics made up between 30-40% of this population (Chandler 1975, A3-a3). This over-representation, nearly four times their proportion in Vietnam, was likely due to the fact that many of them were associated with the former Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem government of South Vietnam. Moreover, many of the refugees had converted to Catholicism during the processes of flight and resettlement (Hoskins 2008). Today, the representation of Catholic is about 27% of the total 1.6 million Vietnamese Americans (Bankston 2000, 36-53).

While Orange County has a comparatively higher proportion of Catholics than other counties in the U.S., with approximately one in three individuals claiming Catholic affiliation, it also has the largest Vietnamese Catholic community outside of Vietnam. In 1982, there were approximately 7,000 Vietnamese Catholics (Vietnamese Catholic Center 1998). By 2010, this statistic had multiplied ten times and constituted 40% of the total number of Vietnamese in the region, according to the estimates of a church leader who works at the Orange Diocese (Father Long interview 2010). The Vietnamese population is the largest Asian Catholic group in Orange County, representing nearly 6% of the region's 1.2 million Catholics. Although it is proportionally smaller than the percentages of Anglo (55%) and Hispanic (35%) among all Orange County Catholics, the Vietnamese Catholic group makes up nearly 30% of all members of the religious vocation in the Orange Diocese (Father Long interview 2011). As a result, many Vietnamese priests have to learn another language, usually Spanish, in order to serve non-Vietnamese Catholics.

From Exodus to Resettlement: Vietnamese Marianism Transplanted on U.S. Soil (1975-1984)

As they resettled in the U.S., Vietnamese Catholics continued to pray to Mary and, arguably, did so more fervently because of their traumatic experiences of coerced displacement as refugees (Dorais 2007). However, there are no supporting records that they were devoted specifically to Our Lady of Lavang more than other Marian forms. Moreover, historical evidence has revealed that Vietnamese Catholics focused on Our Lady of Fatima in their homeland orientation. The popularity of Our Lady of Fatima -- possibly more than Our Lady of Lavang -- immediately after Vietnamese refugees arrived to the U.S. may be because of her official Vatican recognition and therefore greater universal appeal.

Since their early years of arrival in the U.S., Vietnamese Catholics concentrated on homeland orientation and anti-communism in their Marianism. In 1976, they came together to pray for the freedom of Vietnam from communism after Our Lady of Fatima appeared in Saigon (the former name of Ho Chi Minh City) although the Vatican did not verify the appearance (Tran 1994,

299-323). Since 1978, a larger number Vietnamese Catholics across the U.S. has also been attending the annual Marian Day to pray for Vietnam. The event attracted nearly 1,500 attendees during its first year and had continued to grow in popularity, although it is held annually in the isolated town of Carthage, Missouri during the dessert-heat month of August (Phan 2005, 457–472). The organizers were brothers of the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix, a religious order founded in Vietnam in 1941. They symbolically moved their religious headquarter to Carthage, Missouri after more than 50% of the group's members (175 brothers) fled Vietnam during post-1975 (Beyette 1991, 5-5). This refugee and near extinction experience has loomed large in the brothers' Marianism. Marian Day is not just another religious festival but a collective grass-roots political movement among Vietnamese Catholics to ask Mary to save Vietnam and its people from communism. This is the grounding from which the patroness of the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix had been dubbed "Our Lady of Global Peace." It created symbolic connections with Our Lady of Fatima, who first received this title from the Vatican in 1952 in order to protect Russia from communism (No Name 2011b). It also alludes to another Marian statue in Ho Chi Minh City (home of the largest number of Catholics in Vietnam) that was built in 1959 and was given the same title by the local diocese (Ngoc 2005).

The homeland orientation in Vietnamese American Catholic faith had been marginalized by the U.S. Catholic Church's implicit policy of cultural assimilation. In Orange County, Vietnamese Catholics faced pressures from the diocese to assimilate into its structural organization. Despite sufficient funding, large numbers and a clearly expressed desire, they did not receive permission from the Orange Diocese to establish their own ethnic parish. This disappointed them, since permission had been granted to the Polish and Korean Catholic communities during the 1980s (Krekelberg and Giacomi 2007). In 1983, Vietnamese Catholics were only allowed to establish the Vietnamese Catholic Center to hold non-religious community functions. Meanwhile, they had to continue to hold masses at local parishes led by non-Vietnamese pastors, although Vietnamese Americans were significantly over-represented among priests and religious brothers and sisters.¹ These forms of assimilation, with the aim of concealing and erasing the Vietnamese presence in the church, stirred resentment among many Vietnamese Catholics who shared with me that they felt exploited for financial gain by the Orange Diocese.

As a result of the experiences of marginalization, Vietnamese Catholics began to mobilize their ethnic representation outside of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 1980, Vietnamese American Catholics established the Federation of Vietnamese Catholics, which expanded a

¹ By 1978, four Vietnamese American priests had become pastor but, ironically, none served the largest Vietnamese American Catholic community in Orange County (Tran, 1994, pg. 310).

clergy-based national organization founded in 1976 to include the laity (Phan 2000, 19-35). This grassroots organizing created networks among Vietnamese Americans dispersed throughout the U.S. and mobilized their representation within the Catholic church (Father Lam interview 2010). It occurred more than a decade before the Vatican and the U.S. church systemically created a mechanism for Vietnamese Catholics to represent themselves, when the former established the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese in 1988 and the latter followed with its US counterpart in 1989.

From these simultaneous experiences of exclusion within the U.S. church hierarchy and organizational strength among Vietnamese American Catholics, Our Lady of Lavang emerged as a unique Vietnamese cultural representation by the early 1980s. She was not commonly known outside of Vietnam and her lack of recognition from the Vatican had restricted her popularity to Vietnamese Catholics. However, it is precisely because of these particular associations with Vietnam and Vietnamese identity that Our Lady of Lavang has become a symbolic ethnic marker for Vietnamese American Catholics to distinguish themselves from other Catholics in the U.S. As early as 1982, Vietnamese Catholics began using her name to label their ethnically-based religious organizations (Dinh 1995). Within the next decade, the representation of Our Lady of Lavang for Vietnamese ethnicity had achieved its full momentum, reaching beyond local recognition and toward international acceptance.

Our Lady of Vietnam: Ethnic Identity and Homeland Ties (1985-1994)

Beginning in 1985, Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. used their organizational prowess to globalize the status of Our Lady of Lavang. During this year, they received news from the Vatican that Catholics in Vietnam were petitioning for the canonization of 117 martyrs who were persecuted in Vietnam (Tran 2009). Vietnamese American Catholics joined the movement and, for the first time in a decade, they were re-connected to co-religionists in the homeland. While working on the canonization, Vietnamese Catholics in the U.S. and Vietnam also campaigned for the Vatican's recognition of the Our Lady of Lavang apparition.

As a result, for the first time in history, Pope John Paul II publicly discussed the significance of Our Lady of Lavang with Vietnamese Catholics immediately after the ceremony of canonization for the 117 martyrs in Rome on June 19, 1988 (Tran 2009). Following this historic event, during the same year, he established the Center of Pastoral Apostolate for Overseas Vietnamese to create an institutional bridge with the overseas Vietnamese community. The organization undoubtedly informed the Holy Father about the 200th year of commemoration of Our Lady of Lavang's

apparition in 1998. By the early 1990s, Pope John Paul II referred to Our Lady of Lavang much more frequently to the public and in international scenes in anticipation of the celebration (Tran 1994, 299-323).

Our Lady of Lavang's growing global popularity further solidified ethnic pride among Vietnamese American Catholics in Orange County, California. However her European image was incompatible with their yearning to integrate Vietnamese ethnicity into Catholicism. As a result, in 1994, they constructed the first Vietnamese representation of Mary (Vietnamese Catholic Center Booklet 1998). Her white statue, sculpted by Van Nhan and placed at the entrance to the Vietnamese Catholic Cultural Center, represents Mary dressed in Vietnamese traditional clothes (áo dài) and her head adorned by a saucer-like headdress (Figure 1). She holds a miniature statue of Jesus in front of her, "as if she wants to hand her most beloved child to Vietnamese people in order to save them and their race" (Vietnamese Catholic Center Booklet 1998, pg. 17). She stands on a grotto in the shape of an S that represents Vietnam and its mountainous ridges. According to a publication by the Vietnamese Catholic Cultural Center, this representation of Mary "guides the spirit of Vietnamese people to return to their homeland roots" and to pray for their co-religionists who are suffering from communism (Vietnamese Catholic Center Booklet 1998, pg. 17). Meanwhile, it also brings "peace and tranquility" to Vietnamese faithful who are adapting to life in a new country.

Vietnamese American Catholics named her "Our Lady of Vietnam" to emphasize their lingering connections to the homeland as well as their cultural heritage. Moreover, they also informally referred to her as "Mary of Global Peace." This created symbolic connections to other forms of Marianism that had also been associated with the same title by Vietnamese Catholics, particularly the statue of Mary at Marian Day's home site in Carthage, Missouri and the one in the center of the Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

Our Lady of Lavang: From A European Icon to a Global Symbol of Vietnamese Catholicism (1995-Present)

After Vietnam re-established diplomatic ties with the U.S. in 1995, its economic integration and globalization had created more channels for Vietnamese American Catholics to reconnect to co-religionists in their homeland. For example, they could easily send remittances and fly directly to Vietnam on a U.S. carrier. Meanwhile, the government of Vietnam was also loosening strictures toward religious practices as part of its agenda to create friendlier economic ties with Western countries (Bouquet 2010, 90-108). It formally recognized Catholicism as the second largest

religious group in Vietnam, with a following of six million or seven percent of Vietnam's population in 2005 (Vietnamese Committee for Religious Affairs 2006).

Within the context of economic globalization and religious tolerance in Vietnam, Vietnamese bishops received news about the statue of Our Lady of Vietnam and wanted to replace the European statue of Our Lady of Lavang in preparation for the 200th commemoration in 1998. They were further encouraged by personal support from the Vatican. Between 1996 and early 1998, the bishops received many letters of blessings from Pope John Paul II in reference to the upcoming historic ceremony (Tran 1994, 299-323).

Consequentially, church leaders in Vietnam invited Vietnamese American Van Nhan, who sculpted Our Lady of Vietnam, to create a Vietnamese statue of Our Lady of Lavang (Tran 2009). Like the image of Our Lady of Vietnam, the new representation of Our Lady of Lavang depicts Mary dressed in a white Vietnamese traditional clothes (áo dài) and wearing a golden headdress (Figure 2). She also holds a statue of baby Jesus. However, it arguably portrays Vietnamese traditions much more poignantly than the former because of its added colors. Certainly, the blue cloak that is on top of Our Lady of Lavang's white áo dài alludes to the conventional representation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. However, because the cloak is a Vietnamese traditional dress reserved for special Vietnamese occasions, such as weddings, the new image highlights important references to Vietnamese culture.

On July 1, 1998, this statue received blessings by Pope John II in Rome (Tran 2009). At this celebrated event, the Holy Father also proclaimed Our Lady of Lavang as the patroness of the Catholic Church of Vietnam. Although this religious honor did not officially recognize the historical accuracy of the apparition of Our Lady of Lavang in 1798, it was a source of inspiration for Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world. For the first time in history, a Vietnamese icon of the Catholic faith was officially introduced to the global Catholic community. On August 13, 1998, two hundred years after her apparition, more than 200,000 attendees gathered in Lavang to worship Our Lady of Lavang in the representation of a Vietnamese woman.

Ever since, there have many sites constructed in honor of the Our Lady of Lavang in the U.S., including a church in Santa Ana, California completed in 2001 and an altar inside the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. completed in 2006. These developments are not simply cultural representation for Vietnamese American Catholics. They also reflect, remind, and galvanize the continuing ethical responsibility of Vietnamese American Catholics to co-religionists in their country of origins. As citizens of the richest and most powerful country in the world, they have access to economic, political, and cultural resources that could speak for those in Vietnam. In 2010, Vietnamese American Catholics and other overseas

Vietnamese Catholics dispersed throughout the world officially formed the twenty-seventh diocese of the Catholic church in Vietnam. They were collectively known as the “Overseas Diocese,” as engraved on a stone placed at the Our Lady of Lavang sanctuary on January 4th of that year (Publicity Committee for the 2010 Holy Year Mass 2010). At the Marian Day in August 2011, a priest reminded more than 70,000 attendees (mostly Vietnamese) that, if Mary had freed Russia from the clasp of communism, then she will also do so for Vietnam.

OUR LADY OF THE MEKONG RIVER IN CAMBODIA CROSSES ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS, AND BORDER DIVIDES

Demographic Background

Vietnamese Catholics lived in Cambodia as early as the mid-17th century under French colonialism (Ponchaud 1990). Although the population was probably small, they most likely made up nearly (more than 95%) the whole Catholic community in Cambodia, which was predominantly Theravada Buddhist. The community grew during the mid-19th century when more Vietnamese Catholics sought refuge in the country from the religious persecutions in Vietnam (Ponchaud 1990). Vietnamese Catholics constituted between seven and eight percent of all Vietnamese in Cambodia by this time (Ponchaud 1990). In 1914, there were 32,500 Vietnamese Catholics of the total 36,000 Catholics in Cambodia. They also made up a significant number within the vocation (Ponchaud 1990). For example, by this time, there were thirteen Vietnamese Catholic priests, which was equal to the number of foreign missionaries.

As of 1970, before the massive killing of and repatriation of Vietnamese to Vietnam in the middle of the 1970s, at least one account reported that Vietnamese continued to make up more than 90% of all Catholics in the country or 60,000 out of the total 65,000 Catholics (Phan 2011). The heightened anti-Vietnamese violence during the 1970s radically reduced the Vietnamese Catholic population. Most Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia fled to South Vietnam between May 10 and August 15, 1970 under the Lon Nol regime (1970-1975), which expelled more than half of the 400,000-member Vietnamese population (Ponchaud 1990)(Kiernan 1990, 64). The Khmer Rouge rule that followed in the next three years either killed or expelled the remaining 150,000 Vietnamese (Chanda 1986).¹

Since the 1980s, Vietnamese have been slowly returning to Cambodia. Estimates of their

¹ Cited in Kiernan 2011, p. 586.

population varied widely. Kiernan's 1990 article estimated that there were 200,000 Vietnamese, less than half of group's population during pre-1970 (pg. 64). In a 1993 report, the United Transitional Authority of Cambodia (UNTAC) counted that there were about 500,000 Vietnamese or 5.5% of the country population (Economist Intelligence Unit 1993).¹ However, Cambodian political claimed that there are between one and four million Vietnamese in the country (Owsley 1995, 377-416).

Although the size of the Vietnamese group in Cambodia remains unclear today, Catholic leaders believe that, within this group, there are approximately 22,000 Catholics or two thirds of all Catholics in the country (Father Canh interview 2010; Father Martin interview 2010; Destombes 2007). While Vietnamese remains as the majority among all Catholics in Cambodia, their proportion has significantly been reduced due to conversion among Khmers.

Unlike their counterparts in the U.S. who could become citizens, most Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia are stateless, legally excluded from obtaining citizenship in Cambodia and Vietnam (Tarr 1992, 33-47). As a result, they have limited access to education and formal employment opportunities (Tarr 1992, 33-47; Berman 1996, 817-874). Many Vietnamese children abandon their education at around thirteen years old in order to start working (Miss Ha interview 2010). They make about \$5 per day or \$60-\$70 per month (Father Canh interview 2010). This income is barely enough to cover food expenses, but often cannot pay for unexpected incidental costs and large forms of investments, such as hospital care. As a result, Vietnamese Catholics often have to pool their financial resources to help each other. Meanwhile, they remain impoverished and this poverty is perpetuated through generations because of the lack of access to social services (Tarr 1992, 33-47).

Vietnamese Marianism on Cambodian Soil: From Transplantation to Growth (1860-1961)

During the first one hundred years of their arrival in Cambodia from 1860 to 1961, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia most likely did not worship Our Lady of Lavang because they were geographically distant from her sanctuary in central Vietnam and modes of far-distant communication were limited. Instead, they most likely developed their own tangential course of Marian worship under the leadership of religious orders that served and led them. In 1869, the Sisters of Providence of Portieux arrived in Cambodia from Vietnam to serve the growing Catholic community, which was in large part due to the large influx of Vietnamese Catholics since King Norodom gave them a piece of land in Russey Keo (the present-day second largest district of

¹ Cited in Abuza, p. 441.

Phnom Penh) four years earlier (Ponchaud 1990). The sisters belonged to the first religious order that arrived in Cambodia. They brought with them their patroness, Mary Help of Christians, who most likely shaped their religious outreach and solidified Marian piety among Vietnamese Catholics. Although the Providence of Portieux came from in France, many Vietnamese participated in it. From 1880 to 1925, its novitiate near the border between Vietnam and Cambodia trained 333 sisters, all of whom were Vietnamese.

During the 1940s and 1950s, when foreign missionaries began to gradually return to Europe as a result of the French defeat in the Indochina War, Vietnamese Catholics continued to perpetuate Marianism on Cambodian territory. Between 1945 and 1959, the Providence of Portieux moved its headquarters from Can Tho province (which borders Cambodia) to Phnom Penh. By now, the number of Vietnamese sisters had greatly outnumbered their French counterparts, with the former at 280 and the latter at nineteen. Although the Providence of Portieux returned to Vietnam in 1959, after the diocese of Phnom Penh separated itself from two Vietnamese provinces following the end of the Indochinese War, the Daughters of Mary continued to develop Marianism in Cambodia through its patroness (Ponchaud 1990). It was established in 1943 in the heart of the Vietnamese Catholic community, Russey Keo, and was made up of mostly Vietnamese.

Khmerization and Nationalism: Vietnamese Exclusion and Expulsion (1962-1978)

During the 1960s and 1970s, Vietnamese Marianism in Cambodia was not connected to Our Lady of Lavang although her sanctuary in Vietnam had become a national shrine and a minor basilica. Following the Vatican II religious reinterpretations in 1962, the Catholic Church in the country institutionalized radical transformations under the leadership of Bishop Yves-Georges-René Ramousse. Among these changes was notably the Khmerization of Catholicism, which intended to expand the outreach of the faith to Cambodians by integrating Khmer culture into religious practices and beliefs (Ponchaud 1990). In 1964, the liturgy was completely translated from Latin into Khmer. Catholic teachings, rituals, and beliefs were also localized into familiar “Buddhist” forms for Khmers. For example, the faithful sit cross-legged on the ground nearly throughout mass, as if they were visiting wats and temples. Catholic concepts such as “life after death” and “baptism” were loosely translated in references to Buddhist ideas of “reincarnation” and “rebirth” (Father Canh interview 2010). In some cases, Catholic practices are re-incorporated into Buddhist forms but retain Catholic interpretations. For instance, incense sticks replaced candles in churches and at home altars and the Catholic Saint’s Day was moved back by almost two months to coincide with Pchum Ben (Ancestors’ Day) in September, the second largest holiday in Cambodia during which Buddhists throughout the country visit pagodas. As a result of

these accommodations to Khmer culture, Vietnamese Catholics became gradually marginalized in the post-Vatican II Cambodian church although their population Catholics continued to exceed the number of ethnic Khmer Catholics in all congregations (Ponchaud 1990).

Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia remained disconnected from Our Lady of Lavang in Vietnam during the 1970s. While the sanctuary for Our Lady of Lavang was burned down by 1972 and religious life in Vietnam came under strict communist surveillance after 1975, they were also caught in a wave of anti-Vietnamese nationalism that swept across Cambodia. They were forced to flee to Vietnam or, if they were willing to risk their lives and remained in Cambodia, had to conceal their Catholic and Vietnamese identity. During this decade, all church buildings except for two, including the original house of the Providence of Portieux (Sister Mary of Providence of Portieux interview 2010), were destroyed. All Vietnamese-dominated religious orders, including Daughters of Mary, also returned to Vietnam during this time (Ponchaud 1990).

Despite their resettlement in Vietnam during the 1970s, Vietnamese Catholics originally from Cambodia did not learn much about the Our Lady of Lavang because of the limited level of interaction with local co-religionists. Most of them were placed in Vietnamese camps in rural areas along the Mekong River and near the Cambodia-Vietnam border (Tran 1979). This region did not have many local Catholics, who had been mostly concentrated in Saigon and neighboring cities such as Hoi An and Bien Hoa since 1954 (Frankum 2007). Furthermore, the conditions of war, political instability, and poverty created more challenging obstacles for them to establish communication across distant regions.

The Return of Vietnamese Catholics and the Catholic Church (1979-1995)

After Vietnamese soldiers toppled the Khmer Rouge in January 1979, Vietnamese Catholic returnees and new immigrants slowly re-entered Cambodia but did not revive Marianism. They remained cautious about their faith and did not have any statue of Mary nor other religious objects. My interviewees informed me that concealed their identities and practiced Catholicism underground. Among these individuals included Father Tinh. He was the only priest in the country during this time but he never wore his religious black robe. He wanted to flee from Vietnam to a Western country but had been “trapped” in Cambodia since 1987.

Although the Vietnamese government halted the Khmer Rouge genocide, Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia between 1979 and 1989 re-ignited Khmer nationalism grounded in anti-Vietnamese feeling. For example, while I was in the field, I learned that Cambodians frequently circulated a story about a group of Vietnamese soldiers who killed three Cambodian men

and used their heads as stands for a stove. Even the Vietnamese-installed Hun Sen government also employed anti-Vietnamese rhetoric to bolster its nationalistic discourses even though, according to my Vietnamese and Cambodian informants, most Vietnamese voted for him. The rise of Khmer nationalism during the early 1990s resulted in the killings of many Vietnamese despite the presence of UNTAC between 1992 and 1993 (Ehrentraut 2011; Tarr 1992; Berman 1996, 817-874; Abuza 1995, 433-445).

When the European-led Catholic church officially returned to Cambodia in 1991 within this context of anti-Vietnamese hostility, it restricted Vietnamese forms of Marianism by advocating for the Khmerization of Mary as part of its inculturation agenda. Under Bishop Yves-Georges-René Ramousse, who also led the Khmerization transformations during the 1960s in Cambodia, Mary was redesigned in the form of a Khmer woman (Figure 3). She was imagined as a woman dressed in Khmer traditional clothes: a sarong (a long skirt), a simple long-sleeve top, and a kroma (a hand-made, multi-functional scarf) wraps around her neck. Her two hands hold a small figurine of baby Jesus. Moreover, because her image is often carved out of the banyan tree, her skin tone is distinctively dark and makes her stand in great contrasts to “white” European statues of Mary.

All of my Vietnamese Catholic interviewees informed me that they were shocked when they first saw the Khmer statue of Mary. Even Father Tinh, the only Vietnamese priest in Cambodia, could not convince his Vietnamese followers to worship the Khmer statue of Mary and had to replace it with a “white” one. Many Vietnamese Catholics shared with me that they believe Mary was “white” and beautiful, suggesting that the dark-skinned Khmer version of Mary was not beautiful. While several also said that they could not possibly stand citing prayers in front of the Khmer Mary, others believed that the Virgin Mary in heaven would not receive their prayers if they prayed to her.

The Khmerization of Mary visually reflected the at-large exclusion and forced assimilation of Vietnamese Catholics within the Catholic Church in Cambodia. This is apparent in the church’s structural hierarchy. Vietnamese Catholics often whispered to me that most leadership positions in the lay organizations, such as pastoral committees, are reserved for Khmers even though Vietnamese Catholics constitute the majority among lay people. Moreover, the church restricts the participation of Vietnam-born and Vietnamese men in the priesthood.

For example, although Father Tinh had revealed his identity as a priest to the bishop in 1993, he was not allowed to practice until 1997. He became and had remained as the only Vietnam-born priest serving in Cambodia. Father Tinh speculated that the bishop would not have permitted him to practice if it were not for the fact that he could not legally return to his homeland, Vietnam, nor resettle in another country. The bishop had turned down all requests from priests in Vietnam to

serve the Vietnamese Catholic community in Cambodia. He often justified this by saying that the church in Cambodia does not need any more priests, according to Father Tinh. However, the reality was that the Vietnamese Catholic community has been underserved. They often were not able to attend Sunday and other important masses because there were not enough priests to visit all the villages. This was in contrast to the cases of churches in the city, which held regular masses catered to predominately Khmer and (non-Vietnamese) expatriate congregations. Similar to the restriction of Vietnamese priests, the Catholic church in Cambodia places a cap on the number of Vietnamese-ancestry religious brothers and sisters in the country despite the high demands of Vietnamese Catholics for their teaching and service. Father Tinh said that he had received many requests from Vietnamese brothers and sisters to serve the Vietnamese Catholic community in Cambodia, but the bishop had allowed only handful to do so.

Along with the restriction of Vietnamese Catholics at leadership levels, the Cambodia Catholic church also informally followed a policy of linguistic assimilation. It enforced the use of Khmer language in all ceremonial church activities, including masses, weddings, and funerals. To achieve this goal, the bishop was willing to pay for Khmer language and cultural classes taught by Khmer teachers in all Vietnamese villages.

Ironically, however, the Khmer language had been a barrier for Vietnamese Catholics to express their faith even though they are fluent in colloquial Khmer. Even those Vietnamese Catholics who were best educated in Khmer, such as religious brothers and sisters who regularly attended and supervised the Khmer classes, did not know how to use it in the church. As a result, Vietnamese Catholics used Khmer only for masses, as enforced by the bishop, but almost exclusively spoke in Vietnamese during other religious activities.

Moreover, although the Catholic church hierarchy had the good intention of integrating Vietnamese Catholics into Cambodian society, the Khmer language and culture program could not reverse their legal exclusion. Without legal recognition in order to access many employment opportunities, Vietnamese Catholics had to live “day by day” with their limited incomes from informal work and do not have high hopes for the future, according to Father Tinh. As a result, parents did not encourage their children to attend the Khmer classes but to start working at around the age of thirteen to help out with the family finances.

Our Lady of the Mekong River: The Spiritual Mother of Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia (Mid-1990s-Present)

By the late mid-1990s, the Cambodian church’s policies of ethnic marginalization and

assimilation toward Vietnamese Catholics were out of sync with the gradually improving relations between Cambodia and Vietnam. As both of these countries liberalized and globalized their economies, they began to re-established bilateral ties. In 1998, Vietnam and Cambodia established a joint border committee to resolve one of the most contentious issues between the two countries (Amer 2010, 92-116). This partly paved the way for Cambodia's acceptance into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations at the end of December 1998 in Hanoi, effectively ending its isolation from its neighbors. As the bilateral relationship progressed, the Vietnamese government also became more involved in Cambodia's affair concerning the Vietnamese population, particularly through the Overseas Vietnamese Organization (Hội Việt Kiều).¹

At the crossroad of porous borders, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia showed early signs of revived Marianism by collectively purchasing (European) statues of Mary in Vietnam in 1998 and 2000. However, these early forms of Marianism did not connect Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia to Our Lady of Lavang, which by 1998 had become the patroness of Vietnam and a unifying symbol for Vietnamese Catholics throughout the world. The reason is that, in the context of Khmerization and ethnic marginalization within the Catholic Church in Cambodia, Vietnamese Catholics were allowed to only worship Mary as “white” (European representation) or “dark” (Khmer representation). As a result, they remained unaware of a specifically Vietnamese Our Lady of Lavang, according to my informants. Moreover, even though Catholics arriving from Vietnam knew about Our Lady of Lavang, they were reluctant to introduce her image to Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia most likely because they feared provoking the authority of the local bishop. Unlike co-religionists in the U.S. who could freely organize and mobilize their concerns because of their rights as citizens, Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia are stateless and depend on the local church hierarchy for legal protection.

In 2008, the options between “white” and “dark” versions of Mary expanded to include a grayish and oxidized image that had come to symbolize Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia. In April of this year, a group of Khmer fishermen from a village named Areyksach in Phnom Penh lifted a 130 kg and 1 meter and 50 inches tall steel statue of Our Lady of Fatima from the Mekong

¹ Vietnam News Agency (Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam), “Trường Việt Kiều ở Campuchia Hoạt Động Hiệu Quả (Vietnamese Language School Activities in Cambodia are Successful), July 27, 2010, accessed December 1, 2010 (<http://www.baomoi.com/Truong-Viet-kieu-o-Campuchia-hoat-dong-hieu-qua/59/4618408.epi>); Ibid., 400 Gia Đình Việt Kiều ở Campuchia bị Hoà Hoàn” (400 Overseas Vietnamese Families in Cambodia Suffer from Fire), March 29, 2004, accessed April 1, 2010 (<http://vietbao.vn/Xa-hoi/400-gia-dinh-Viet-kieu-o-Campuchia-bi-hoa-hoan/10856383/157/>).

River (Figure 4). They recognized the object as a Catholic figurine and gave it to Vietnamese Catholics in the village. Because it is made out of steel, Father Tinh suspected that the statue was not locally made in Asia but brought to Cambodia by French missionaries at least 50 years ago. Like many other religious objects, it was most likely thrown into the Mekong River by Khmer Rouge soldiers during their rule between 1975 and early 1979.

Gradually, the statue grew in popularity and became colloquially known as “Our Lady of the Mekong River.” As a result of the generosity of benefactors and pilgrims throughout Cambodia and in other countries, Vietnamese Catholics were able to collect \$22,000 to build a shrine for the statue (Uncle Ten 2010). The sacred site includes an artificial 8.1 meter high mountain located next to the village church. It alludes to the pilgrimage centers of Our Lady of the Realm and the Black Lady in Vietnam near the border with Cambodia that Khmer Buddhists have been visiting (Taylor 2004; Taylor 2010, 85-102; Guthrie 2004). However, Our Lady of Mekong seems to be visually more Khmer than these goddesses because her hands are clasped and placed on her chest as in a traditional Cambodian form.

Vietnamese Catholics in Areyksach have consciously relied on Our Lady of the Mekong River to facilitate exchanges with Buddhist Khmer. Instead of referring to her by a popular church designation, such as Our Lady of Fatima or Our Lady of Lourdes, they named her after the Khmer name of the river. The title transforms the Virgin Mary from a Catholic icon into a mother for both Vietnamese Catholics and Buddhist Cambodians because her name reminds them of their shared economic deprivation. They can no longer rely on the Mekong River for fish. Instead, it has become a divider that keeps them away from the city, now home to rich people and development projects. Wealth looms large in new modern buildings and foreign brand name stores visible across the Mekong River, and yet Areyksach villagers live in a world of poverty and slums that is far distant from it.

Simultaneously, Our Lady of the Mekong River has become an important exportable and mobile representation of Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia. As her popularity expanded and traveled to other countries, she also brings news about them to their ethnic co-religionists counterparts in other countries. This is essential because most Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia do not have access modern forms of communication, such as the Internet and phones, which are necessary to extend their outreach beyond Cambodia and Vietnam.

The cross-border reconnections established through Our Lady of the Mekong River have been important in ameliorating the social isolation, political marginalization and economic deprivation of Vietnamese Catholics in Cambodia. They have facilitated circulation of support among Vietnamese Catholics dispersed throughout the world. For example, members of the Pastoral

Committee of Areyksach informed me that, because of Our Lady of Mekong River, they have received monetary donation from Vietnamese Catholics in distant countries such as the U.S., France, and Australia. In return for the financials support, they pray for their donors to Our Lady of the Mekong River. These transnational exchanges with co-religionists were limited and nearly impossible before they began worshipping her.

CONCLUSION

This paper reveals that Vietnamese co-religionists in the U.S., Vietnam, and Cambodia have re-established connections with each other by employing Vietnamese forms of Marianism, representing the Blessed Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Vietnam, Our Lady of Lavang, and Our Lady of the Mekong River. From these transnational ties, they resist nation-state models of integration and collectively work toward reconciliation through ethnic recovery. As the research has shown, the Blessed Virgin Mary in her indigenized Vietnamese forms intends to undo the imagery erasure of Vietnamese Catholic history, memory, and experiences. At the same time, she alludes to the distinctive religious experiences of Catholics originally from Vietnam and now dispersed throughout the world. This uniqueness is an important ground on which Vietnamese in the U.S., Vietnam, and Cambodia forge a cross-border collective identity and heal through ethical responsibility to each other. By helping each other in terms of monetary, material, and spiritual support, they are re-learning, re-cultivating, and re-building the basic principles of human relationship that have been damaged by coerced displacement, geographical separation, and continuing marginalized ethnic status.

The transnational connection among Vietnamese Catholics through Mary reflects her symbolic role as a sacred mother who could sustain and mediate relations among her children who are dispersed throughout the world. Vietnamese Catholics have transformed her into their ethnic image in order to assert not simply cultural connections but also blood ties, as if she were their biological mother. They seek her to express their pain and sufferings as marginalized ethnic minorities with a long traumatic history of war and violence. She is their mother who would listen to their cries and help them. It is precisely at this point of convergence that Mary, in her various Vietnamese forms, has become a distinctively Vietnamese mother who could create reconnections among Vietnamese Catholics in the US, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The mothering element of a female religious figure, such as the Blessed Virgin, does not conceal gender inequality or sexual marginalization. Rather, it complicates our understanding of these concepts in current literatures on mother worshipping. Vietnamese women and men may have

different reasons for seeking comfort and solace from goddess icons. However, they share in the need and desire for a mother who would listen, accept, and understand their challenges and difficulties during a period of rapid cultural, economic, and political changes. In this way, they have “hyper-gendered” mother goddess figures with certain conceptions of who and how a mother should be. At the same time, it is within this space of mother-children relations that Vietnamese men and women could redefine sexuality and gender in Vietnam and abroad.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Our Lady of Vietnam (completed in 1995, Santa Ana, California)



Figure 2: Our Lady of Lavang as a Vietnamese woman (completed in 1998, La Vang, Vietnam)



Figure 3: The Blessed Virgin re-imagined as a Khmer woman (introduced during the 1990s, Phnom Penh, Cambodia)



Figure 4: Our Lady of the Mekong Delta (Phnom Penh, Cambodia)



Creation of “Our Own Moral”: A Case Study of the Concept of “Đạo Mình” and Women's Community in a Caodaist Temple in Hanoi

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Introduction

The Hanoi Temple (Thánh Thất Thu Đô Hà Nội) on which I have been conducting my anthropological field research is a subgroup of the syncretic religion, Caodaism (Đạo Cao Đài), which is especially popular in Southern Vietnam.

In this paper, I clarify the character of the social space by comparatively analyzing the concepts of the two terms “hộ đạo” (religious family), and “đạo mình” (our own morals), to which women of the Hanoi Temple community often refer in everyday practices, including religious activities.

Although both “hộ đạo” and “đạo mình” are used by women in the Hanoi Temple community to distinguish themselves from those outside the community, each term has a different meaning. Usually, “hộ đạo” means a parish that follows a particular sect of Caodaism, but it also means a family comprised of members who share a common “đạo” (Caodaist doctrine) in the same parish. Basically, the term was brought into use by the priestess Hoa (79 years old), the representative of “hộ đạo,” to emphasize the ideal relationship to the Hanoi Temple community. On the other hand, “đạo mình” usually refers to expressing one’s own “đạo,” that is, one’s own belief in Caodaistic religious thought. However, through close analysis of daily usage of the term “đạo mình,” it becomes clear that the “đạo mình” concept carries some interesting connotations. Users of this term often mention certain ideas, feelings, and acts that do not directly stem from orthodox Caodaism doctrine: extramarital affairs, participation in different religious groups’ activities, passive or negative feelings or attitudes toward the Hanoi Temple community, and so on. Their heterodox usage of “đạo” does not necessarily indicate direct disobedience to Caodaistic doctrine or to the parish. It implies a reinterpretation of the meaning of suffering in their lives so that they can share it and make it tolerable, and can reconstruct their own morals that are in line with the various issues they have encountered.

It is true that laypeople's heterodox usage of the term “đạo” has given rise to internal conflict with the priestess in various situations in their interactions in the temple, but laypeople still continue to gather in the Hanoi Temple community. How should we view the relationships of women in the Hanoi Temple community? Is it possible to consider the Hanoi Temple community as a social space where the public and private spheres intermingle? We may discover the possibility of alternative notions about the public and private spheres through the case of the Hanoi Temple community.

1. Background

1-1. Caodaism

Caodaism is one of the syncretic religions that have practices and beliefs derived from Vietnamese popular beliefs, as well as from major world religions and ideologies such as Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, and Confucianism. This religious movement expanded rapidly with the modernization of the rural area in Southern Vietnam under French colonial rule in the middle of the twentieth century. A few million peasants in the southern area followed the Caodaism movement at that time¹.

After 1975, all religious and ritual activities have been under rigorous control of the Vietnamese communist government. Now, Caodaism has eight sects and an association that organizes its own activities with communist authorization; in total, there are over 3 million believers in Vietnam and elsewhere (see Figure 1). Caodaism followers worship the super being, called “Đức Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế.” He is represented as a creator of the universe and the father of human beings². The goddess, called “Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu,” is represented as the mother of humankind³. All human beings in the world are viewed as their children in Caodaism, and followers identify each other as brothers and sisters. For example, in the Ban Chinh Dao sect, the

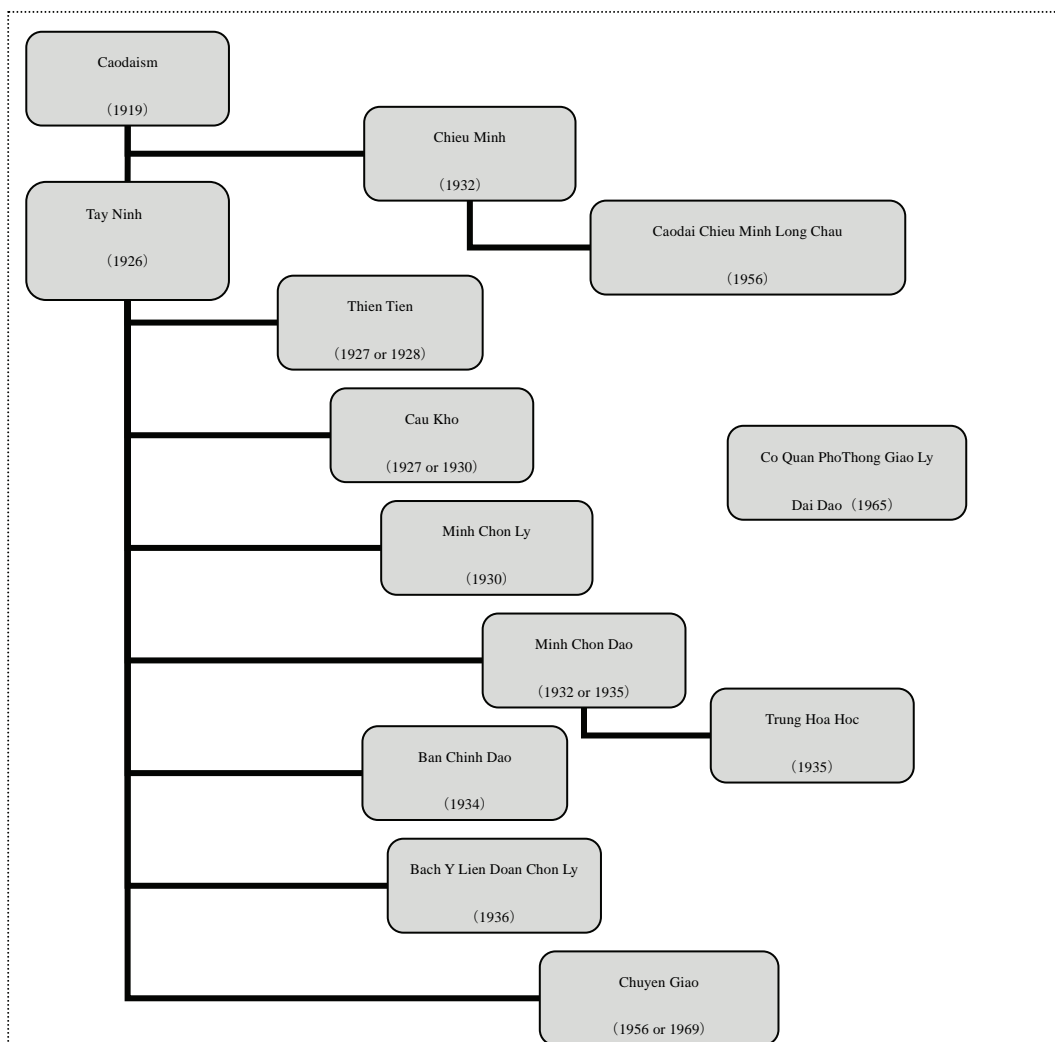
¹ Most of the previous studies about Caodaism have discussed its origin, history, tenets, hierarchical organizational structure, and sociopolitical involvements with nationalism and millennialism [cf. Oiwa 1941, Gobron 1949, Fall 1955, Hickey 1964, Smith 1970, Oliver 1972, Werner 1976, Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1983, Takatsu 1985, 1986a, 1986b, 1988, Blagov 2001].

² “Đức Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế” is familiar to Vietnamese people as a guardian deity of each village. It is worshiped at the communal house “đình” of each village in Vietnam.

³ Goddess worship is the most familiar religious practice for Vietnamese people. “Đức Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế” sits at the top of the Vietnamese pantheon, and some goddesses, which are called “thành mẫu” or “công chúa,” follow him.

second largest sect, followers consider the sect founder Nguyễn Ngọc Thương to be the eldest brother, and order themselves by seniority and rank within the organization.

Figure 1: The Factionalization of Caodaism Sects



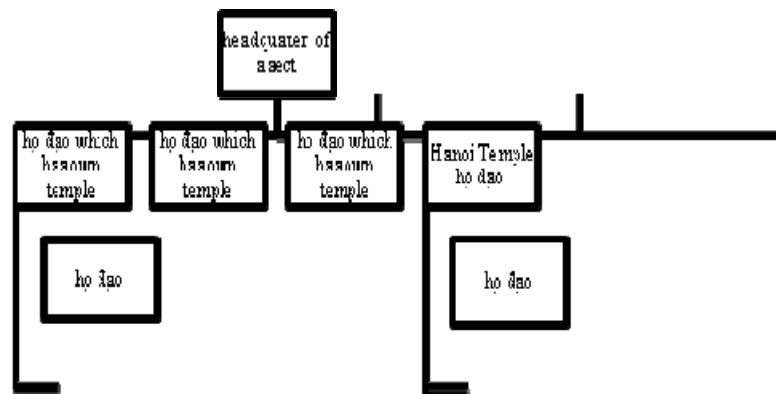
Based on Blagov 2001, and an interview by the author

Individuals who believe in Caodaism are grouped into two basic categories. The first includes parsons who renounce the world. He or she usually lives in a temple, “thánh thất ,” from the time when he or she first renounces the world, and spends the rest of his or her life observing Caodaist doctrine, such as the five commandments, religious activities in service to the super being performed four times per day, and keeping a strictly vegetarian diet. He or she often becomes a

representative of “họ đạo” and initiates religious activities at the temple. The second category includes laypeople that typically live in their own homes, yet attend a temple four times per day to worship the super being, and to take part in ritual or other religious activities.

After becoming a Caodaism follower, an individual usually belongs to a minimum group called “họ đạo,” which has roles such as those of a Christian parish (see Figure 2). All members belonging to a “họ đạo” are required to take part in religious activities in keeping with Caodaist doctrine. A “họ đạo” is administered by a representative of “họ đạo” with support from ranking laypeople within the “họ đạo.” Parsons often become “họ đạo” representatives, and laypeople who belong to a “họ đạo” have to obey the representative, because he or she has the right to dictate the activities in the “họ đạo.” When a “họ đạo” gains over 500 members, they are permitted to build their own temple, called “thánh thất” under Caodaist doctrine¹. In addition, it is also a feature of “họ đạo” that all activities of “họ đạo” should not run contrary to the locality of the area where the “họ đạo” is located.

Figure 2: The Organization of a Sect



1-2. Concept of “Đạo”

The term “họ đạo” originally consisted of two terms: “họ” and “đạo.” “Họ” relates to kin/relation, and it means a family or a clan in Vietnamese. Vietnamese people usually use the term “họ” to represent their own kinship, such as “dong họ.” Thus, “họ” is not Caodaist jargon.

The other term “đạo” translates to “道” in Chinese, and means “way” or “ism” in English.

¹ After 1975, they need to get governmental permission for all activities.

Vietnamese people usually use the term “đạo” as a general term for religion or belief. They refer to “đạo nho,” “đạo phật” or “đạo cao đài,” which mean Confucianism, Buddhism, and Caodaism, respectively. Their respective Chinese translations are “儒道,” “仏道,” and “高台道.” For instance, when they ask someone about his or her own religion or beliefs, they say “Anh / Chị theo đạo nào?,” which means “which religion / belief do you follow?”

Moreover, a broad meaning of the term “đạo” implies morality and ethics that generate the order. The terms “đạo đức” and “đạo lý” respectively translate in Chinese to “道德,” which means “morality,” and to “道理,” which is synonymous with “ethics.” The terms are understood as connoting the good social norms of Vietnamese culture. For instance, “đạo con” means “ethics of children,” which is an individual who worships his or her late mother and father with veneration and respect (Gammeltoft 1999:173).

In the context of Caodaism, “đạo” is based on the Caodaist doctrine or worldview. The term “hộ đạo” consists of two terms, “hộ” and “đạo,” and it implies an ideal of the kinship group among Caodaism followers. In other words, “hộ đạo” connotes not only a parish based on geographical space, but also an interpersonal relationship formed by individuals sharing the “đạo” for the purpose of ordering their personal practices. Caodaism followers gather that a “thánh thất” might be understood as a “home,” in which they imagine a construction of the ideal relationship as fictive kinship among followers sharing “đạo.”

2. The Hanoi Temple Today

The object of my research, the Hanoi Temple, was founded in 1939 by the Ban Chinh Dao sect, and was recognized as the central “hộ đạo” of Northern Vietnam with its own temple granted by headquarters. Since its foundation, the Hanoi Temple has been influenced by urbanization and politicization. Now, it is the only Caodaist organization in Hanoi and the surrounding area¹.

As of 2010, one priestess named Hoa and approximately 50 laypeople belonged to the Hanoi Temple. About 80% of the laypeople were elderly women over 60, and most of them were either widows who had lost their husbands in the Vietnam War, unmarried women, or divorced women.

¹ Before the Ban Chinh Dao sect spread into Northern Vietnam, the Tay Ninh sect, the largest sect, was already established there and had founded the Thang Long Temple in Hanoi. These two temples had been jointly working under a socialist government since 1945, when Northern Vietnam became independent of French rule. In 1986, the two temples unified into one organization of the Ban Chinh Dao sect.

Moreover, they shared the common experience that they had come to believe in Caodaism after migrating from their birth places in neighboring provinces to Hanoi during the Vietnam War. With similar social backgrounds, they had developed unique relationships through their religious activities in the Hanoi Temple community.

2-1. Imagination of the Hanoi Temple “Họ Đạo” as the Ideal Family

All religious activities within and outside the temple were organized under the leadership of priestess Hoa. Priestess Hoa lived in the Hanoi Temple for 59 years after she renounced the world at the age of 20. Before her renunciation, however, she had kept Caodaistic religious practices, working as an elementary school teacher. She became the representative of the Hanoi Temple “họ đạo” in 1998 when the former representative died. At that time, Priestess Hoa was one of two female renouncers, and they lived together in the Hanoi Temple. After the other female renouncer died in 2001, Priestess Hoa lived her life alone at the Hanoi Temple until 2010 when she herself died.

Priestess Hoa usually got up at 4 o’clock A.M., dressed herself in a white robe, and set up her long hair for everyday worship to the super being at 5 o’clock A.M. Then she ate some fruit, which had been a church offering on the altar. After this light breakfast, she sometimes joined official meetings or rode her bicycle to visit an ill layperson. She returned to the temple only at 10:30 to prepare for the daily worship service held at 11 o’clock A.M. In the afternoon, she usually spent time in the Hanoi Temple reading books, communicating with the headquarters of the Ban Chinh Dao sect in Southern Vietnam, or doing yard cleaning and so on.

When the ritual days came, Priestess Hoa guided laypeople to the ritual. Laypeople gathered at the Hanoi Temple followed her directions, and after the ritual she preached to the laypeople the following message:

We, the Hanoi Temple “họ đạo,” practice affectionately caring for each other as brothers and sisters under the eldest brother Nguyen Ngoc Thuong. You must return to the temple when ritual day comes to pay service to the super being (thầy), and solemnly appreciate peace in everyday life because the super being is our father, and we, “họ đạo,” are his children. “Đạo” implies children’s respect for their parents. Children must also care for each other as brothers and sisters. If someone becomes sick, we would visit him or her. If someone has a serious problem, we must join hands with each other to solve the problem. That is the “đạo” we must follow.

Priestess Hoa usually preached about the ideal relationship among “hộ đạo” members. That is the relationship where members care for each other following the “đạo” based on the Caodaism doctrine. Moreover, she emphasized that each layperson should carry responsibility as a member of the Hanoi Temple “hộ đạo,” and required them to assemble at the temple frequently to provide mutual support like family members do.

Priestess Hoa’s recognition of the “đạo” appeared in her attitude as representative of the Hanoi Temple “hộ đạo.” On a ritual day, she preached that every layperson could recover their offering of fruits or sweets after the ritual finished. She also made plans to take care of anyone who might become sick. If someone was chatting with others when Priestess Hoa was preaching, she waited until they stopped chatting with giving caution by laypeople with status. She had been imaging the Hanoi Temple “hộ đạo” as an ideal harmonized and moralized relationship, like a Hanoi Temple family.

3. Reality of the Hanoi Temple “Hộ Đạo”—Layperson’s Practice of “Đạo Mình”

Today, approximately 50 laypeople belong to the Hanoi Temple “hộ đạo.” They are divided into two categories. The first is laypeople with status (Type 1), and the other those who lack status (Type 2).

Type 1 consists of 13 women and 2 men. They play pivotal roles by preparing and executing rituals, caring for Priestess Hoa daily. Type 2 laypeople, in contrast, take part in certain rituals. Type 1 and Type 2 laypeople possess different attitudes toward temple activities.

Each Type 1 member had close interactions with Priestess Hoa because they were engaged in all the activities of the Hanoi Temple “hộ đạo.” Priestess Hoa had always required that they gather at the Hanoi Temple to guide the Type 2 laypeople to an idealized attitude based on Priestess Hoa’s ideal “hộ đạo.” Through the interaction with her, each Type 1 member gained an understanding of Priestess Hoa’s way of thinking about “đạo” and “hộ đạo.”

However, they did not fulfill all of Priestess Hoa’s requirements. A layperson in Type 1 made the following statement:

Those people who have the time should go back to the temple. We are each in a different social condition based on our daily lives. It is not the same as in times past. Now, we do not have to be strained for time to return to the temple. It is unavoidable that we do not have much time to spend on temple activities. The most important thing is for us to keep “đạo” individually. That is our own moral “đạo mình.”

If they had responded to all her demands, they would have wasted so much time on religious activities. Priestess Hoa and the laypeople recognized different meanings of “đạo.” The laypeople did not believe that going to the temple frequently and working on temple activities were important matters. In fact, they usually did not go to the temple except on ritual days.

Moreover, they also did not have the same interpretation of the Caodaist doctrine. They did not know about the pantheon of gods in detail because they did not have time to study it. Also, the form of the Caodaist altar that laypeople were required to have in their homes were different according to each family. Laypeople had reinterpreted some of Caodaist doctrine essential to the Caodaistic worldview.

Each layperson recognized these religious acts as an accumulation of good deeds for themselves, called “cong qua” in Caodaist doctrine. “Cong qua” includes mutually beneficial practices among the members, such as a visit to the sick or the aged, but not ritual practices. However, as I mentioned above, since most laypeople did not visit the Hanoi Temple except on the specific ritual days, their knowledge of Caodaist doctrine did not suit Priestess Hoa’s ideal. That is why Priestess Hoa complained of laypeople’s attitude toward activities in the Hanoi Temple’s “họ đạo”:

I do not know the reason why all members in my “họ đạo” are so stupid. It is the ritual day for Le Ba Tran, who was a founder of the Ban Chinh Dao sect, but there is no one who remembers that. Surely they did not know who Le Ba Tran is. There is no one who studies “đạo” in my “họ đạo.” There is no one who practices “đạo” in my “họ đạo.” There is no one who worries about the future of Hanoi Temple’s “họ đạo.”

Recently, the conflict between Priestess Hoa and the laypeople escalated. Particularly, Type 1 members experienced increased stress through their interactions with Priestess Hoa. Actually, some members had rebellious attitudes against Priestess Hoa. However, they continued to gather at the Hanoi Temple and to participate in specific rituals.

4. Ritual Practice at the Hanoi Temple

According to Caodaist doctrine, followers must partake in the monthly rituals called “le sac bon” on the 1st and 15th of every month. All the laypeople who attend the ritual pray under Priestess Hoa’s direction to the super being and other gods for peace in their family.

Besides the monthly rituals, there are two kinds of rituals: first, annual rituals which consist of rituals for deities and memorial events of Caodaism, and second, rites of passage for followers.

Laypeople who belong to the Hanoi Temple, however, take part in only a few specific rituals.

4-1. The Goddess Ritual

Of all the ritual activities, the most bustling ritual of the year at the Hanoi Temple is the one dedicated to the Goddess, held on August 14th and 15th. Most laypeople able to participate in the ritual assemble at the Hanoi Temple to enjoy the ritual and its preparation.

In Caodaism, the goddess called “Diêu Trì Kim Mẫu” or “Phật Mẫu” is the most familiar deity for women. They call the goddess mother “mẹ” and consider themselves her child, or “con.” They pray to her for their and their family’s health and happiness.

The goddess ritual has the highest number of participants of all the rituals in the Hanoi Temple, because most members are women. Another reason is related to a peculiar feature of the goddess ritual; laywomen of the Hanoi Temple spend a long time together preparing for the goddess ritual. This behavior is called “hậu,” which means “to serve.” In part of the ritual process, laywomen stand and chant sutras on the side of the goddess altar several times, taking turns. They talked to me, as summarized below:

The goddess ritual is the one for women. We conducted “hậu” many times by turns, and enjoy chatting while waiting our turn to conduct “hậu.” We ought eagerly to tarry the day of the goddess ritual more than all the other rituals. This is the “đạo mình.”

They waited their turns in a small room. There was one bed to sit or lie on, and the women talked of various topics, such as their health, their families, and so on. Through the experiences of the goddess ritual, laywomen who belonged to the Hanoi Temple experienced close interactions and formed interpersonal relationships.

4-2. Mortuary Rituals

In addition to those rituals referred to above, the mortuary ritual for dead members is important to the laywomen of the Hanoi Temple. This ritual practice consists of the funeral ritual “lễ tang” or “đám ma,” and some three memorial service rituals: “lễ cầu siêu,” “lễ tiêu tường,” and “lễ đại tường.”

While the funeral is held by the chief mourner of the dead member’s family at their house, many non-Caodaist mourners composed of the deceased’s relatives, neighbors, and friends attend

the funeral. Then, the memorial service rituals are held at the Hanoi Temple under the direction of Priestess Hoa. Participants in memorial service rituals are members of the Hanoi Temple and the family of the dead. After the ninth day of the funeral, laypeople gather at the Hanoi Temple to calm the souls of the dead as fictive kinship members. That ritual is held nine times every nine days after the funeral, following the worldview of Caodaism. Mortuary rituals are also the place where laywomen who gather in the Hanoi Temple community construct their interpersonal relationships.

Participating in all the rituals is not required, but rather encouraged in Caodaism. However, laypersons belonging to the Hanoi Temple reinterpret “đạo” according to their personal social condition, and participate in specific rituals. In particular, they place great emphasis on the goddess ritual and its preparation, such as cleaning the temple, setting up the goddess altar, and cooking vegetarian meals to offer on the altar.

Mortuary rituals provide a place to confirm the social relations between the living and their ancestors in Vietnamese society. Japanese anthropologist Suenari argues that “the funerary ritual is the largest of their life stages for Vietnamese people. It is necessary to secure a space for the spirits of the dead to settle down for their afterlife to sublime the ancestor. That is a place to make visible the social relationship between the dead person and his or her children in the society” (Suenari1998:338). However, those rituals are conducted by the men in Vietnamese society, so women have access only through their husbands. For the women who are situated on the periphery of the patrilineal kinship, such as laywomen of the Hanoi Temple, it means that they have to find an alternative place to worship their ancestors or themselves for their future.

In this sense, the Hanoi Temple provided opportunities for laywomen to construct relationships among themselves for a social protection different from those based on kinship or social relationships in their home villages. Their relationships are “thân mật,” which means “intimate” relationship.

The two following cases show that laywomen are constructing their intimate relationships through religious activities at the Hanoi Temple.

5. Daily Practice

Here I focus particularly on Type 1 members. Type 1 members had been kept in close interaction and contact with each other even outside the temple. They sometimes talked small talk over the phone about temple activities and private matters.

Case 1:

An unmarried 65-year-old woman named Lan was an earnest laywoman for over 30 years. But recently she has had no time to attend rituals in the Hanoi Temple, because she is caring for a baby. The baby is her sister in law's son, a single woman over 40 years old who became pregnant through an extramarital affair. The sister-in-law had the son as a single mother in her home village. It is an unusual situation to be a single mother in Vietnam, especially since Lan's sister lived in a very traditional village in Central Vietnam. Her elder brother and relatives were ashamed she was pregnant and treated her like an immoral woman. Since these relatives did not want her to care for her baby in their home village, Lan, who lives in faraway Hanoi, adopted the baby to bring up as her own in Hanoi. She told two Type 1 members about the situation. They worried about Lan's having to raise the child, and sometimes called her to talk about their own lives.

Case 2:

A 74-year-old widow named Dau is a leader of Type 1. She has been an earnest laywoman for 25 years. Her husband died in the Vietnam War when he was in his mid-thirties. In Vietnam, people believe that the body of a dead person is essential to the funeral, and also to calm the soul of the deceased. Dau did not hold a formal funeral for her late husband because she had no information about where her husband had died, and so could not identify his body. Dau worried because the funeral had still not been held. After the Vietnam War, the socialist Vietnamese government permitted the ritual with possession only to find the place and the remains of war dead. Many people went to a shaman to find the remains of their deceased family member. Dau also talked about her late husband to a few Type 1 members, and was introduced to a shaman by a member.

Both of these stories were extremely private, not easily discussed with others. What both women did contradicted the Caodist "đạo." However, they confessed these private matters to very few Type 1 members, with whom they not only shared similar social experiences, but also built intimate relationships through the practices like those mentioned above.

Conclusion

In this paper, I showed the differences in meaning of the "đạo" between Priestess Hoa and laypeople belonging in the Hanoi Temple. As I have shown above, Priestess Hoa insists on the term "hộ đạo" which is the religious family of Caodaists. The term "đạo" is less common among laywomen, who insist on the "đạo mình" as "our own moral" with recognizing "đạo" multiply. Through the practice of the "đạo mình," laywomen in the Hanoi Temple construct interpersonal

relationships whereby they are able to share their most private matters with each other. It seems that these relationships among women who have the common background of being situated on the periphery of patriarchal society in Vietnam and are living in rapidly globalized urban areas generate an alternative way of securing the social ease lost by the deviation from their traditional kinship in the Hanoi Temple.

In short, the Hanoi Temple community provides an intimate sphere open to women who are alienated from the traditional social structures over which the patriarchy holds sway. For them, it is a place to reconstruct order in their lives. It might be possible to have a holistic understanding of the social world of women who are living in globalized urban areas today, and it might provide a possibility to reconsider the notion of morality, considered to be in the public sphere in the modern world.

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Imperious Mandarins and Cunning Princesses: Mediumship, Gender, and Identity in Urban Vietnam

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Vietnam's rapid integration into the global economy has been accompanied by a vigorous revival of religion (Taylor 2007). Throughout the country, newly refurbished pagodas and temples are teeming with devotees who make offerings to ancestors and deities and pray for health, wealth and prosperity. Religious beliefs and practices that were once attacked as wasteful and superstitious have (again) become a conspicuous feature of contemporary urban and rural life. An important example is Four Palace mediumship, an intrinsic part of the Mother Goddess Religion (see Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996, 2004; Fjelstad & Nguyen 2006, Endres 2011). The worship of Mother Goddesses and the deities of the Four Palaces – in present-day Vietnam alternately referred to as Đạo Mẫu, Đạo Tứ Phủ or Đạo Thánh – is a complex pantheistic belief system that has incorporated Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist influences. Spirit mediums of the Four Palaces perceive the world as divided into four distinct domains or palaces (*phủ*): Heaven (Thiên Phủ), Earth (Địa Phủ), Water (Thủy Phủ), and Mountains and Forests (Nhạc Phủ) that are 'supervised' or governed by the Mother Goddesses. Associated with these palaces is a hierarchically ranked pantheon of male and female deities who possess spirit mediums during elaborate possession rituals called *lên đồng*, *hầu bóng* or *hầu thánh*. During a possession ritual, the deities are invited to descend from their palaces to the world of humans and "mount" their mediums in a prescribed order, while a group of *chầu văn* musicians chants their legends composed in poetic verse (Norton 2009).

Just like in other possession religions, the initiation into mediumship often relates to critical moments in human life. An illness that cannot be medically cured, a streak of bad luck in business or personal affairs, or haunting dreams may indicate the spirits' calling. It is important to note that a person qualifies as a practitioner not because of his or her free will, but because that person has a "spirit root" (*căn*), meaning that he or she is fated for mediumship. This "spirit root" is often associated with one or several deities of the pantheon. A person can have the root of, let's say, the Seventh Prince (*căn Ông Hoàng Bảy*) or the Third Princess (*căn Cô Bơ*). This root is believed to have been "implanted" during a previous life (*kiếp trước*) and usually implies the idea of a debt owed to the deities of the Four Palaces that needs to be repaid by serving the spirits in this life and

becoming a medium. As a minimum requirement, a medium has to hold one *lên đồng* ritual per year. In theory, any medium with at least ten years of ritual experience, sufficient knowledge, and a private temple may proclaim him- or herself as a master, a *đồng thầy*.¹ Whereas knowledge and learning (*hiểu biết*), performative skills and moral virtue (*đức*) rank high on the list of vital qualities a master medium should possess, the reputation and authority of a *đồng thầy* also derive from dominant gender ideologies in society. If we look at the ratio of male to female mediums in contemporary Hanoi, two trends become evident. First, women clearly constitute the majority of Four Palace adherents. Second, master mediums with large followings and thriving temples seem to be predominantly male. Male mediums often contract their alleged superiority into the phrase ‘one male medium equals one thousand female mediums’ (*một đồng nam bằng ngàn đồng nữ*). Yet at the same time, Four Palace mediumship also evolved as an alternative space in contemporary Vietnamese society within which spirit mediums may enact gender identities that move beyond the restricting frames of hegemonic social norms and traditions.

Based on recent anthropological fieldwork among urban spirit mediums in Hanoi, this article explores the gendered and gendering dimensions of Four Palace mediumship from two different, but interrelated angles: the bias toward belief in male superiority, and the construction of transgendered identities among Four Palace mediums.² The voices and views on the topic draw from a diverse range of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ concepts and reflect not only on the gender dynamics in Four Palace mediumship but also the gender contestations in contemporary Vietnamese society at large.

‘Gender trouble’ in the world of mediums

Sources dating back to the French colonial period make hardly any mention of male mediums in Four Palace mediumship (Giran 1912, Durand 1959). Instead, they suggest a gendered separation between the female domain of the Four Palaces (or the Chư Vị cult, as it was then referred to), and the male sphere of the Saint Trần cult. Nguyễn Văn Khoan, a Vietnamese scholar

¹ In contrast, a "normal practitioner" who has undergone the initiation ritual is referred to as a "child of the spirits" (*con nhà thánh*) and a "follower" or "disciple" (*con nhang đệ tử*) of a master. Because a *lên đồng* is essentially self-therapeutic in purpose, "regular" mediums have to bear all costs associated with their ritual activities by themselves.

² The article is based on Chapter 5 of my book *Performing the divine. Mediums, markets and modernity in urban Vietnam* (NIAS Press, 2011). In-depth research was carried out from January to December 2006 as part of a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

associated with the École Française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO), distinguishes between the following three 'popular cults':

Three main popular cults share the favour of the masses: the *chư vị* cult, the cult of Trần Hưng-Đạo's generals, and the cult of the infernal spirits and patrons of sorcerers. The priests of the *chư vị* cult are the *bà đồng* (female mediums), the ones of Trần Hưng-Đạo's generals are the *ông đồng* (male mediums) or *thầy pháp* (masters of magic formulae), and those who worship the spirits of hell are the *thầy bùa* (masters of amulets) or *thầy phủ-thủy* (masters of amulets and waters). (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930: 109, my translation)

The male mediums of Trần Hưng Đạo (called *ông đồng* or *thanh đồng*) were apparently held in higher esteem than the female mediums (called *bà đồng* or *đồng cốt*) of the Four Palaces (Do 2003: 97–105, Phan Kế Bính 1995 [1915]: 239–240, Phạm 2009). Whereas the male cult was associated with the superior morality of Saint Trần whose mediums were considered capable of exorcising demons and evil spirits from possessed (and predominately female) individuals, the female Chư Vị cult was associated not only with marginalised women (such as widows and childless divorcees) but also with a morally inferior spirit world, as Paul Giran remarks: 'Among the Chư Vị [assembly of spirits], there are many subaltern spirits, male or female, that are tolerated by the Holy Mothers even though they cause a lot of trouble for people' (Giran 1912: 293; my translation). Many of the possessed, so Giran continues, even turn to Saint Trần in order to get rid of these malevolent entities. Contrary to what these early accounts suggest, it may be safely assumed that the two spirit possession cults have always to some extent overlapped with each other. Since the resurgence of spirit mediumship in the *đổi mới* era, however, these formerly distinct ritual realms have opened up and intermingled in complex ways. While on the one hand, female mediums nowadays actively participate in the ritual embodiment of Saint Trần (see Phạm 2009), male mediums now seem to dominate the ranks of masters in Four Palace mediumship. This development may also have informed the pronounced emphasis on the importance of knowledge and learning, because biases rooted in persisting Confucian gender norms perceive male intellectual abilities as superior to that of women and link knowledge and leadership roles with masculinity (Luong 1992: 70, Soucy 1999: 228). However, when I raised the issue of male superiority in Four Palace mediumship for discussion I received an interesting range of replies that reflect and challenge persistent gender ideologies in society.

First of all, there is a strong bias against women's bodily functions and the social roles associated with them. During menstruation women are generally considered unclean and thus are prohibited from entering sacred places and participating in ritual activities. A female master who

has not yet gone through menopause would therefore be severely constrained in her work. Moreover, if a woman fulfils the social expectations of getting married and having children, her family is seen as her first and foremost obligation. Master Cảnh argues that these constraints are the main reason why there are more male than female masters. He explains, 'A medium's job is very hard, and female mediums cannot act in the same ways as men.' As an example he cites that before a palace-opening ritual, a master has to abstain from sexual intercourse for at least one week in order to be 'pure'.¹ A master who initiates many followers thus has to live a largely celibate life. Cảnh maintains that whereas men have no problem being chaste (sic!), women in their fertile age cannot withdraw from their 'conjugal duty' unless they decide to abandon their husbands. He even mentions the case of a female master who had given birth to her youngest child at the age of fifty, which had apparently caused a major uproar in the *lên đồng* scene. 'The news that the old hag N. had given birth flashed through the whole of Hanoi with lightening speed!', Cảnh laughed and scornfully added, 'Who would trust a female master if she is [still sexually active] like that!'

The 'impurity' issuing from a woman's body is a general concern among female worshippers and it entails that most women have already passed menopause when they decide to operate as masters. One of my female interlocutors, Master Nga, related how the problem dissolved into nothing for her:

The deities had made me go [on a pilgrimage] to the Fifth Ladies' temple. At that time I was just over forty. On the way I started [to menstruate], I went to the river and took a bath, and then I pleaded to the deities for help. I said, 'Praise to you, my [heavenly] parents have conscripted me into their service, and now this just happened to me naturally, it was not my own will, it just happened and now I feel so miserable and I shall go back home!' From that day on [my menstruation] stopped, everyone said I was clean early, many women still [menstruate] until they are over fifty. I'm telling you, the people distinguish between men and women, but the deities provide for all, no matter if man or woman.

In contrast to Master Cảnh's assumptions, the self-confident octogenarian master asserts that women are in fact morally more virtuous than men. Men, so she argues, are more lecherous, they booze and enjoy talking dirty and still lust after women when they are well over fifty years old. Yet she admits that women, too, have extramarital affairs: 'Many male mediums have affairs with their followers, their families crumble and this is not good; but women also do that.' This inclination towards licentiousness, however, is limited to 'female mediums whose root of mediumship is light',

¹ 'Regular' mediums also have to follow this rule, but usually only for one day.

so the upright master argues.¹ By this she refers to women who have the root of a lesser deity in the Four Palace pantheon. In contrast, a heavy root is related to the morally superior deities such as the Great Mandarins or even Saint Trần. ‘If a woman has a root of Saint Trần,’ Master Nga reasons, ‘she would not dare to do anything dishonest or immoral, or else she’d be punished immediately.’

The *căn* of a Four Palace medium is often of the opposite gender – i.e. many male mediums have the root of a female deity and many female mediums that of a male deity. Female master mediums who have the *căn* of a Great Mandarin sometimes argue their *căn* is higher (*cao hơn*) than a male master’s *căn*. While the root of an imposing male deity certainly lends them authority, it does not necessarily grant the *bà đống* a higher status or prestige than that of a male master. Female mediums are often considered as hot-tempered (*nóng tính*) or hard to please (*khó tính*). Although these traits do not conform to female ideals, they are not seen as particularly male characteristics either. Master Thiên, for example, is a rather loud and boisterous woman who enjoys leading people and organising ritual events. But she also has a flaring temper that often offends other peoples’ sensibilities. According to her associate Thầy Hiền, male masters generally don’t display this kind of hot-temperedness. He elaborates, ‘Men do not fly into a temper like that. Bà Thiên’s disposition is very intimidating; she is often angry for trifles and resents petty mistakes.’ Compared to female masters, so Thầy Hiền argues, ‘Male masters are more bighearted (*quảng đại hơn*); they say, “let’s not talk about this any more”, whereas women have to reprimand, to scold and speak out because this is how they think’ (Interview 22.05.2006). Master Thuận, himself a professed homosexual with the *căn* of a princess deity, sees it differently. He says, ‘Female mediums are more bighearted than men, and it has to be said that if you want to follow the right path in religion (*đi theo chính đạo*), women are more trustworthy than men’ (Interview 10.05.2006). While he thinks that female masters have greater powers (*uy lực*) than males, he says male masters are more illustrious (*oanh liệt*) and imposing (*hoành tráng*). As both male and female interlocutors have confirmed to me, this assessment applies first and foremost to their performative skills in *lên đống* ritual and explains why male masters usually gain more fame in the world of mediums. Furthermore, Thuận says, ‘Men are more successful as masters because they are more flexible and tricky (*éo le*)’. The latter traits are consistent with his characterisation of the Four Palace deities whom he describes as cunning and artful even to the point of being ruthless. According to this logic, the (greater) appeal and success of male masters would then not be based so much on any ideal hegemonic male characteristics than on the morally dubious features of female deities who preferably plunge their roots into male human beings. In contrast, a female master’s prestige would basically sprout from the root of the morally superior male spirits within the Four Palace (or the

¹ Master Nga’s attitude is concordant with the view of colonial-era sources (i.e. Nhất Lang 1952; Lộng Chương 1990 [1942] that depict Four Palace mediums as women of loose morals.

Saint Trần) system. These transgender aspects have gained greater prominence in Four Palace mediumship in recent years and therefore deserve particular attention.

Princesses, queens and imperial concubines

Forms of ‘ritual transvestism’ have been known in Southeast Asia (and beyond) since ancient times. Ritual transvestites, or transgendered ritual specialists (a term I borrow from Peletz 2006), were ‘individuals who in the course of priestly or shamanic functions “switched” genders or took on “gender-ambiguous” roles as they interceded with spiritual beings on behalf of human subjects’ (Blackwood 2005: 849). Following Blackwood and Peletz, I use the term ‘transgender’ to denote a rather broad range of gender transgressive practices and identifications that pass beyond culturally defined gender categories of ‘man’ and ‘women’. Such a wide understanding would, for example, incorporate the ambiguously gendered hermaphrodite just as much as the cross-dressing drag queen or the masculine ‘butch’ lesbian.¹ In a ritual context, transgender practices may be temporary (i.e. in the case of a ritual practitioner who transgresses the established gender boundaries only during ritual performance) or part of a permanent transgender identity of the ritual practitioner. Throughout Southeast Asia, transgendered ritual specialists were most often ‘male-bodied individuals who dressed in female attire while performing certain rituals associated with royal regalia, births, weddings, and key phases of agricultural cycles’ (Peletz 2006: 312). Among the best-known examples are the *bissu* among the Bugis of South Sulawesi (Andaya 2000) the *basir* (male) and *balian* (female) of the Ngaju Dayak, Kalimantan (Blackwood 2005), and the Burmese *nat kadaw* (Brac de la Perrière 1989).

In contrast to these rather well-documented cases, very little is known about transgendered ritual specialists in early modern and colonial Vietnam.² To my knowledge, there is no historical

¹ Contrary to what prevailing connotations of the term may suggest, however, transgendering does not in any case entail same-sex relations (Peletz 2006: 311).

² In the French colonial imagination, however, Vietnam (or rather “Indochina”) stood out “as a site of homosexuality, and more particularly as characterized by physical androgyny” (Yee 2001: 270; see also Proschan 2002a; 2002b). In turn-of-the-nineteenth-century literary texts, the “androgynous young male” was both a figure of beauty as well as a symbol of moral and sexual depravity. Women, on the other hand, were often portrayed as lacking grace and femininity (see Proschan 2002a). These colonial constructions of Vietnamese genders not only displaced anxieties about gender identity “from the imperial centre to the geographical periphery of empire and from the centre of (French) identity to the

record of their existence, with the faint exception of one French colonial source that discusses the frequency of hermaphrodites among the Vietnamese in Cochinchina and mentions that a certain ‘class of individuals, the muabum, whose trade is to perform dances and diverse other entertainments’ invariably classified themselves as such (Gaultier de Claubry 1882; cited in Proschan 2002a: 445).¹ The term muabum is most probably a malapropism for the *múa bóng*, a Southern Vietnamese ritual dance (that also involves acrobatic feats) performed by male transvestite performers (see Taylor 2004: 174). Until now, however, this Southern Vietnamese form of ritual transgenderism has not yet received adequate attention in the research literature. Another indication of the religious role of transgendered individuals in Southern Vietnam is found in Heiman and Le’s 1970s reference to ‘hermaphroditic witches’ (set off in quotes throughout the article) described as male cross-dressers who ‘are trained in their career as healers from childhood’ and ‘believe that they are inhabited by female spirits and that they are spiritually female’ (Heiman and Le 1975: 93). Outside the ritual context, many of these ‘witches’ apparently lived ‘normal lives’ and did not dress in female clothing.

In the early twentieth century, Four Palace mediumship became the target of much of the venom and scorn poured by Vietnamese modern intellectuals on popular religious practices. In his novel *Hầu Thánh* (1942), the writer *Lộng Chương* provides a wealth of fascinating details about the world of mediums that are absent from scholarly works (e.g. Durand 1959). Although transgressive gender practices did not escape the author’s attention, the issue did not loom overly large in the author’s mind. Of particular interest are several references to female same-sex pairings between Four Palace mediums of complementary spirit roots, e.g. the root of a Great Mandarin and that of a Princess deity. This practice was called *kết căn* (tying the roots) and, according to *Lộng Chương*, indicated that ‘two ladies have bonded as husband and wife’. One of the characters in his novel is Bà Đào, the widow of a school teacher, who ‘seeks the affectionate caress of a strange love with another woman,’ a capricious temple owner named Châu. Interestingly, Bà Đào’s same-sex attraction is not condemned as an aberrant deviation from traditional gender norms, but instead explained from a social–psychological perspective according to which social restrictions against the remarriage of widowed females would ‘not leave any other choice for a young widow to satisfy the strong desires of her heart’ (*Lộng Chương* 1990 [1942]: 53).

In contrast to this rather sympathetic attitude, male-bodied mediums who display effeminate

Other” (Yee 2001: 279), but also constituted an important part of the rationale for justifying French colonial rule in Indochina.

¹ The Vietnamese term for hermaphrodite is *ái nam ái nữ* which literally means “love man love woman”. The term is also used to indicate androgyny and bisexuality; see <http://vietqueer.net/glossary>.

mannerisms (*ông à ông eo*) only receive a marginal but scornful note: '[Like the female mediums], these effeminate men also dance and whirl around, they also tie their roots as "wives" and "husbands", they are also jealous in love, and sometimes even dress as women' (Lộng Chương 1990 [1942]: 135, my translation). In his reportage Mediumship (Đồng Bồng) published in the satirical journal Phong Hóa (Customs and Mores), Trọng Lang explores the issue in greater detail:

Besides the *bà đồng* there are the '*cô đồng*', most of whom are men. They say they are *cô đồng* because their destined aptitude matches the Princesses like that of husband and wife. In order to express their dedication to the Princesses, they do not get married and stay sexually chaste. Maybe this is a precondition for the Princesses to possess their bodies and help them earn money by telling fortunes or soul-calling. (Trọng Lang 1935, Vol. 166, my translation)

Trọng Lang then offers an intriguing explanation why the *đồng cô* are generally unable to take a wife (*lấy vợ*). It is, he argues, because they suffer from the 'failing-in-love-disease' (*họ có bệnh 'thất tình'*), and this would make them become '*ái nam*'. In the strict sense, the Vietnamese term *ái nam ái nữ* designates a hermaphrodite, but in general usage it also refers to male homosexuality. Trọng Lang's remark could thus be an attempt to, first, link male effeminacy in spirit mediumship to homosexuality and, second, to explain this 'deviancy' in terms of a reaction to an unfulfilled (heterosexual) love life.

In earlier scholarly works, transgenderism was most often treated as an outlet for homosexuality. Moreover, transgendered ritual spaces were seen as providing a culturally accepted niche for homosexual males, an assumption that Blackwood (2005) refers to as the 'homosexual niche theory'. At first glance, the striking presence of gender transgressive males in contemporary Four Palace mediumship seems to corroborate this argument. As Prochan has noted, 'The role of the transvestite medium seems to offer an occupational niche to men whose sexuality does not conform to heteronormative expectations' (Prochan 2002: 463, footnote 40). However, as I will elaborate below, this view is much too narrow. Recent studies have called attention to the connection between gender transgressive ritual practices and sacred cosmologies in Southeast Asian cultures (Errington 1990, Andaya 2000, Johnson 1997, Blackwood 2005). The theme of an original cosmic oneness manifest in dual-gendered or ambiguously gendered deities can be found across island Southeast Asia. In this perspective, transgendered ritual specialists appeared as 'a metaphor for cosmic unity and incorporation' (Johnson 1997: 26) and were thus often seen as potent mediators between the world of divinities and the world of humankind. In contrast to these well-documented cases, Vietnamese cosmology does not provide a consistent, singular explanation for gender-transgressive behaviour. Rather, it seems that gender transgressive Four Palace mediums

draw on a variety of spiritual conceptions in order to construct their identities.

Lộc and Kỳ, for example, conceptualise themselves as heavenly fairies (*tiên*) sent down to earth in a male human body: ‘According to the intent of the creator (*tạo hóa*) we ought to be females; in the West you wouldn’t put it in these terms but here we say we are creatures of heaven.’ As immortal beings, fairies may be sent down to earth as a punishment for any misdeed committed in the heavenly palace. The most famous example is Princess Liễu Hạnh who was expelled from Heaven for breaking a jade cup and transformed into a powerful deity after serving a lifetime of hardship on earth.¹ According to Lộc and Kỳ’s conceptualisation, many of these fairies come down to earth ‘in the guise of males, but their characteristics and preferences are those of females’. The reason for this disguise is linked to their task in life, which is ‘self-cultivation’ (*tu*) by leading a (chaste) religious life.² If the fairy-in-disguise manages to practise self-cultivation ‘until the end of this incarnation’, then s/he would be able to ‘escape the eternal cycle of birth’ and ‘leave this world of dust to return to the other side’ (*về bên kia*). But why, we may ask, does a fairy need the guise of a male body in order to practise self-cultivation? Lộc and Kỳ explain:

If the fairies came [down to earth] in the guise of a woman they could not practise self-cultivation, this is why the council of Buddhas and Saints decreed that they have to be born with a male body. The world is full of temptations in many respects; this is why the fairies need the guise of men in order to practise self-cultivation.

The notion that a fairy in the body of a (young and graceful) woman would not be able to live a chaste religious life is largely consistent with Master Cảnh’s claim that a woman of childbearing age could not abstain from having sexual relations (be it for reasons of a woman’s uncontrollable desire or because it is regarded as her conjugal duty). Yet Lộc and Kỳ admit that their male disguise

¹ Dror (2002: 67) mentions that Princess Liễu Hạnh sometimes disguised herself as an old woman and sometimes as a beautiful young lady. According to popular imagination, however, Liễu Hạnh, during her second life on earth, appeared in many places both as a woman (when she encountered men) and as a man (when she encountered women) in order to “tease” them. While this kind of gender crossing is not mentioned in the *Vân Cát Thần Nữ Truyện*, Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story relates that Liễu Hạnh crossed the gender boundary in her official deification by the Lê dynasty, when she was conferred the title *Chế Thắng Hòa Diệu Đại Vương* (Great King who grants victory and peace). Thus, the last part of the *Vân Cát Thần Nữ Truyện* refers to her not as a female deity, but as a male king (see Dror 2002: 72).

² According to Thien Do (2003: 133), “The meaning of the word *tu* (Chinese: *hsiu* – to correct, repair, reform, improve) has long entwined the Confucian trajectory of *tu than* (self-correction, perfectibility), or *tu tâm* (cultivate the heart-mind), with the Daoist *tu luyện* (training – as in various meditative arts including alchemy and magic) and with the Buddhist *tu niệm* (perfecting thought and imagination).”

does not always prevent the fairies from succumbing to mundane temptations: ‘Of course it is very difficult – the fairies are put to a test (*thử thách*), but it is their own responsibility [to pass it], and this is why not all of them can practise self-cultivation.’ ‘Is there a difference, then, between a *đồng cô* (a gender-transgressive male medium with a female spirit root) and a gay¹ man?’, I ask the two (then still) assistants. ‘The two are absolutely different from each other’, Kỳ asserts. ‘According to the Vietnamese understanding, homosexuality – both male and female – is regarded as a kind of illness. In contrast, being a *đồng cô* is a completely spiritual matter (*việc tiên thánh*). After all, it is not our free will but the deities have chosen us and bothered us in order to let us know we have a predestined affinity for the Buddhas and Saints.’

In Vietnamese public opinion, male same-sex sexual behaviour has for a long time been perceived as either a sexual deviancy incompatible with traditional morality and customs, a disease (*bệnh*) in need of treatment or, still worse, as a sign of mental disorder (see Blanc 2005, Colby et al. 2004, Pastoetter 2004). Another common attitude perceives homosexuality as an ‘import’ of debauched Western lifestyles and fashions. In this regard, Vietnam’s most famous sexologist, Dr. Trần Bồng Sơn (1941-2004) distinguished between ‘genuine’ (*thật*) homosexual men and ‘fake’ (*giả*) ones, the latter being ‘lured by fashion or experimentation into trying homosexuality’ (Colby et al. 2004: 48). Although recently the media seem to have taken a more balanced view (e.g. Nguyễn Thành Như 2005), these highly prejudiced perceptions of male homosexuality are still reiterated today (see for example N.A. 2006, Nguyễn Thuận Thành 2005). Many of these stereotypes are even perpetuated in the ‘identity discourse’ of male gender transgressive Four Palace mediums.

This becomes apparent in the motley of concepts presented by the protagonists of Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s recent documentary *Love Man Love Woman* (hereafter: LMLW) that portrays one of the most prominent Four Palace master mediums in contemporary Hanoi. Master Đ. makes no secret of his homosexual inclination, which he thinks of as half-blessing, half-curse. From a spiritual perspective, he argues that the performative skills of *đồng cô* (defined as mediums ‘who

¹ There are various terms that indicate homosexuality, and ‘gay’ has been adopted most recently into Vietnamese lingo. The colloquial word *pê đê* has apparently been adopted from the French *pédéraste*, whereas *ái nam ái nữ* confers the meaning of ‘half man half woman’, or, more literally, ‘love man love woman’, which is also the title of a documentary by Nguyen Trinh Thi (2005). Blanc (2005: 665) mentions the expression *lại cái*, translated as ‘penetrated by the female spirit’ and most probably used in the south rather than in the north of Vietnam. For official usage, the term *đồng tính luyến ái* has been adopted. According to Pastoetter (2004), the term is a literal translation of the Chinese word for ‘homosexuality’ that came into use in the 1930s.

have a male body and a female soul') are always superior to that of 'genuine women' because, he says, 'It seems like the gods and spirits look for male mediums to descend into because men are perceived to be cleaner than women in every aspect. So the gods perhaps prefer men' (LMLW). From a more dispassionate perspective, however, Master Đ. perceives his female spirit root as a punishment from Heaven. 'This is against nature's law. And it's also against the morality by society. I know that – how could I not know that? But this is my fate – what can I do about it? There's nothing I can do about it' (LMLW). The way how he perceives his own effeminate demeanour and preference for same-sex relations clearly reflects the wider social ambivalence about homosexuality. In one scene of the documentary, Đ. reminisces that he had demonstrated an affinity for female pursuits like knitting and embroidering from his early childhood. Yet in another scene, he perceives of homosexuality as a 'contagious disease' that he had contracted as a teenage boy when he was seduced by his mathematics tutor:

I have a feeling that this disease is contagious. When I was fifteen or sixteen there was a guy who worked close by and came here often. He asked me to come visit him and that he would tutor me with math. He did tutor me, decently, for a few days. Then, from the fourth or fifth day he started with his hanky-panky. At the beginning I was scared. [...] Then suddenly I found it fun. And I felt I liked it. Then I started to like the guy. That's it. From then on it was getting worse Then later some of my friends – first they didn't know. They were [genuine] men. And I was fond of them. Then suddenly, they got infected as well. You see! Then one led to a series of others. (LMLW)

In answer to the cheeky question of the filmmaker whether he had ever tried to get 'cured' he passionately exclaims, 'I don't want to get cured! I don't want to get cured to be a total man. Because I still find love, I still find fun with people of the same sex. What on earth do I have to get cured for?' Despite the ambivalence in his opinions, Master Đ. does not clearly distinguish between Vietnamese 'traditional' conceptions of male gender transgressive behaviour and contemporary 'secular' constructions of male homosexualities. Another male gender-transgressive master interviewed in the documentary, however, sees things differently. He argues that 'in the old days' there had been only few *đồng cô*, but recently their numbers had grown significantly because of exposures to Western ideas and culture:

First we had the *đồng cô*. Then we got exposed to the West. There are gay people in the West. Now it's spreading into Vietnam. [...] Being gay is for a [different] class of people – for those men who like being playboys. Spirit mediums like us are different. They should be differentiated. (LMLW)

Besides the conceptualisation of gender transgressive males as *đồng cô*, Vietnamese culture

also offers another explanation for effeminate behaviour in male-bodied individuals. Human beings are believed to possess two different kinds of human souls: three ‘spiritual souls’ called *hồn* and seven (for men) or nine (for women) ‘material souls’ called *vía* or *phách* (Nguyen Van Huyen 1995 [1945]: 237). According to this concept, an effeminate male may be perceived as having eight *vía* – one more than a normative man and one less than a normative woman.¹ Even more compellingly than the notion of a female spirit root, the idea of eight *vía* emphasises a transgender identity outside the binary system of male and female. This third gender is seen as particularly efficacious in mediating between humankind and the spirit world.

For Master Cảnh, there is no difference between a female spirit root and homosexuality: ‘Here they say the female spirit root is too heavy, we don’t refer to it as homosexuality, but in actual fact it is homosexuality, isn’t it. Someone who [sexually] desires men and boys is homosexual, what else.’ In his opinion, male effeminacy and homosexuality is the result of a disrupted equilibrium between the two cosmic principles yin and yang that express the polar quality of all things. Four Palace mediumship, Master Cảnh argues, can be an effective way to restore this equilibrium – or, in his words, to ‘clear the psyche’ (*giải tỏa tâm lý*):

[Four Palace mediumship] can clear the psyche. It means that after entering into mediumship [male effeminacy] lessens. That is, it raises their masculinity. In the West you have ways to change your gender. But in Vietnam we sneak into the temples to clear the psyche. (Interview 24.03.2005)

Whereas many male mediums would in fact be classified as homosexuals, others strictly deny that their demeanour indicates any (sexual) interest in other men. Cường, for example, feels offended because his slightly effeminate behaviour is perceived as a homosexual trait in mainstream Vietnamese society:

[As a child], one learns how to speak and then later I develop my way of speaking, so how can this be changed later, the language, voice, manner and bearing are also related to fate, to my spirit root. They cannot be changed [...], we are how we are from early childhood, we are born like that. But alas! Many people say, ‘This guy behaves effeminate, womanish, and even transgendered (*ái nam ái nữ*)’ [...]. If people talk like that it kind of hurts my self-esteem. Sometimes I think if I could behave as dignified as a normal person others wouldn’t say all these spiteful words, but [being like I am] is my fate and I have to accept it.

¹ In popular usage, this concept generally relates to gender transgressive males. In contrast, women with ‘male characteristics’ are not said to have eight *vía*.

By tracing his *đồng cô*-characteristics to the spirit root of the Little Princess, Cường now enjoys recognition within a group-network of fellow-mediums that comprehends his personality in different terms than the vast majority. Like many other gender transgressive male spirit mediums, he has fulfilled social expectations by getting married and fathering children. According to Confucian teachings, the failure to produce offspring is considered the greatest sin against filial piety (see also Nguyen Van Huyen 1995 [1945]: 29). Not conforming to the expected heterosexual norms by openly assuming a gay identity or, as Lộc and Kỳ have suggested, by practising self-cultivation and living a celibate life is thus not an option pursued by many. Rather, as one of my interlocutors put it, they choose to have ‘one leg in each world’ (*kiêm chi đôi nước*) and only act out their transgender identities in the safe space of Four Palace mediumship.

As mentioned above, the *đồng cô* are often perceived as exceptionally talented and dextrous in ritual performance. For Master Thuận, artistic skilfulness is an innate or essential characteristic of transgendered people that he (in stark contrast to Master Cảnh!) links to a greater balance of the male and female element: ‘All over the world, transvestites and homosexuals are more skilful than normal people, because [...] the unity of yin and yang always brings forth people of talent beyond the normal’. But while, on the one hand, they are seen to make the Four Palace religion prosper, concern has been voiced from within their own ranks that nowadays many *đồng cô* smear the religion’s image by bringing in a lot of negative things:

Despite their skilfulness, most *đồng cô* don’t take the right path in the religion. Eighty-five percent of them follow the wrong path (*đi theo tà đạo*), i.e. they are stubborn, deceitful, untruthful, dishonest and chaotic. It is perhaps difficult to make them improve their conduct, but it is these people who have made the spirit religion (*thánh đạo*) prosper, without the *đồng cô* the religion cannot develop (Interview with Master Thuận, 10.05.2006).

For the octogenarian Master Nga, the *đồng cô* are at best a bunch of nonsensical liars and pleasure seekers, and a gang of drug dealers at worst. Based on what she has learned from the media she rails against their alleged immoral and sinful conduct, although she herself has initiated many *đồng cô* into ritual practice. One of her followers is assistant Lâm who was twenty-four at the time of this research and apparently no longer as obedient to his old master as he used to be when he was initiated at the tender age of fourteen:

When he was seventeen or eighteen years old, he often drove me crazy, and then I gave him a good scream and he didn’t dare to do it again. But now that he is grown up I said to him, ‘I’m not following you [in person] but I’m following [the likes of] you on television, they call you “queens” (*bà hoàng hậu*) and “imperial concubines” (*bà cung phi*), right?’

Just watch out what kind of gangs you're hanging out with. Whether or not someone respects you, trusts you, feels compassion for you, or hates you - it all depends on your own conduct, so whatever you do you better not commit a sin!' (Interview 20.02.2006)

As I have shown in this section, gender transgressive males are creatively drawing from and (re)combining a diverse range of 'traditional' and 'modern' concepts in order to forge their transgender, bisexual or homosexual identities within and across various social and ritual spaces. However, Master Nga's condescending attitude towards the contemporary *đồng cô* also shows that "Modern" ways of being homosexual threaten not only the custodians of "traditional" morality, they also threaten the position of "traditional" forms of homosexuality, those which are centered around gender nonconformity and transvestism' (Altman 2001: 88). The 'queering' of Four Palace mediumship can, on the one hand, be attributed to a greater tolerance of gender transgressive behaviour in Vietnamese society at large. On the other hand, there seems to be a felt need to conceive of non-normative gender (and sexuality) in a way that marks it as inherent to Vietnamese culture rather than as a Western-influenced (debauched) fashion. Four Palace mediumship thus becomes a creative liminal space in which non-normative, or transgressive, gender identities are acted out.

Constructing unique (female) identities

In contrast to the *đồng cô*, gender transgressive females are much less evident in the world of mediums.¹ However, women, too, carve out alternative identities in the *lên đồng* world that not only reach beyond the normative boundaries of gender appropriate behaviour, but also exceed the breadth of Four Palace mediumship in its, let's say, conventional form. Master Thiên, for example, is an ambitious woman who seeks to establish a reputation for efficacy and integrity. This includes offering her followers a diverse range of ritual services outside the established responsibilities of a Four Palace master; for example the ritual cutting of a karmic bond that may undermine a woman's marriage prospects in this life (*lễ cắt tiền duyên*), rites for settling karmic debts (*lễ trả nợ tà quan*) as well as various rites relating to the souls of the ancestors (*lễ gia tiên*). These rituals require the expertise of other ritual specialists such as diviners, spirit priests and soul-callers (*người gọi hồn*),

¹ Only one of my female interlocutors, a spirit medium in her early fifties named Yên, told me that as a child she had behaved "like a boy", she had her hair trimmed short and wore trousers. When she grew up, however, she said she let her hair grow and behaved in a feminine way. However, when I tried to press the topic a bit and asked her whether she had felt as if she had been born in the wrong body, like some *đồng cô* would claim, she explained that only her character is "like a man's" and that otherwise she was not "deviant" (*lệch lạc*).

i.e people who act as vessels for the souls of the dead.

The souls of the dead are in fact a serious concern in Vietnamese society. Mortuary beliefs assume that if not properly cared for, they may become potentially malevolent, hungry ghosts who can cause all kinds of misfortune to the living. This is particularly true if death has occurred under violent circumstances, as this will cause the soul to remain eternally trapped in the traumatic memory of mortal agony, a condition Kwon (2006) describes as ‘grievous death’ (*chết oan*). This condition entails the precarious possibility for these souls to be unable to make the transition to the Otherworld. Instead, they may ‘angrily roam the earth looking for any food and care they can find’ (Malarney 2002: 180). The vast number of Vietnamese war dead who lost their lives during the so-called American War, estimated by Hirschman et al. (1995) at one million, suggests that innumerable ‘ghosts of war’ still haunt the country in both a figurative and a literal sense (see Kwon 2006, 2007, Gustaffson 2010). While the official state commemoration of war dead glorifies the dead soldiers’ contribution to the national cause of reunification and independence, it does not resolve the most pressing concern for the bereaved: the fate of the war martyrs’ souls (Malarney 2001). This is where Master Thiên’s most ambitious spiritual project comes in. As the events have been described in detail elsewhere (Endres 2008, Endres and Lauser 2012), I shall limit myself here to a brief summary of the most essential points.

In November 2006, Master Thiên mobilised her network of supporters and followers to raise funds for the organisation of a major ritual to be held at Đồng Lộc junction in the central province of Hà Tĩnh. During the American War, this intersection was a strategically and logistically important part of the legendary (so-called) Ho Chi Minh Trail, as virtually every supply truck heading south had to pass it. In their efforts to destroy the logistical network, American aircraft heavily bombarded the area. Among the victims of the carpet bombings was a squad of ten young volunteer girls who had been levelling bomb craters to keep the junction open to traffic. The girls were buried near the place where they had met their premature death. In the early 1990s, the area was declared a historical site (*khu di tích*) and various memorials in honour of the war dead were constructed. The graves holding the remains of the ten girls were upgraded and currently constitute the most important site of commemoration at Đồng Lộc junction. Because they were ten in number when they sacrificed their lives at one single stroke (the number ten implies completeness) and their bodies were found intact and undamaged by the bombing, the ten girls are believed to possess divine powers that may be summoned for the benefit of the living. The Mông Sơn-ritual organised by Master Thiên (and performed by Thầy Hiền and his apprentices) had a twofold purpose. It pertained to the general aim of bringing peace and salvation (in terms of escaping the cycle of rebirth and attaining nirvana) to the wandering souls of Đồng Lộc junction, and it served the specific purpose of smoothing the process of the Ten Girls turning into benevolent deities (*biển*

thành những vị thiên thần). With untiring fervour, Master Thiên collected donations worth 18 million Vietnam Đồng, of which 14 million were used to buy votive paper offerings (e.g. paper shirts with matching ties, paper military uniforms, hats and shoes). The ritual was held at the memorial site and subsequently followed by a series of soul-calling rites that enabled Master Thiên's followers to establish direct contact with the girls and ask for their assistance and advice. But the Ten Girls also pursued their own agenda and asked for more rituals to be held at various war cemeteries along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Master Thiên complied with the demands of the girls' souls and committed herself to raising funds for another ritual dedicated to the liberation of the national war martyrs' souls. In December 2007, on the occasion of the 63rd anniversary of the Vietnamese People's Army, she organised an even bigger *Mông Sơn*-ritual at Trường Sơn National Cemetery, which contains over ten thousand graves of fallen soldiers. Her wealthy supporters had contributed over forty million Vietnam Đồng, most of which went up in flames in order to cater to the war martyrs' needs in the Otherworld.

Master Thiên's efforts at healing the wounds of war are timely and seem to meet an urgent need in contemporary Vietnam (see Gustaffson 2010, Schlecker and Endres 2011). During his trip to Vietnam in February 2007, the exiled Vietnamese Zen monk Thích Nhất Hạnh held several 'requiem ceremonies to untie the knots of great injustice' (*lễ giải oan*). Like the *Mông Sơn*-ritual, a *giải oan*-ceremony is intended to liberate the souls of those who died unjustly or whose bodies were never found. Master Thiên, however, is not a Zen Buddhist monastic. As a *bà đồng* of the Four Palace religion, she offers her followers and supporters a wide range of ritual services and remedies that pertain to her followers' this-worldly concerns rather than to the Buddhist aim of detachment from the world. Although some of her 'ritual management strategies' are certainly entrepreneurial in character (Endres 2010), she is not a businesswoman and therefore depends on her followers' generous contributions in order to finance her ritual projects. However, through her activities she gives her (predominately female) supporters the chance to reconcile their spiritual needs with patriotic sentiments and to 're-moralise their wealth' (Jellema 2005) by remembering their moral debt (*nhớ ơn*) to those who had sacrificed their lives so that others could live in peace and prosper. Moreover, she constitutes her own identity as a 'scientific medium' who is skilful in organisation and efficacious in securing divine benefits for her supporters by exploring (and inventing) new ways of tapping into supernatural powers.

Conclusion

My interlocutors in the world of Four Palace mediumship have often emphasised that 'nobody is alike' (*không ai giống ai*) and that in the world of mediumship it is important to distinguish

oneself from another. For an aspiring master in contemporary Hanoi it is particularly crucial to set himself apart from others because he has to outperform a growing number of competitors on the *lên đồng* scene. When I started comparing the palace-opening rituals of several masters, I found a puzzling variety in details where I had least expected it. But rather than re-inventing the wheel, most of them develop their own style by watching other masters' performances and choosing certain elements over others. Master Thiên, besides refining her ritual style, has not only expanded her specialisation as a *bà đồng* to include other ritual services but also her supernatural network of divine beings that can be approached for favours and blessings. Master Đ. has firmly established his standing as the most skilful (*giỏi nhất*) master in contemporary Hanoi (if not in the whole of North Vietnam) and tries to integrate his spiritual path as an illustrious *đồng cô* with his openly gay lifestyle. Master Cảnh, in turn, builds his reputation on his 'superior' masculine qualities and on his moral integrity as a male master medium who enjoys a happy family life besides fulfilling his religious duties. Despite having carved their own niche, however, master mediums carefully watch each others steps. From ritual lapses to scandalous rumours, the news usually spreads like wildfire in the world of mediums, and everybody is careful not to become the target of criticism and mockery. The contradictory contestations involved in the contemporary fashioning of Four Palace mediumship, however, are not just a matter of fierce competition in the religious marketplace. As I have shown in this article, they also reflect the gender dynamics in contemporary Vietnamese society at large. In the rapidly changing social and economic context of contemporary Vietnam, Four Palace mediumship thus provides a creative alternative space in which non-normative, and sometimes transgressive, gender identities are constructed, negotiated, and performed.

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The limits of “*chia se*” (sharing) in the Women’s Union: Through life histories of female cadres in a village of Ha Tinh province, Central Vietnam

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Outline

This paper examines the possibilities for and limits of the Vietnam Women’s Union, an official mass organization, as an alternative intimate sphere for rural women in Vietnam. The Women’s Union at Thach Chau commune, in Ha Tinh province, Central Vietnam (Map 1), where I have been conducting my ethnographic field research, is the only institutionalized organization for women in the commune, as all the Buddhist temples, along with other “feudal” constructions, were destroyed during the socialist transformation period (*cai tao xa hoi chu nghia*) in the 1970s.

This paper has two parts. First, it analyzes core members’ motives for participating in the Women’s Union based on life histories of the organization’s communal branch chairpersons, and compares these life histories with those of male cadres in the commune. “*Chia se*” (sharing) is one of the key terms for understanding female cadres’ explanations of their motives for devoting themselves to the Women’s Union. *Chia se* means to share another person’s happiness and sadness by expressing one’s sympathy for that person. This sympathy may be expressed by visits, monetary offerings, or flexible treatment understanding his or her situation and feelings. While male cadres refer to *chia se* as a method to win the hearts of their colleagues and the villagers, some female cadres say that sharing happiness and sadness with other people is the most important motivation for participation in social activities.

In the second part, this paper provides an ethnographic case study of a debate among the village women on whether the Women’s Union should support a woman facing difficulties, whose family has not followed the national family planning program and whose husband has problem drinking behavior, meaning her family does not meet the state’s “cultural” expectations. This case shows the limits of *chia se* for sisterly members of the Women’s Union. Practically, the organization does not allow members to provide in-depth assistance to fellow women, especially when they are viewed as not being good “citizens” (*cong dan*).

I argue that although the Women's Union has the potential to become a counter-public sphere for women based on their debates about everyday issues with other members, it cannot be seen as a neutral peer group for women in difficulty.

Alternative social spheres for Vietnamese rural women

Vietnamese rural women have many kinds of alternative social spheres outside the family. These spheres may include a woman's parent's lineage group, gossip among wives with cups of "raw tea" (*che xanh*) before going to the local market, or gossip among women in the kitchen preparing dishes for weddings or annual memorial services for dead lineage members. Religious organizations, especially Buddhist temples, have also provided rural women with alternative autonomous spheres where they can share the difficulties they face in family life.

Thach Chau commune

However, these alternative social spheres do not exist in Thach Chau commune, where I conducted the research for this study, because the people destroyed all religious and traditional constructions in the commune, including all the Buddhist temples and communal houses, as part of the Communist Party's campaign against conservative culture in the 1970s. Many ancestral houses of lineage groups in the village were also destroyed. Even now, in Thach Chau commune, religious activities and traditional festivals have not been revived. Thus, in Thach Chau commune, the Women's Union is assumed to be the absolute social space in which women build their close relationships with each other.

Thach Chau commune is located in a lowland area 10 km from the capital of Ha Tinh province. The population was 5,628 in 2002. The residents are Kinh people, the ethnic majority of the Vietnamese nation. This area was the birthplace of the communist movement in Vietnam and belonged to North Vietnam before 1975. Thus, in general, the residents are sympathetic to the Communist Party. In Ha Tinh province, the proportion of Communist Party members is higher than the national average, and Thach Chau commune has an even larger proportion than the provincial average at 6%. Most of the Party members in the commune are war veterans and retired white-collar workers. The majority of the residents are small farmers. Agricultural productivity is comparatively lower than in other villages in the province because of a limited irrigation system.

Map of Ha Tinh Province



Thach Chau commune is famous for its cultural traditions, represented by the Phan Huy lineage, which produced some famous members of the diplomat-literati in the eighteenth century, including Phan Huy Ich and Phan Huy Chu. Because of a connection with central government officials based on its “cultural” traditions, as well as its convenient location for transportation, the commune has attracted many national and foreign projects, such as the communal library-museum, a public high school, a national salt plant project, and a ROSCA (Rotating Saving and Credit Association) project for women introduced by IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) (Kato 2010).

The lowest level of government in the rural area is the commune (*xa*). The commune has a Communist Party cell, People’s Assembly, People’s Committee, and branches of official mass organizations including the Women’s Union. Within the commune, there are quasi-administrative units. These units are called *langs* in northern Vietnam, and they were the lowest administrative village levels before the Independent Revolution in 1945. In certain regions, the unity of the *langs* completely disappeared after the revolution, and *xoms*, which were the hamlets under the former *langs*, became the lowest units.

In Thach Chau commune, *langs* have lost their territorial and emotional unity, and 11 hamlets, with around 500 residents in each, comprise the basic quasi-administrative units.

The Vietnam Women's Union

The Vietnam Women's Union (*Hoi Lien Hiep Phu Nu Viet Nam*, VWU) is a state-affiliated official mass organization that functions as an interest group for women, as well as an apparatus for mobilizing women to adopt state policies and the directions of the Communist Party.

According to an official document of the organization, it is mandated to undertake tasks such as (1) raising women's awareness, knowledge and capacity in order to meet the requirements of the new socio-economic situation; (2) participating in the formulation, social counter-argument, and supervision of the implementation of laws and policies on gender equality; (3) assisting women in economic development, job creation, and income generation; and (4) assisting women in building prosperous, equal, progressive, and happy families ("Goals of the women's movement in the 2007–2012 period" on the organization's website).

The Women's Union was founded in 1930 during the colonial period. The history of the Women's Union in the North is closely attached to the history of national liberalization. During the period 1955–1975, when the whole country was at war, the Women's Union initiated many campaigns of emulation across the country, such as "the campaign of five goods," and "the campaign of three abilities," to encourage women in their labor, combat, study, and everyday family life.

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Women's Union became a channel for Party-State propaganda and could not offer enough material benefits for members. However, since the early stage of the *Doi Moi* period, the Women's Union has begun to attract local women again through the Communist Party's strategy to reactivate mass organizations as institutionalized means of governance (Endres 1999: 160). The entitlement of the members to allocations from credit funds also attracted local women. In recent years, the Women's Union has contributed to the achievement of birth control and assistance for women's economic independence.

As the unique political organization for women in Vietnam, the Women's Union has a network throughout Vietnam with four administrative levels — central, provincial, district, and commune — with a total membership of more than 13 million women, according to the organization's website. It also has semi-official branches at the village/hamlet level. Before the 1990s, members of the communal executive committee of the organization were often transferred from administrative positions in the agricultural collective and the communal government. In recent years, however, communal cadres have been recruited from leaders of the organization's hamlet branches.

In Thach Chau commune, each hamlet has a branch of the Women's Union. The hamlet executive committee of the organization consists of three members. They are elected by members in the hamlet following the recommendation of the Communist Party and the communal Women's Union. Sometimes, recommended candidates are defeated in the elections. There are two types of leaders at the hamlet level. One is a category of leaders who are enthusiastic about social and collective activities. They often have ambitions to be politicians in the village. The other is people who are imposed upon to work as leaders. Some of them are wives of local cadres. They often feel their duty in the Women's Union is a burden and do not continue more than one term.

In 2003, there were 270 adult women in H hamlet, where I conducted most of my field research. According to the hamlet Women's Union branch, there were 74 members who were enthusiastic about participating in the organization's everyday activities.

The Women's Union is a fairly active mass organization compared to other official mass organizations. During 2000–2002, when I first stayed in the village, the H hamlet branch organized membership meetings 18 times in two and a half years. One of the most significant activities of the Women's Union at the communal and hamlet levels is the management of various types of funds. According to the annual report of the H hamlet branch of the Women's Union in 2002, it held 108,500,000VND as funds that the Women's Union contributed to the hamlet. The hamlet branch is allocated 500m² of agricultural land by the hamlet for raising additional funds. In addition to the income from the land, the hamlet branch also raises fund by receiving contracts for harvesting from members who do not have the time or manpower for rice reaping. This additional fund is often used for recreational trips by the hamlet branch.

Interviews

In 2009 and 2011, I interviewed 16 local cadres in Thach Chau commune to ask about their life histories, including four chairpersons of the Women's Union communal branch, and two other female cadres (Appendix 1). I had three main questions for interviewees: (1) how and why did they become local cadres, (2) what is the secret to being a good leader, and (3) what did they think about their own jobs.

There are several general features of the life histories of female cadres (Appendix 2).

First, they were all active in the Youth League. In particular, people who had mobilized to the civilian defense expressed their nostalgia for the liveliness and voluntarism of youth activities.

Second, most cadres of older generations had voluntarily taught small children to write (*vo*

long) in their youth, as in the cases of Ms. Giang and Ms. Trung, as well as several elder male cadres including Mr. Xuan, Mr. Hung, and Mr. Cac, which indicates their volunteerism and interests in social affairs as well as a certain educational level.

Third, some of them are from well-off households. For example, Ms. Trung's parents were middle-class farmers, and Ms. Van's father owns a company in Vinh city. This indicates that being middle- or upper-class does not exclude women from recruitment for leadership positions in the Women's Union at the communal level. This is not the case, however, for senior leaders of the provincial Women's Union, whom I also interviewed in this research project. They are usually from the poorest households in their villages.

Fourth, though it seems to be contradictory to the third point, many of these women had to support their families by themselves. Ms. Giang and Ms. Huong lost their husbands in the battlefield. Moreover, Ms. Giang had to take care of her disabled son. Ms. Van's father ran away and lived with his second wife in Vinh city, and Ms. Van had to stay in the village and support her mother as the eldest child in the family. Ms. Giang and Ms. Trung do not have any male siblings, and this requires them to take greater responsibility for their parents compared to women who can rely on male siblings for family matters such as ancestral worship. Most of the female cadres are the eldest or the youngest in their families, which is also true in the male cadres' cases. They usually live with their parents and are responsible for taking care of their parents.

Fifth, most cadres of the elder generations were assigned as chairs of the Women's Union after working for many years in the communal agricultural collective or the communal People's Committee, while cadres of the younger generations, who started their careers in the 1990s, were usually trained at the hamlet branch of the Women's Union and then recruited to positions at the communal level. As Endres (1999) notes, the Women's Union was reactivated in the 1990s as a state agent for local governance as well as a popular organization to provide members with economic interests by allocating many kinds of foreign and national funds. It seems that young female cadres are more interested in the activities of the Women's Union.

Sixth, female cadres recognize working at the Women's Union as an opportunity to connect to "society," and as a means for self-empowerment to gain social prestige among fellow women, which may be comparable to what Pham Quynh Phuong (2009) found about the meaning of being a female medium of the Tran Hung Dao cult in terms of empowerment.

“Chia se” (sharing)

Before I started the interviews, I assumed that the Women’s Union provided local women with an alternative intimate sphere outside the family, at least in a village like Thach Chau commune, where religious organizations do not exist. Here I examine this hypothesis, though my findings on this matter are conflicting. “Chia se” (sharing) is one of the key terms for understanding female cadres’ explanations of their motives for devoting themselves to the organization.

As Malarney notes, villagers expect a “good” cadre to express commonality with them and to behave “as if he were any other resident” (Malarney 1997: 911). Some elder cadres in Thach Chau commune say that local leaders should get along with the masses (*hoa dong voi quan chung*). Mr. Lieu, a retired male Party secretary, says that a cadre should behave as “an ordinary peasant” (*mot nguoi nong dan*) to let villagers talk about their needs.

Local cadres have to get along with the masses. It means, for example, although I am a Party secretary, I also have to take my position as an ordinary peasant in the village. Only by doing so, can I grasp people’s feelings and desires (*tam tu, nguyen vong*) or problems for which they want to ask leaders for solutions. (Mr. Lieu)

Mr. Lieu gave some examples of how to behave like a peasant. One example is sharing tobacco with people.

For example, I don’t smoke. But, you know, people here often smoke *lao* tobacco (a kind of water pipe). And whenever I find a group of people smoking *lao* tobacco, I also sit down with them for a while and smoke some. If I do so, even though I am a Party secretary, I can build a spirit of consensus with them, and then they are willing to tell me what they really think. If I find them sitting together but just go by and don’t say anything to them, they might feel a distance between me and them and would not tell me what they want to say. As cadres in the village at the grassroots level [...] I don’t know how it is in Japan, but in Vietnam, cadres have this conception. (Mr. Lieu)

Malarney notes that it is recommended for leaders to participate in weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies in the village. Faithful attendance at these occasions is seen as the expression of a sentimental relationship (*tinhh cam*) with villagers, and is seen as the leader’s “expression of solidarity and equality with the people” (Malarney 1997: 912).

For local cadres, the expression of commonality is, first of all, necessary to gather correct information from villagers. Mr. Ha, a commune security chief for almost two decades, says that “relations” (*moi quan he*) with villagers are important to gathering correct information about

conflicts in the village.

If the relations become better, then they will give you much information. It is because of the relations. If a Party member has good relations with them, and when they feel he has enough prestige, enough capability, and enough trust, then they will provide him all. This is true not only for the security section but for everyone. (Mr. Ha)

A female cadre also expressed the same idea. “For women, you must understand their psychology,” said Ms. Huong, a former chairperson of the communal Women’s Union. For her, *chia se* is a way to win members’ hearts.

Our activities rely on members’ family conditions. But, to be successful in the organization, first of all, I must grapple cadres at the grassroots level. [...] When I was in office, I had to agitate people around each member. This person was in a situation like this; another person was in a situation like that. I had to understand each case to manage cadres so that they were eager to work with me; then, I eventually gained success.

She continued,

In those days, many of my fellow cadres were in difficulty, but I encouraged them. [...] For example, the circumstances of Mrs. Ha in the First Brigade were very difficult then. She wanted to join the activities, but her husband did not allow her to do so. Besides, he was not a Party member, but an ordinary mass, so I visited him and managed to get him to understand. I managed and encouraged him to let her participate in the activities. I analyzed those things for the husband to understand. I mobilized the cooperative spirits and material resources of the members to help the family in difficulty. With a successful movement like this, at last, I could encourage him to agree with her completely, and eventually the activities in the brigade also improved.

Meanwhile, we also need to note a gender difference in the discourse on commonality and sharing. While male leaders tend to say the purpose of commonality and sharing is to get more information, some female leaders mention sharing in itself as the main attraction of their jobs. For example, Ms. Van, the present chair of the Women’s Union, said that she likes her job because she can keep in touch with other women and “share grief and happiness” (*chia se vui buon*) with fellow “sisters” (*chi em*). In fact, female cadres usually know much about peer cadres’ families and often told me proudly about the successes of their fellow female cadres’ children. For example, in talking about the role of the Women’s Union in education, Ms. Trung, a former chairperson of the communal branch of the organization, gave me many concrete examples of fellow cadre’s children.

These narratives of *chia se* represent the ethics of concern, or an egalitarian ethics expressed by commonality with ordinary people and fellow cadres. The ethics emerge from the behavior of sharing, such as sharing *lao* tobacco and sharing people's grief and happiness. The practice of *chia se* is initially an art of governance to win the hearts and minds of the people and to gather information, but it is also seen as a joy of cadres.

To sum up: (1) Local male cadres and female cadres often emphasize the importance of *chia se* in their jobs; (2) Many local cadres refer to *chia se* as a strategic method to winning the hearts of their colleagues and villagers; (3) Several female cadres say that sharing happiness and sadness with other people is the most important motive for participation in social activities. I can safely say that for female cadres, at least, *chia se* is something more than a strategy of governance. Is it too naïve to relate the idea of *chia se* to the women's sensitivity and care for the feelings of others (Gilligan 1982)?

Conflicts over harvesting for a household in difficulty

Nevertheless, *chia se* does not mean providing thorough assistance to peer women facing life difficulties. The concerns for "sisterly" members in the organization are usually limited to a certain extent, and are not as deep as the intimate care women have for their own family members.

In this section, I examine a debate among members of the Women's Union in H hamlet in 2005 about the reasons for supporting a pregnant woman (Ms. Hoa) whose husband (Mr. Thu) was defined by the state as not being a "cultural" citizen.

The situation was as follows. Their son was injured and went into a hospital in a distant city, and Mr. Thu had to leave the village to take care of him. Thus, there was no one who could harvest for their household.

Most of the Women's Union members proposed that the organization should mobilize all the members to help the family with harvesting, trying to share their difficulties as a collective issue.

However, Ms. Trung, a former chairperson of the communal Women's Union, and a resident of H hamlet, said it was inappropriate for an official organization to help any household defined as not being "cultural" by the state. The chairperson was concerned about the baby to be born, which was to be the third child of Mr. Thu's household, a violation of the birth control campaign promoted by the state and the Women's Union. In addition, Mr. Thu's bad drinking behavior was also recognized as a problem. As I wrote above, it is an important mandate of the Women's Union to implement state policies and directions of the Communist Party. Though the rules of the

Women's Union do not prohibit supporting members who have a third child, the cadres of the commune Women's Union rejected the members' proposal, interpreting the organization's political position quite strictly.

Members opposed this instruction, saying, "Mr. Thu is a bit mentally ill (*be than kinh*). [...] We should help them if we have a sense of mutual love and affection (*tuong than, tuong ai*)."

In responding to these opinions, the former chairperson proposed a compromise to the members. She said that there was no problem if Women's Union members wanted to help Mr. Thu's household personally, but "to help voluntarily" (*tu nguyen giup*) and "to help collectively" (*tap the giup*) are different, and in this case, the Women's Union could not help collectively. She said that members could help the family if they had the "charity spirit" (*hao tam*). The organization did not prohibit members from doing so. "To help collectively" (*tap the giup*) would have meant, in this context, the Women's Union mobilizing members and officially supporting Mr. Thu's household. *Hao tam* usually means to support personally and voluntarily someone in difficulty. The former chairperson meant that members could help Mr. Thu's household as a personal activity but that the Women's Union, as an official mass organization, could not support the family. Finally, the meeting confirmed that the organization would not prohibit members from supporting personally Mr. Thu's household out of "mutual love and affection" (*tuong than, tuong ai*) or "sentiment and chivalry among villagers" (*tin lang nghia xom*).

This minor episode shows the possibilities for and difficulties of the women's attempt to express their solidarity based on the official organization's capacity to mobilize people. According to the opinion of the cadres of the communal Women's Union, the Women's Union is an official organization operating under the authority of the Party and the state; thus, beneficiaries of the organization must be good "citizens" (*cong dan*). Un-cultural families are excluded from its benefits. On the other hand, ordinary members view the organization as an association of local women and put more emphasis on mutual aid among members, seeing the organization as a locus of "sharing."

This episode shows the conflicting position of the Women's Union as a state-affiliated mass organization that cannot offer *chia se* support for villagers who do not meet the criteria for good "citizens." Though female cadres explain the importance of the *chia se* spirit, in formal situations, they often set limits on the targets of official support. This means that the Women's Union is primarily a state apparatus for creating state values in local women.

Conclusion

Though the intimate relationship based on the practice of *chia se* is ideal for female cadres as well as ordinary Women's Union members, we cannot conclude that the Women's Union is, in fact, an alternative intimate sphere for village women. The idea of *chia se* must confront state values in many cases. Thus, I argue that, in addition to the Women's Union, it is necessary to establish another social channel for women in rural areas to create access to other kinds of institutions specializing in peer support, especially in places like Thach Chau commune, where the socialist transformation completely eliminated indigenous alternative social organizations.

However, it is possible that the Women's Union could become a counter-public sphere based on women's negotiation with the state for intimate relationships among women. In the case I discussed above, ordinary members tried to provide support for Mr. Thu's household as a collective activity of women in the village, not as a private activity. By doing so, they tried to make harvesting for Mr. Thu's household the obligation of village women, or, in other words, the responsibility of the village women as a "collective" (*tap the*). It can be said that the ordinary members' proposal was the start of the process of making village women agents of mutual aid to peer members, which would make them agents of an alternative morality contrasted with the state value of the good "citizen." As Vasavakul notes, regardless of their official status and affiliations, popular organizations have the ability to represent particular interests and to provide alternative policy options to those advocated by the Party-State (Vasavakul 2003: 53). What is important here is that the institutional capability of the Women's Union is, in practice, the basis for the collective agency of village women in the case of Thach Chau commune.

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Appendix 1 List of interviewees

No	Name	Birth Year	Career	Education (years)	Military	Siblings
01	Nguyen Xuan	1928	SPCC (1966-75, 78-88)	04 (<i>yeu luoc</i>)	None	The eldest child in 4
02	Mrs. Giang.	1938	CVWU (1968-1984)	07/10	None	The eldest child in 7
03	Phan Huy Hung	1944	SPCC (1991-2000)	04/10	None	An only child
04	Hoang Van Tung	1945	SPCC (1989-1990)	10/10	1967-75, wounded	<i>n. d.</i>
05	Le Dai Lieu	1948	SPCC (2002-2008)	07/10	1967-78, 1979-81	The youngest child in 7
06	Le Van Cac	1948	CVFF	10/10	1967-1969, wounded	The youngest child in 4
07	Mrs. Huong	1949	CVWU (1984-1999?)	07/10	None	The eldest child in 8
08	Le Thi Trung	1950	CVWU (1996-2006)	07/10	<i>dân công hỏa tuyến</i>	The youngest child in 6 (have no brother)
09	Pham Thai Sang	1951	CCPC	08/10	None	The 2 nd child in 6 (have one elder sister)
10	Le Mai Ha	1951	The head of the local security police contingent	07/10	1968-72, provincial force	The 2 nd child in 7 (have one elder sister)
11	Tran Van Hanh	1960	PSCC (2001-2002)	10/10	1979-83	The eldest child in 4
12	Le Quang Huy	1964	VSPCC (2008-)	12/12	None	The eldest child in 4
13	Le Thi Lam	1967	A member of the VWU communal committee	07/10	None	The 4 th child in 5

			(1995-2003)			
14	Nguyen Tien Tan	1968	SPCC (2008-)	12/12	1985-89	The youngest child in 8
15	Le Thi Van	1972	CVWU (2006-)	12/12	None	The eldest child in 3
16	Pham Thi Tam	1972	VCVWU(2011-)	12/12	None	The second youngest child in 9

PSCC=Secretary of the Party’s Communal Cell

VSPCC=Vice Secretary of the Party’s Communal Cell

CVFF=Chair of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front

CCPC=Chair of the Communal People’s Counsel

CVWU=Chair of the Vietnamese Women’s Union

VCVWU=Vice Chair of the Vietnamese Women’s Union

Appendix 2 Profiles of the female cadres in Thach Chau commune

02 Ms. Giang, born in 1938
<p>Born in Thach Chau commune, the eldest child of seven sisters, Ms. Giang’s parents were ordinary farmers and also raised silkworms and weaved silk. She joined “the August Revolution Boy and Girl Scout” group (<i>Doan Thieu Nhi Thang Tam</i>), and she played an active part in the chorus group. She joined the “Mass Education Movement” (<i>phong trao binh dan hoc vu</i>) when she was a junior high school student and taught small children to write (<i>day vo long</i>). After finishing the seventh grade, she married a student from a sport university. She was 19 years old at that time. She lost her husband in the war against the United States in 1968 (she received his death notice in 1977). She has a disabled son whom she has to support. She joined the Vietnam Women’s Union and worked at the hamlet level. She joined the Communist Party in 1966 and subsequently, she was appointed as the chair of the communal branch of the Women’s Union. She studied at the Women’s Union school in Vinh city for two years. She also studied at a financial school for 45 days, and she was then appointed as the cashier of an agricultural collective in the commune. Later she became the cashier of the united agricultural collective of the commune. In 1986, she resigned from the collective administration because she wanted to concentrate on economic activities. She said it was natural for her to be active in the Women’s Union because social activities had been her “environment” since her days in the Scouts. At present, her only grandson works as a member of the communal committee of the Youth League. She said that being good at “taking care” (<i>lo lang</i>) of directions from above and the happiness of the association’s members is a distinct feature of the female cadres’ way of working.</p>

07 Ms. Huong, born in 1949

Ms. Huong was born in a neighboring commune, the eldest child of eight brothers and sisters. After finishing the seventh grade, she dropped out of school because of financial problems. She joined the civil engineer brigade, the coastal defense service, and Irrigation Team No. 202 when she was 16 years old. She was assigned as the vice-chief of an agricultural collective when she was 17 years old. According to her, the Communist Party kept her from leaving the commune because the commune was short of young cadres. She got married at 17 and lost her husband on the battlefield. She joined the Communist Party when she was 18 and was assigned as the sub-chief of the communal Youth League and was reallocated to work as the chairperson of the communal Women's Union when she was 20 years old. Then, she successively held positions as the assistant for the communal People's Committee, vice-secretary of the communal Party branch. She married an elementary school teacher in 1981 and moved to her second husband's house in Thach Chau commune. At that time, she had an adopted daughter and her second husband had five children. She had two children with her second husband. She was assigned to positions as a committee member of the hamlet branch of the Women's Union in 1981, the vice-chair of the communal branch of the Women's Union in 1983, and chairperson in 1984. In 1999, she transferred her position to the successor and moved down to the position of vice-chair in charge of a financial project for women in the commune. She resigned from the office in 2001. When she first moved to her second husband's village, she experienced difficulties with her husband's relatives, who were opposed to her working in the "society" when her husband also worked outside. However, encouraged by cadres in Thach Chau commune, she overcame these difficulties and worked at the Women's Union.

08 Ms. Trung, born in 1950

Ms. Trung was born in Thach Chau commune, the youngest of six sisters. Her parents were classified as middle-class peasants in the land reform period. After finishing the seventh grade, she joined the Youth League. At that time, meetings of the Youth League were often held in each hamlet, rather than in schools as they are now, so group activities were very cheerful. They always sang songs and played games, even during bombing. She also joined shooting practices and the coastal defense service with other young women in the commune. She also voluntarily taught little children to write in her hamlet. She got married in 1968, when she was 18 years old, but she needed to wait until 1973 to organize their wedding party because when her husband came back from the South in 1971, she had to go to the South as the vice-company commander of the volunteer army service corps (*dan cong hoa tuyen*). She had her first son in 1974 and now has five sons, all graduated from universities. After the war, her husband went to Laos for military-political duties and came back to the village after demobilization. According to her, her husband was a hardworking man and often supported the people around him. She talked eagerly about education for children, saying that a mother should be an "accompanying friend" of her children

and observe children's social relationships and everyday behavior. She was assigned as sub-chief of the local security police contingent in charge of the census resister. In 1986, she was allocated as vice-chair of the communal branch of the Women's Union and the cashier of the united agricultural collective of the commune concurrently. In 1996, she was assigned as the chair of the communal Women's Union. She has many memories of the integration of hamlet nurseries into the communal kindergarten and of credit projects for women. She thinks female cadres are usually better trained in their duties than men are, especially when they start a new pilot project, and are not over-confident in organizing. She is proud of the children of fellow cadres, who study well and have good jobs. Her husband died in 2009, and since then she has often stayed at her eldest son's house in Hanoi. Her husband's younger brother is successful in political life, and held important posts such as the secretary of the district Party branch and vice-chair of the provincial branch of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front.

13 Ms. Lam, born in 1967

Ms. Lam was born in Thach Chau commune, the fourth child of five brothers and sisters. After finishing the seventh grade, she dropped out of school because she could not pass the exam to enter high school. She joined the Youth League when she was 15 years old. The main activity was coaching singing and dancing for small children, which was a very cheerful "*soi noi*" experience for her. She also joined the irrigation team with her friends. She is regretful that the Youth League these days has become more and more like an "economic" activity instead of a "movement" like it was in her days. In 1985, she was assigned as the leader of the hamlet Youth League. She joined the Communist Party in 1988 and got married in the same year. Her husband was an executive member of the communal Youth League at that time, and then successively held positions in the local government. He now works at the district Party branch in charge of personnel. Ms. Lam had her first son in 1990. She has two children. She joined the Women's Union in 1992 and was assigned by the Party as the leader of the hamlet branch in 1993. She became a member of the executive committee of the communal branch of the Women's Union in 1995 and held an additional post of person in charge of the population and families of the commune in 2001. She was reassigned to work as an official for administrative affairs in the communal People's Committee in 2004. According to her, the Women's Union became more active once it started to have credit funds and was able to provide members with material benefits. She claims not to have any feeling about the activities of the Women's Union. She rather insists on her preference for art performance activities in the village.

15 Ms. Van, born in 1972

Ms. Van was born in Thach Chau commune, the eldest of three brothers and sisters. Her father ran away when she was a child. After finishing high school, she decided to stay at home to support her mother even though she had enough ability to go to university. She was assigned as the sub-leader of the communal Youth League in 1988 and was selected as the leader in 1989. In 1994, she got married to a

son of a former chairperson of the communal People's Committee. Her husband was successively selected as the chair of the hamlet branch of the Farmer's Association and the chief of H hamlet, but he had to resign from the position because of health problems. After having a daughter, Ms. Van was successively assigned as the chair of the hamlet branch of the Women's Union in 1997, an executive member of the agricultural service collective of Thach Chau commune and the person in charge of population and families in the communal People's Committee in 2002, an executive member of the communal branch of the Women's Union in 2004, and the chair of the communal branch of the Women's Union in 2006. She still holds this position. She said she loves "political" activities more than "economic" activities. According to her, female cadres often take much more care (*lo lang*) in their tasks than male cadres do; thus, they always plan ahead and take care of the outcomes.

16 Ms. Tam, born in 1972

Ms. Tam was born in Thach Chau commune, the eighth child of nine brothers and sisters. After retiring from a forestry office in Ha Tinh province, her father returned to the commune and worked as the chief of the communal stockbreeding collective. After graduating from high school, she did not continue studying because of laziness and started a small business at local markets with her parents' capital, then married a man in the commune. He worked in a lumber mill in the South at that time. She has two children. After having her first daughter in 1994, she joined the Women's Union. She was recognized for her ability by the chair of the hamlet branch of the Women's Union at that time, and was assigned as a member of the executive committee of the hamlet branch in 1998. She was assigned as the chair of the hamlet branch in 2004, as a member of the executive committee of the communal branch in 2006, as the person in charge of the accounting for the agricultural service collective and electricity collective of the commune in 2007, and the person in charge of keeping the agricultural collective store. She just became the vice-chair of the communal Women's Union in 2011. She finally gave up her small business when she was assigned as the vice-chair, though she had tried hard to keep working at the market since her young days. She said that although activities in the Women's Union give her political experience, they do not have anything to do with economic stability, at least working at the hamlet level with a contract.

Social and family roles of working women in transitional Vietnam

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Vietnam is a country with high proportion of women in the labor force. Working is universal among Vietnamese women. The rate of women participate in labour force is 48.6% compared with 51.4% of male (GSO, 2010). At the same time, they need to fulfil their mother and wife roles in the family, as the traditional roles of Vietnamese women. This paper, used some existed data from previous surveys in Vietnam in 2009 and 2010, aim to provide an overview of the status of women leaders in the political systems and their domestic roles at home in order to identify the constraints they face in the everyday life.

1. Institutional settings for gender equality

Throughout history of founding and defending Vietnamese nation, women have always played a very important role. Since the country's independence was declared in 1945 and for many decades, the Vietnamese Communist Party and the State have always appreciated and promoted the role and position of women, made their every effort to ensure women's equal rights and development and created favourable conditions to help them dedicate the most to our nation's common cause of building a strong Vietnam with prosperous people and a fair, democratic and civilized society. Vietnam is one of the countries that early signed and approved the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The policy on non-discrimination in Vietnam currently is not only a declaration but also being clearly represented in the Party's resolutions and instructions and the State's and Government's policies and civil laws, in works for mobilizing women, works of women cadres and on gender equality. It is respected and ensured to be implemented in the practice of social life, as well as in every family and in the awareness of the people. This is also an important condition that guarantees the implementation of gender equality in social life.

Ten years ago, Vietnam only had an interdisciplinary organization for the advancement of women established from the central to local authorities. The Law on Gender Equality, which was

approved by the National Assembly session XI in the 10th Meeting on 26th November 2006 was put into effect from 1st July 2007, affirming the deep and comprehensive consideration of the Party and State to women in general and to female cadres in particular. At present, the national system on gender equality in Vietnam includes: Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam. Besides, the Vietnam Women's Union and Vietnam Female Member of Parliament Group have also actively joined in the implementation of this work.

On 27 April 2007, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party issued the Resolution No.11-NQ/TW on the work for women in the period of accelerating industrialization and modernization. Almost all of legal documents newly drafted or modified and supplemented are integrated with "forbidding discrimination against women" spirit and complying with gender equality rules. Some of those are: Law on Cadres and Civil Servants, Law on Promulgation of Legal Documents, Law on Election to the National Assembly, Law on Election to the People's Council, Law on Gender Equality approved by the National Assembly in 2006 and Decrees on Instruction of Implementation (Decree No.70/2008/NĐ-CP dated 4th June 2008 are giving detailed instructions on the implementation of some Articles of Law on Gender Equality, Decree No.48/2009/NĐ-CP dated 19th May 2009 regulated solutions for assuring gender equality, Decree No.55/2009/NĐ-CP dated 10th June 2009 regulated administrative penalty in gender equality ...) has marked a turning-point and is a breakthrough in the cause of gender equality in Vietnam. Those are documents with important values aimed at strengthening the Party's leadership, the State's management, continuing renovation in the work of women so that they can participate in bigger numbers and more actively, contributing more to the development of the family, the community, the country and the implementation of gender equality.

Since December 2007, the Government has assigned the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs to be responsible for state management of gender equality. Since then, the organizing system and system on state management on gender equality have been basically established from the central to localities and the operation has come into order. It is remarkable that the National Committee for Advancement of Women in Vietnam continues to be completed and operates quite well. The system of Departments for Advancement of Women is established in all ministries, industries, provinces and central cities.

Resolution 57/NQ-CP dated 1st December 2009 has issued the Action Plan of the Government for the period up to 2020 in implementing Resolution 11-NQ/TW dated 27th April 2007 of Political Bureau regarding the work for women in the period of motivating industrialization and modernization of the country. This is a significant policy of the Party and the

determination of the whole political system aiming at enhancing the work for female cadres to meet requirements of the industrialization and modernization of the country.

In the implementation of the gender equality objective, the Government has built and implemented special strategies and plans typically for women such as: National strategy on Advancement of Women in Vietnam for the period 2001-2010; mainstreaming gender equality in strategies, plans and joint programmes of the nation such as: comprehensive strategy on growth and hunger elimination and poverty reduction, plan on socio-economic development for the 5-year from 2006- 2010... The system for gender equality implementation is more and more improved and developed.

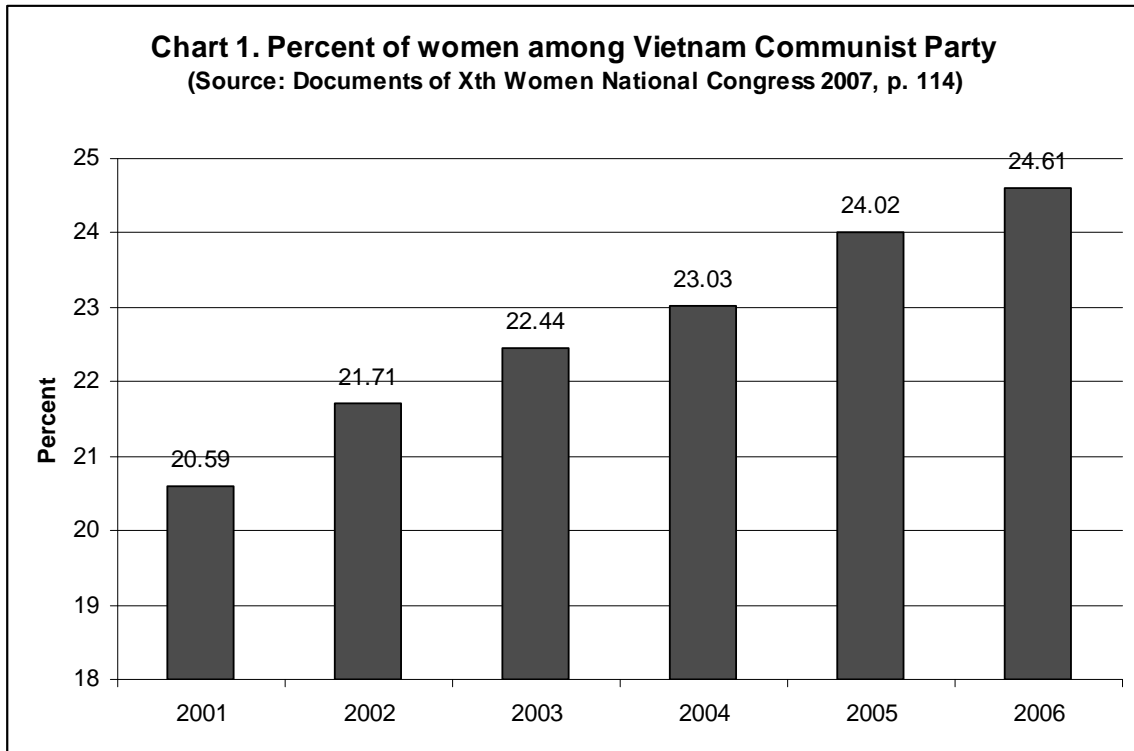
Vietnam is considered that basically completing the framework on policies and law on gender equality. In order to concretize our Party's and State's points of view and objectives on gender equality, at the same time, to legalize relevant regulations in international conventions in which Vietnam is a member (typically, CEDAW), over the last 10 years, policies and law on gender equality have been gradually improved. The Communist Party of Vietnam specially values the importance of promoting the strength of national unity, encouraging great efforts of the whole population, including women. It is necessary to promote the Party's leadership, the renovation of women's cause so that women can participate in bigger numbers and more actively, contributing more to the development of the family, the community, the country and the implementation of gender equality.

2. Participation of women in the political system

Women's participation in leadership is one of important criteria of the advancement of society and gender equality. Over the past years, the number of female cadres in leadership and management positions at all levels and in different agencies has a rise in both quantity and quality. This is shown in high proportion of women in work force. Constituted over 50% of population and nearly 50% of society's work force, there are more and more women participating in various areas of society and holding important positions in political system.

In the sector of Party's agencies, at central level, in the 2006-2010 tenure, the rate of women joining the Communist Party's Central Committee (including alternate members) is 10%, higher in compared with the 2001-2005 tenure (8.6%), the ratio of female cadres who participate in Secretariat of the Party's Central Committee is 20% (2/10 people); at provincial level, through supervision and inspection of 24 provincial committees and city committees, it can be seen that there are 10 provincial and city committees having the ratio of women participating in the Party's

Executive board in 2005-2010 term to reach more than 15%. There are 14 provincial and city committees having the executive committee rate lower than 10%, and there are 5 provincial party committee female secretaries nationwide.



Source: EOWP, 2009

Gender equality in politics field has been positively improved. Over the last century, the position of Vice President of the State is always held by women. In the 2006-2011 tenure, it was the first time that the National Assembly has a female Vice President.

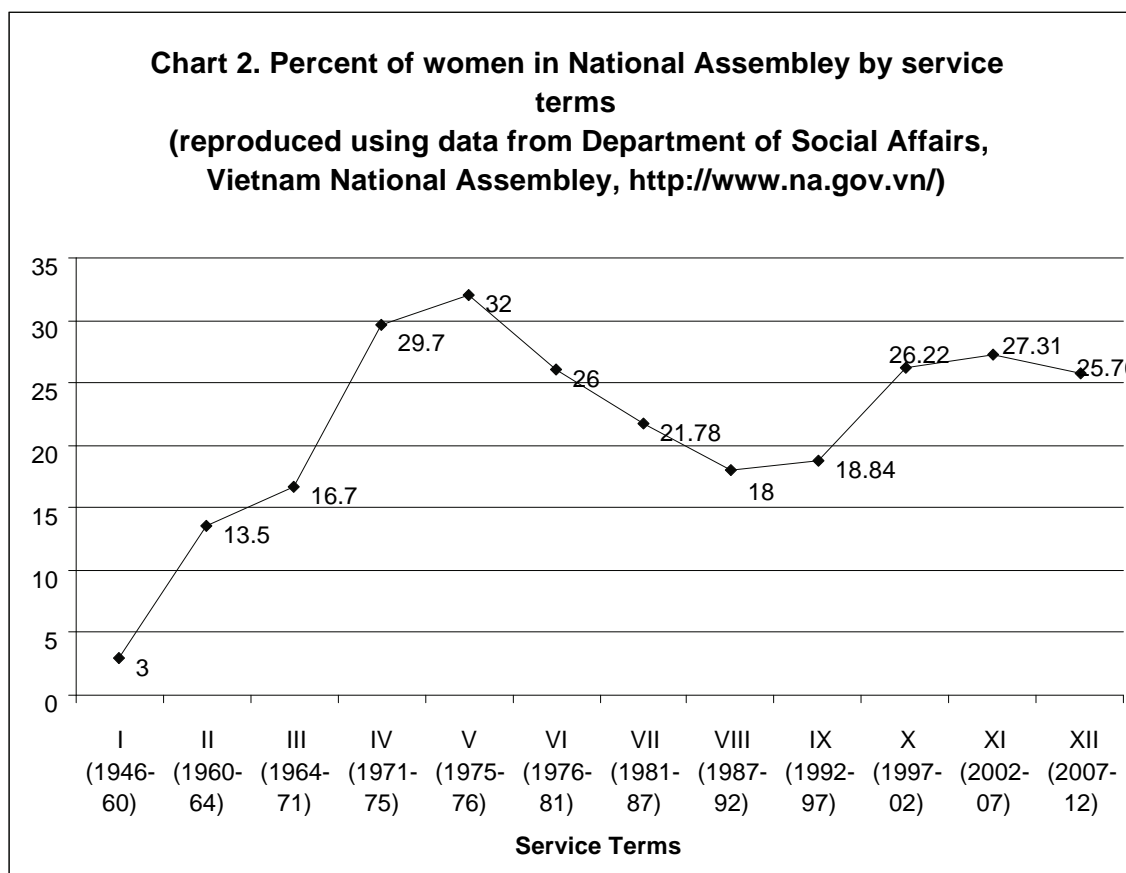
In the area of the State's administrative agencies, the female officers and civil servants increase in both quantity and quality. In 2007-2011 term, the proportion of female Ministers and equivalents is 4.5%, ratio of female Deputy Ministers and equivalents is 8.4%.

Table 1 Proportion of women leadership at the central level (%)

Position	1987-91	1992-98	1997-2002	2005
Minister and the equivalent	10	12	13	12
Vice Minister and the equivalent	7	7	9	9
Director of Provincial Department and the equivalent	13	13	12	6
Vice Director of Provincial Department and the equivalent	9	12	8	14
Director of National Committees and Administrations	0	0	0	25
Vice Director of National Committees and Administrations	0	0	0	33

Source: GSO, National Committee for the Advancement of Women 2006; Report on the Gender Equality in Vietnam, 2006

In the National Assembly, Vietnam is one of a few countries in the Asia – Pacific region having the proportion of female members of National Assembly reaching over 25%. The number of female members who hold important positions in agencies of National Assembly has increased. The role and position of women in the National Assembly of Vietnam are affirmed and which have considerably contributed to the development of the country. Although the proportion of women participating in National Assembly does not match with proportion of women in the population, in the work force and there is uneven development in 12 terms of National Assembly, however, Vietnam was still the nation that has a high proportion of women in National Assembly over many years (at present, Vietnam is ranking 33rd in the world, leading top among 8 ASEAN countries having female members in National Assembly and ranking 4th in the Asia-Pacific region).



Source: EOWP, 2009

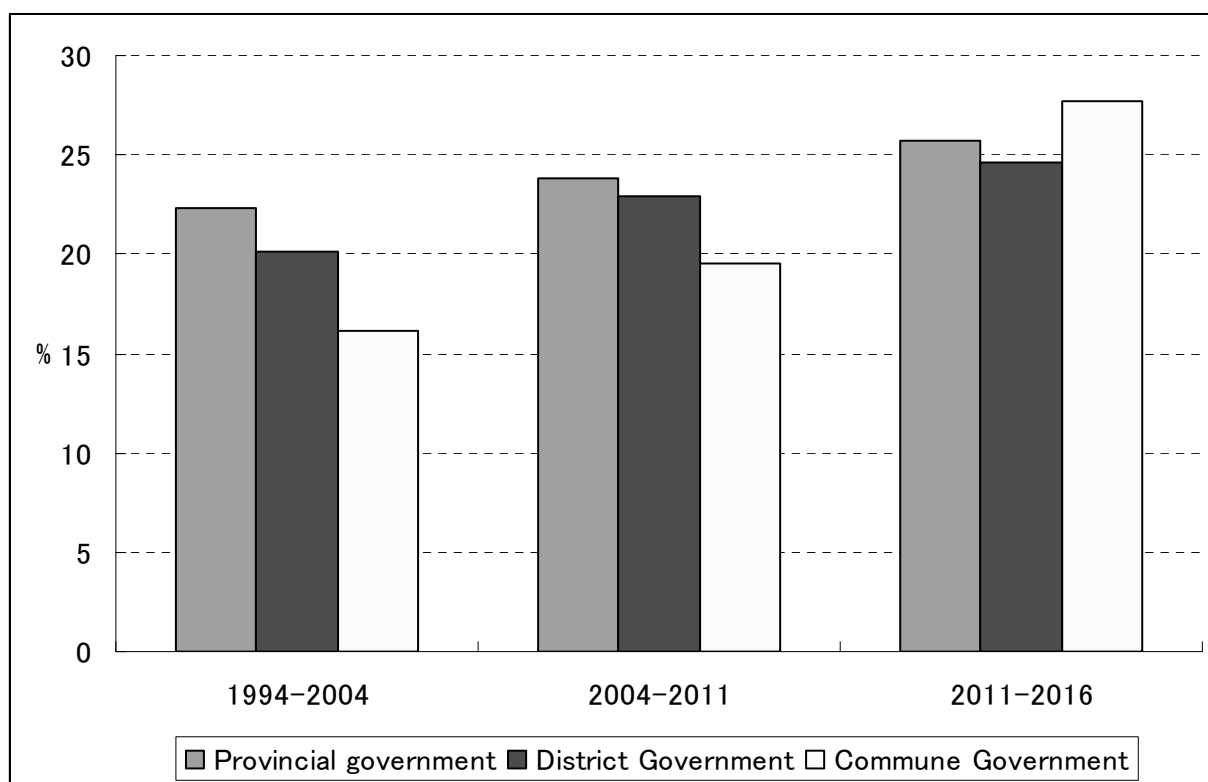
In the National Assembly, women are more represented in the “soft” political committee. For instance, 40% of member of the National Committee for Social Issues and National Committee for Culture, Educational and Youth are women. The proportion of 44% of women is in the National Committee for Ethnicity. Vice versa, the proportions of women in the more “strategic” and “powerful” committee are limited. For instance, only 13% of women in the Committee for Budget and Economics, no women in the National Committee for Security (ADB 2005).

Females cadres who hold important leading positions in agencies of the political system, being elected and appointed to positions of leaders and managers in State’s agencies at all levels from central to localities, have confirmed that the Party and State always concern, trust them and assign many important tasks to them.

In recent years, the work of planning and appointing female staff and cadres in positions of leaders and managers has been paid attention and actively guided by the Party and Government at

all levels. Most of Ministries, agencies and local authorities have developed programs and plans on work for women with emphasis on work for female cadres, fully aware of the importance, content, objective, requirement of work for women; organizing the implementation in a disciplined manner, and periodically evaluating the result. Leaders at all levels have directed to review the quantity of existing female cadres, developing plans, proposing specific targets with the aim at strengthening the personnel of female cadres in general and female cadres in the leadership and management in particular.

Chart 3: Proportion of female official in the People Committee Council by government level



Source: National Assembly Report, 2011

It is noted that the local government includes three levels, which are provincial government, district government and commune government. Each government level has one People Committee Council elected by people and one People Committee assigned from the People Committee Council to make decision and run the government. It can be seen from the table that the women participation has increased nationally and sub-nationally.

Table 2: Proportion of female leadership in the People Committee Council by government level, tenure 1999-2004 và 2004-2011

Position	Provincial government		District Government		Commune Government	
	1999-2004	2004-2011	1999-2004	2004-2011	1999-2004	2004-2011
President	1.64	1.56	5.46	3.92	3.46	4.09
Vice President	8.19	28.13	11.42	20.26	5.6	10.61

Source: Vietnam Women Union, 2011

Table 3: Proportion of female leadership in the People Committee by government level, tenure 1999-2004 và 2004-2011

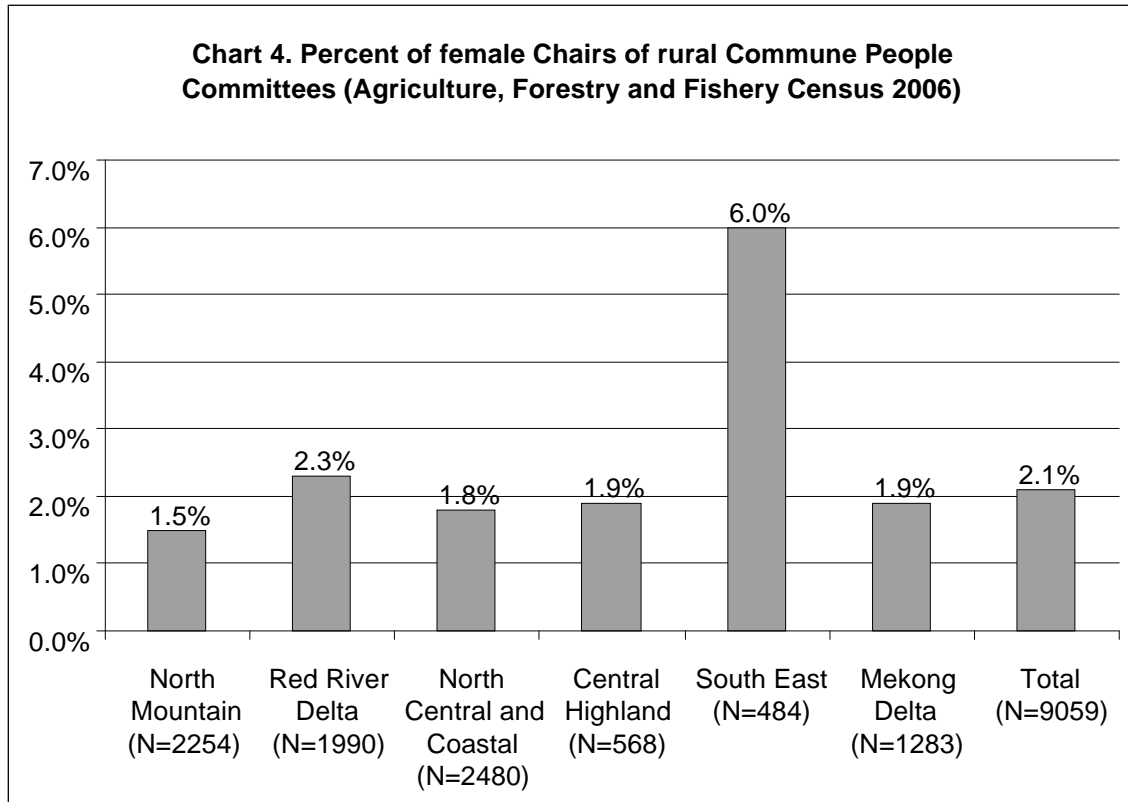
Position	Provincial government		District Government		Commune Government	
	1999-2004	2004-2011	1999-2004	2004-2011	1999-2004	2004-2011
President	1.64	3.12	5.27	3.02	3.74	3.42
Vice President	12.05	16.08	11.42	14.48	8.48	8.84

Source: Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), 2011

Women's right on economics has been raised accordingly with the regulation in which women undersign together with men in certificates of ownership in land, housing and property. Vietnam is one of the few countries that completed report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women (CEDAW).

Vietnamese women have strong steps of growth and development, have great contributions in the areas of economics, culture - society, science - technology, building the Party and Government and in international cooperation. Women of all ethnic groups and religions, women who are workers, farmers, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, in the position of leader, manager or laborer... have united and emulated to promote their inner strength, participated in the successful realization of

the country’s socio-economics goals.



Source: EOWP, 2009

3. Women cadres in family roles

3.1. Decision making of women

The statistics show that the husband makes the decisions in the family with the highest percentage of 51.9%, accounting for more than half of the respondents. The percentage of wives who mostly make the decisions is lowest with only 16.4%, only one third in comparison with the husbands. Both husbands and wives making decisions together account for 31.7% of the respondents. If we take a look at the sex of the respondents, more husbands answer that they are the main decision makers, and that the percentage of wives who are the main decision makers is less than the same answers of the wives about their husbands. For example, in Table 1, in the column “husband make decision more”, 62.3% of the husbands said that they make more decisions

in production, while in the column “wives make decision more”, only 8% of the husbands agreed that their wives are people who make more decisions. 41.1% of the wives said that their husbands make decisions more, and 25.1% of them said that they decide more. So husbands are the main decision makers in the family in rural Vietnam.

Table 4: Decision making regarding production

	Husband decide more	Wives decide more	Equal on decision making	Total
Average	51.9	16.4	31.7	100
Husband	62.3	8.0	29.7	100
Wife	41.1	25.1	33.9	100

Source: *Family in transitional Vietnam, 2004-2011. N=900*

Similar to the influence over the buying of expensive properties for the family, the percentage of husbands and wives who make decisions together about family relations account for the most (47.7%), after which come husbands who make decisions with 40.5%, and only 11.8% of wives make decisions which is 5% less than the percentage of wife decision makers in production and buying expensive properties.

Table 5: Decision making in respect to family relations

	Husband decide more	Wives decide more	Equal on decision making	Total
Average	40.5	11.8	47.7	100
Husband	49.1	6.7	44.2	100
Wife	31.3	17.2	51.6	100

Source: *Family in transitional Vietnam, 2004-2011. N=900*

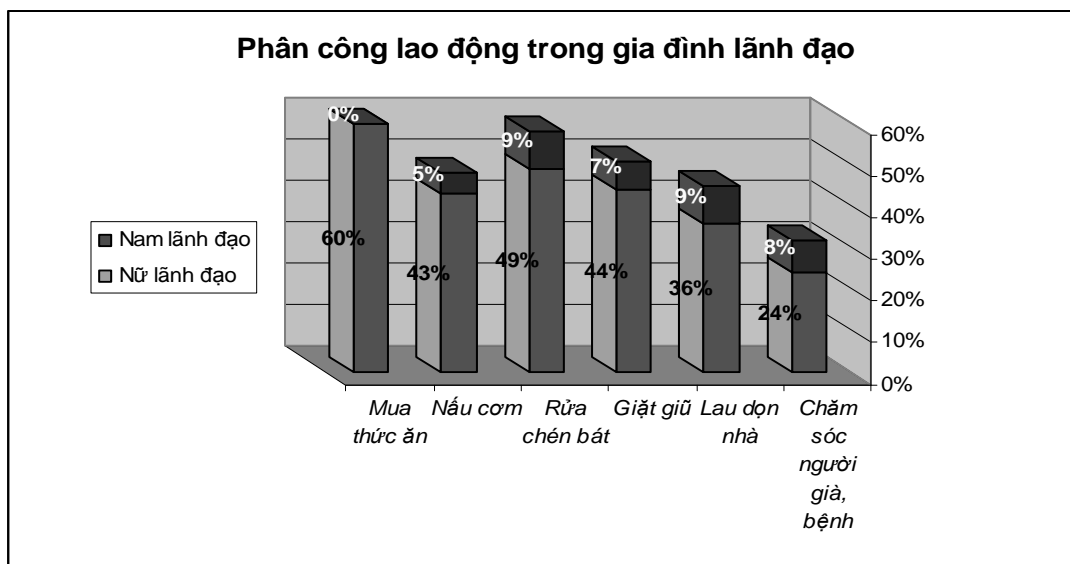
In general, husband report higher proportions in decision making regardless of the issues. The following figure describe if the women leader can have more right in decision making in their home.

3.2. Housework

The efforts include arranging family works and sparing time to improve professional and management skills, fulfilling assigned tasks, having high sense of responsibility for works and building the relationships in working and amongst co-workers.

The following figure illustrates the housework allocation among men and women leadership in HCMC. For men, houseworks are their wives’s responsibility. Very small proportions of male leadership help with the family works, such as buying food (0%), cooking (4,5%), dish washing (9,1%), cloth washing (6,8%), cleaning (9,1%). However, among female leadership, the majority of them have to take care of all family issues, as other normal women such as buying food (60%), cooking (42,5%), dish washing (48,7%), cloth washing (43,6%), cleaning (35,9 %). (Le Thi My Hien, 2010)

Chart 5: Housework allocation among men and women leadership



Source: Le Thi My Hien, 2010

In compared with the men leadership, women leadership has the double criteria of both housework and office work.

Table 6: Gender difference in the housework allocation

	Activities	Male official			Female official		
		Wife	Husband	Both	Wife	Husband	Both
1	Child education	15.8	5.5	78.7	21.5	1.1	77.4
2	Child and parent care	18.2	0.6	81.2	16.6	0.6	82.9
3	Housework	65.0	1.1	33.9	65.5	1.1	33.3
4	Visiting friends	2.2	11.1	86.1	6.2	2.3	91.5
5	Money making	2.8	20.1	77.1	2.8	30.1	67.0
6	Decision making	1.6	30.2	68.1	1.1	25.7	73.1

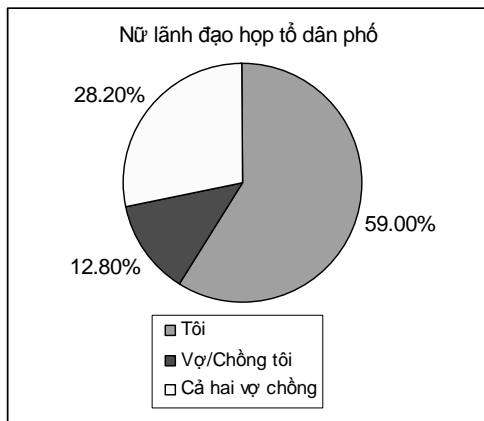
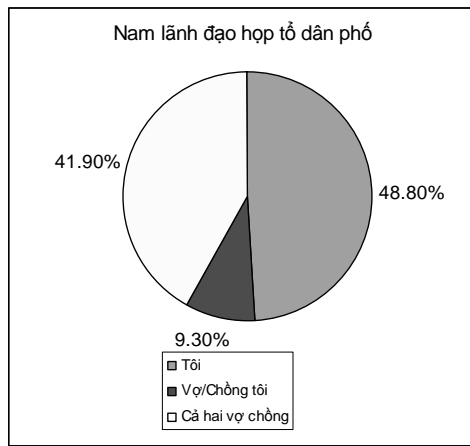
Source: Survey on the female leadership at the grassroots level in Ha Tinh, 2011 (N=372)

Similar to women official in HCMC, women official in the Central of Vietnam also share the same pattern. They report significant higher proportions of doing the housework and care regardless of the social position. Even if they are official, they are not the key decision making person in the family. In both two kinds of family, husbands are aggressive in important issues such as decision making, money making, and housework and care issues are women's responsibility.

3.3. Village/resident unit meetings

Village/resident unit meeting is a community activity which can be understood as the social participation. Both male and female leadership positively join this activity (48,8% among male leadership and 59% among female leadership) Le Thi My Hien: Gender perspectives in leadership at the commune level (case HCMC), 2010

Chart 6,7: Proportion of participation in village/resident unit meetings



Source: Le Thi My Hien, 2010

3.4. Female perception of the family burdens

Urban female official see more burdens in balancing the family works and social works, compared with the rural female ones. However, both rural and urban women report high proportion of feeling hard with the family burdens in daily life. The case studies in Hatinh province add values to this statement.

Being women, I must complete my social work and ensure the family issues. I have to perform my wife and mother roles in the family at the same time. That is social expectation for women like me. Thus, I some times feel very streeful. Even, my husband and I have conflict because I am too busy with my urgent office work and careless about the house things. (Female official, aged 37, Head, Commune Women Union, Ha tinh)

I am a working woman so I totally understand the difficulty in balancing the social and family works. In the urban, I can hire a domestic worker to help with the housework so I can be released a little bit. But the support of the husband and the family are significant. (Female, aged 40, Head of Ward Women Union, Ha tinh).

Working women state that, in order to balance both two works, they have to try double than working men at the same position:

Being a managing woman I am always trying my best, even double higher than other men. Why? Because we have to care both the social works and the family and child care. If we can not overcome such difficulties, we fail. (Female, aged 50, Chair of CPC, Hatinh)

Female leaders highly value the support of their husband and family for their career development. They see that support as particularly important for their success.

Some days, I leave from early morning until the late afternoon. All of my housework such as cooking, child care are given to my mother in law. I know that should not be happened but that's because of my business. It's lucky that my husband and my mother in law understand and take it easy. (Female, aged 30, Head of Youth Union, Hatinh)

Table 7: Proportion of male and female officials to perceive of “have constraint in family works”

Family burdens	Sex		Total
	Male	Female	
Number	91	110	201
%	45.3%	54.7%	100%

Table 8: Urban/rural difference of family burdens

Difficulty		Work location		Total
		Urban	Rural	
Family burdens	N	62	48	110
	%	56.4%	43.4%	100.0%

Source: Survey on the female leadership at the grassroots level in Ha tinh. 2011.

Vietnamese traditional viewpoint assign domestic work and child care for women. Men should be the money maker to feed the whole family. The norms have influence to women too, including female leaders. Such kind of anxiety does not happen with male leaders because they have much more choices and free from pressure of family and work conflicts. This traditional housework allocation brings women with pressure and difficulties in the career development. These two mentioned study in two different areas all share the same pattern in the housework allocation of working men and women.

The following section provides more details of difficulties women face with during their works. The result states that, in Hatinh, the most difficulty for working women is the family work pressure (71.7%), unactive characteristics and early retired age. Other factors from women themselves add more difficulties for women.

It is noted that the implementation of age retirement scheme with five years difference between men and women is a big obstacle to women in career. The age schemes put women and men on different level of comparison in which men are at advantage. For instance, the higher level of management positions the smaller number of female candidates in comparison with men. When considering two candidates of different sex in the similar scenario of age, the female candidate is very likely to be less competitive than men in terms of experiences and seniority. The reason is simple that the woman candidate is five years younger.

Table 9: Difficulties of working women in career promotion

	N	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
1.Lack of managing experiences	205	38.1	21.6	40.2
2.Limitations of the professional qualification	186	45.2	22.6	32.3
3.Limitation in work assignment from the senior	188	30.3	20.2	49.5
4. Lack of confidence	185	44.3	19.5	36.2
5. Unactive characteristics	184	57.6	14.7	27.7
6. Family responsibility pressure	184	71.7	8.7	19.6
7. Earlier age at retirement than men (5 years)	190	53.7	7.4	38.9
8. Women manager increase family conflicts	205	20.6	19.6	59.8

Source: Survey on the female leadership at the grassroot level in Ha tinh, 2011.

Actually, we have to care of our family and children. After working hours, we often want to back home soon so we rarely go out for the networking event with partners, which may eventually limit out social relation and networks. Social opinion is also biased to women. Men can stay in the restaurant or bar hours, but if we women sit there, people will against. Especially in the rural areas, that is more serious. (Female, aged 43, CPC, Ha tinh)

Some time its pressure between the business and house work but I could not leave anything. For women, family is vital since it's the place we are back after working tired. Work is vital too, since it allows us to perform our talent and desire. (Female, aged 44,

Head Secretary, Commune Communist Party, Hatinh)

There might be some explanations for these constraints. The old prejudice and norms originated from the thought of “male chauvinism”, which has been consistently existing in the common social awareness and conception. This is an obstacle to the change in attitude and behaviour of cadres, people, women and men. Women, including women leader, are not totally confident and not actively participating in decision making in the family and the community. Men still hesitate to and reluctantly join and share the house-chores. There is the lack of basic services and families supporting services and the social awareness of gender equality.

In short, Vietnamese women have achieved considerable roles and status in the society. However, they face with the double criteria when balancing the social and the housework. It can be said that, female leaders have made great efforts in finding out and realizing different opportunities to balance well the family and work by appropriate ways. Transition of social viewpoint of gender equality and housework allocation is on the way of change, which need more intervention and communication.

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Social Relations in Vietnam in the Era of Globalization: A Comparative Case Study of Rural Northern and Southern Vietnamese Communities

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In the context of a market economy in Vietnam in the past two decades, the increasing standards of living mean not only an increasing consumption of commodities, but also an intensification of gift exchanges both in ritual contexts and in daily life, as well as of social capital.

Emically, in the consciousness of Vietnamese from all walks of life, social relations and social capital, sustained and strengthened by gift exchanges, loom large as a part of solutions to numerous practical daily problems, ranging from medical care to a family member to informal or formal credit for business expansion. As incomes rise, many households and individuals can and do spend more on gift exchanges to sustain and expand their social capital. It is widely reported in both scholarly studies and the Vietnamese media, for example, that rites of passage such as weddings and funerals have become generally bigger and, in many cases, occasions for considerable expenses and elaborate gifts (Luong 1993, Luong Hong Quang 1997, Kleinen 1999, Malarney 2002 and 2003, *VietnamNet online* November 4, 2007).

This paper is based on a comparative study of the flow of gifts in 2 rural Vietnamese communities, Hoai Thi in the Red river province of Bac Ninh, and Khanh Hau in the Mekong delta province of Long An¹. This collaborative team-based research project was carried out from 2004 to 2007 and built upon my previous research in these two communities in 1990, 1992, and 2000-2003. It involved a variety of research methods, ranging from community-wide socio-economic survey to in-depth interviews and participant observation in 35-41 households in each community. Participant observation was conducted by two fairly large field teams (each fieldworker in charge of 3 households on the average)².

¹ Khanh Hau is well known in the literature on Vietnam as it was studied in the late 1950s by 3 American social scientists and their Vietnamese research collaborators (Hickey 1964, Hendry 1964).

² This research project was supported by research grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Toronto to myself. The research was conducted in collaboration with the Anthropology Department of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Ho Chi Minh City and the Institute of Culture and Information (Hanoi), and with the participation of

I would suggest that our understanding of the gift flows in the two studied Vietnamese rural communities would be enhanced by the close attention not only to the interplay of strategic choices on the one hand and social norms and actors' emphasis on sentiment on the other (Mauss 1967, Heath 1976, Homans 1974), but also to the relation of gifts to regional and region-specific class variations in social capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986).

I. An Overview of the Two Studied Rural Vietnamese Communities

Situated in the two major Vietnamese deltas, the two studied communities of Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau shared the characteristics of being close to major national highways, relative proximity to provincial capitals as well as to either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City, and significant increases in living standards in the past two decades. The commune of Khanh Hau straddles Highway 1A leading from Ho Chi Minh City to the Mekong delta. It is located 55 kilometres south of Ho Chi Minh city and 6 kilometres south of Tan An, the provincial capital of the Mekong delta province of Long An. Hoai Thi is a village in the commune of Lien Bao which is located along the expressway from Hanoi to Lang Son on the Vietnamese-Chinese border. It is 27 kilometres north of Hanoi and 9 kilometres south of Bac Ninh, the capital of a province of the same name in the Red river delta.

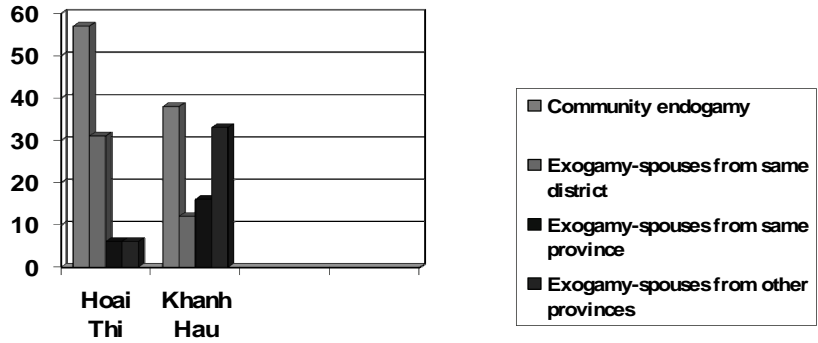
Between 2000 and 2005, the annual per capita income in Khanh Hau rose 54% (from 4.13 million VND to 6.38 million VND in the 2000 value of VND). That in Hoai Thi rose by 125% (from 2.48 million VND to 5.57 VND), allowing Hoai Thi to reduce significantly its income gap with that of Khanh Hau^{1,3} By 2005, agriculture (including animal husbandry) accounted for only 22% of Hoai Thi villagers' incomes, 27% of Khanh Hau villagers', and 19% of the incomes of the surveyed households in the Dinh hamlet of Khanh Hau².

additional researches from the Southern institute of Social Sciences and some other research institutes in Vietnam.

¹ These data are based on a census of all Hoai Thi households and a panel survey of 14% of those in Khanh Hau in December 2000 and December 2005.

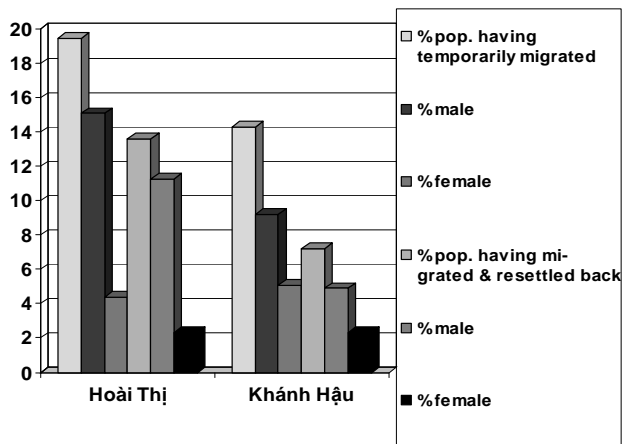
² In Hoai Thi, the percentage of income from agriculture and animal husbandry declined from 39% in 2000 to 22% in 2005. In Khanh Hau, it rose slightly from 24% in 2000 to 27% in 2005 mainly because of the greater investments of many Khanh Hau villagers in aquaculture (fish), as well as in animal husbandry (chicken, hog, and cattle) for urban markets. Before the avian flu epidemic, there were 10 chicken farms in Khanh Hau with more than 3000 birds each, including 2 with about 8000 chickens. By 2005, chicken farms no longer played as important a role in the local economy, and many villagers invested more in raising hogs and cattle.

Figure 1: Annual Per Capita Incomes (in million VND, adjusted to the 2000 value of VND) and Income Sources in Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, 2000 and 2005.



Despite a very modest increase in the number of surveyed household members in both communities from 2000 to 2005 (by 5% in Khanh Hau and by 8% in Hoai Thi), the number of those with non-agricultural incomes had risen substantially in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau in this 5-year period (see figure 2). Most notable in both communities was the virtual doubling of villagers with incomes from industries and handicrafts: the number of such villagers increased from 148 in 2000 to 298 in 2005 in Hoai Thi, and from 163 to 293 in Khanh Hau. In Khanh Hau, there were in 2005 8 industrial factories employing at least 100 workers each, four of which had considerable foreign capital (French and Taiwanese), and three of which were established in the 2000-2005 period. In the commune of Lien Bao where Hoai Thi is located, there was 1 garment factory with almost 500 workers and manufacturing for the U.S. market, where over 20 Hoai Thi villagers were employed. Over 100 villagers worked in the construction industry, mainly in Hanoi, 19 of whom had become building contractors and many others had become specialists in the lucrative granite tile work.

Figure 2: Number of Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau villagers with non-agricultural incomes



Beyond those similarities, Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau differed significantly in size, as well as in their physical and socio-economic openness and internal structure. The commune of Lien Bao to which the village of Hoai Thi belongs has a smaller surface and less population than that of Khanh Hau (see table 1). Of the four hamlets in Khanh Hau, the hamlet of Dinh, an old settlement chosen for in-depth research, is about three times larger in cultivated surface and and population than the northern village of Hoai Thi: in December 2004, the hamlet of Dinh had 142.3 hectares of cultivable land, 701 households, and 2894 people, in comparison to 44 hectares, 257 households, and 1032 people in Hoai Thi in 2005.

Table 1: Size and Population of Two Studied Communities

	Area	Cultivated area	Population in 2005
Khanh Hau	1,073 ha	772 ha	10,575
Dinh hamlet	n/a	142,3 ha	2,894
Lien Bao	650 ha	413 ha	~8,300
Hoai Thi	49,3 ha	44 ha	1,032

More important than the difference in size are the differences in the physical and sociocultural openness of the community and in its internal structure.

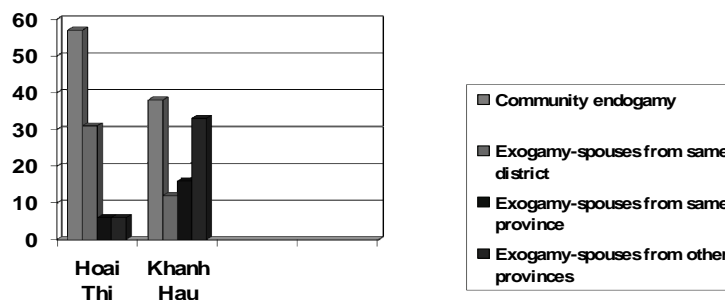
The village of Hoai Thi, like the other 5 villages in the commune of Lien Bao and like most other Red river delta villages, is a distinct and highly nucleated settlement with a fairly homogeneous population, a strong sense of identity, and a powerful centripetal force. 87% of the Hoai Thi population were born in the community, with the remaining 13% moving to Hoai Thi for the reason of marriages to Hoai Thi natives. There was not a single couple in Hoai Thi in which both spouses were born outside the community and settled in Hoai Thi. As a reflection of the strong centripetal force in Hoai Thi, of its villagers who had migrated somewhere between 1986 and 2005, three quarters had resettled in the village by 2005. Economically, although the majority of village incomes in the past few years came from work outside the village, in 2005, villagers still retained 85% of their paddy for their own consumption. And like most other non-Catholic villages in the Red river delta, Hoai Thi had its own communal house (*dinh*) and Buddhist pagoda where respectively most male and female elderly villagers gathered twice a month for their worship of the village's tutelary deity (in the communal house) and various figures in the Buddhist folk pantheon

(in the pagoda).

In contrast, like the rest of Mekong delta communes, the commune of Khanh Hau in general and Dinh hamlet in particular have a dispersed settlement pattern, a more heterogeneous population, and greater physical, economic, and sociocultural openness. The majority of Khanh Hau houses are strung along roads and canals. As a result, unlike in most rural hamlets or villages the Red river delta, the 4 hamlets of Khanh Hau commune are not physically distinct. The physical boundaries between Khanh Hau and neighboring wards and communes are not clear either.

Khanh Hau is not only physically more open, but also economically and socioculturally more so in comparison to most Red River delta communities. Only 73% of the Khanh Hau population were born in Khanh Hau. Of the 496 intact or broken couples in our household survey sample in 2005, only 37% had both spouses from Khanh Hau, and in 13% of the couples, both spouses were born outside Khanh Hau and settled in the commune. In terms of the origin of spouses, almost 40% of the 496 couples in our survey sample had at least one spouse coming from outside the province (figure 3), partly reflecting the location of Khanh Hau next to the provincial boundary between Long An and Tien Giang provinces. Demographically, Khanh Hau was thus a more open community with a more heterogeneous population than Hoai Thi. Economically, in agriculture, in 2005, Khanh Hau villagers sold 96% of their harvested paddy to middlemen, mostly for the export market, and retained only 4% for their own consumption. Many of those who sold paddy after harvest bought rice in smaller quantity for their own use throughout the year. This reflects the much stronger integration of Khanh Hau and the Mekong delta in general into the global commodity market.

Figure 3: Native Places of Spouses (% of couples from:)



Socioculturally, the commune of Khanh Hau has 2 communal houses and two Buddhist pagodas, reflecting the merger of the two villages of Tuong Khanh and Nhon Hau into Khanh Hau in 1917 (Hickey 1964: 8). The bigger communal house serves the population in Dinh and Quyet Thang hamlets and a part of that in Thu Tuu hamlet, while the smaller one serves the Cau hamlet and a part of the Thu Tuu population. The main Buddhist pagoda serves only a part of Khanh Hau population, as 17.5% of Khanh Hau population are Cao daists and 3.7%, Christians. In Khanh Hau, there are three Cao Dai temples of different sects, the biggest of which is also attended by followers from the other communes. Khanh Hau also has the Nguyen Huynh Duc shrine, which the state declared a national heritage site in 1993. On the death anniversary of Nguyen Huynh Duc in the ninth lunar month, 700-800 people from Khanh Hau and other communities came to pay respect. But this annual event did not pull together all the households of Khanh Hau commune in the same way that the village festival and tutelary deity procession in Hoai Thi could. Neither the main communal house nor the main Buddhist pagoda in Khanh Hau could serve as a centripetal force for the Khanh Hau population or for the people of Dinh hamlet in the same way that the communal house and the Buddhist pagoda in Hoai Thi did.

In terms of socio-economic stratification, the difference between Khanh Hau and Hoai Thi was significantly reduced between 2000 and 2005. In 2000, the top quintile of the Hoai Thi population earned 5.5 times more than the bottom quintile, while this ratio was 13.5 times in Khanh Hau and 11 times in Dinh hamlet of Khanh Hau. By 2005, this ratio had changed to 6 times in Hoai Thi, 7.7 times in Khanh Hau, and 6.1 times in Dinh hamlet. Thus, in 2005, socio-economic stratification in Dinh hamlet was comparable to that in the village of Hoai Thi.

II. The Flow of Gifts: A Comparative Overview

In the Vietnamese conception, “qua” is normally a gift in kind or cash, presented to a living entity, in order to express sentiment as a part of a social relation, and for which reciprocity is not specified in amount and timing, reflecting mutual trust. The native notion of “qua” would thus exclude a gift in labor (e.g., in housing construction [called “giup”]), gifts to supernatural entities (called “cung”), gifts at funerals (called “phung”), as well as “gifts” for which reciprocation is explicitly specified in amount and timing (as in the exchange of money for a well-specified favour). As a reflection of the increasing importance of the cash nexus, cash gifts are nowadays commonly presented at weddings, funerals, among other ritual events, both in Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, and in many other communities in Vietnam. Only gifts at death anniversaries remain primarily in kind. In the following analysis, I would include in the category of gifts such forms of assistance as free labor in housing construction, interest-free loans, a free meal or a banquet; as well as gifts at

funerals and to supernatural entities. A major reason for including gifts to supernatural entities is that such a gift is not easily distinguishable from the rest. A food offering to an ancestor whose altar is in one's sibling house will be consumed mainly by the members of this sibling's household, and will thus constitute an indirect gift to this household. My analysis focuses only on gifts among households, and not on intrahousehold gifts.

During our intensive fieldwork in 2005, Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau shared fundamental similarities regarding the occasions for gift exchanges, as well as in the annual per capita spending on major-occasion gifts (including ritual banquets hosted by oneself, but excluding interest-free loans and daily minor exchanges) and in the average percentage of household incomes spent on major-occasion gifts.

The ranges of events for gift exchanges were similar in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau:

- a. life-cycle rituals: birth, one-month or one-year birth anniversary, birthday (recent and limited in occurrence), wedding, longevity celebration, and funeral
- b. other regular rituals: Lunar New Year, death anniversary, Teacher's day
- c. other major events: sickness or hospitalization, house construction
- d. daily exchanges: most frequently food gifts and shared meals

In terms of the type and frequency of events for gift exchanges, the differences between Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau were relatively minor. As an example of such a relatively minor difference, longevity celebrations were much more frequent in Hoai Thi than in Khanh Hau. The northern community of Hoai Thi also had certain ritual events for gift exchanges which were not observed in Khanh Hau: departure for armed services, celebration of university entrance examination success, and reburial of ancestral bones three years after death.

In 2005, there were no significant differences either between Hoai Thi on the one hand and Khanh Hau commune and Dinh hamlet on the other in the amount of per capita spending on gifts (including on banquets hosted by one's household) or in the percentage of per capita income spent on gifts (see table 2).

	Hoài Thi	Khánh Hậu	Ấp Dinh
Number of households	(n=247)	(n=367)	(n=103)
Annual Per Capita Income	5.57	6.36	6.3
Annual Per Capita Spending on Gifts	0.75	0.837	0.814
% of income spent on gifts	13.5%	13.2%	12.9%

Table 2: Spending on Gifts in 2005 in million of VND (in 2000 VND)¹

However, villagers in the northern community of Hoài Thi provided interest-free loans as gifts more frequently than their counterparts in Khanh Hau did. In 2000, when the per capita income in Hoài Thi was only 60% of that in Khanh Hau (figure 1), which meant a considerably greater ability of Khanh Hau households to offer help to fellow villagers, the absolute amount of interest-free loans per household was about the same in both communities (0.54 million VND per household in Hoài Thi vs. 0.5 million VND in Khanh Hau). The percentage of loans bearing no interest to the total amount of household debts was also considerably higher in Hoài Thi (36%) than in Khanh Hau (10%). In other words, Hoài Thi villagers frequently exchanged gifts in the form of interest-free loans despite their lesser capacity to do so due to their lower incomes. By 2005, with rising per capita incomes, the absolute average amount of interest-free loans per household in Hoài Thi had well exceeded that in Khanh Hau (1.62 million VND vs. 0.9 million VND in 2000 VND), and the percentage of loans bearing no interest to the total amount of household debts in Hoài Thi had increased to 47%, in comparison to a slight drop to 9% in Khanh Hau (see figure 4). In the northern community of Hoài Thi, at major events like weddings, house construction, hospitalization, close and well-off relatives of a household with such an event routinely offered interest-free loans as an expression of sentiment and social relations, and did it more frequently than in Khanh Hau. The gifts in interest-free loans flowed more strongly among Hoài Thi villagers than among the residents in the southern commune of Khanh Hau.

A closer examination of the gift flows in Hoài Thi and Khanh Hau suggests that notwithstanding the similarities in the range of events for gift exchanges and the per capita spending on gifts, there were systematic differences between the two communities not only in the

¹ In our *general* household survey in 2000 with 207 households in Hoài Thi and 340 in Khanh Hau, we did not ask about gift spending.

intensity of interest-free-loan gifts but also in many other aspects of the gift flow and social capital from both a diachronic and synchronic perspectives.

From a diachronic perspective, the flow of gifts at the major rites of passage intensified much more significantly in Hoai Thi than in the Dinh hamlet of Khanh Hau from 1975 to 2004. Visits at birth, which normally involved gifts, more than doubled in the northern community of Hoai Thi in these three decades (from an average of 17 in 1976-85 to 37 in 1996-2004) while it increased only slightly in Khanh Hau (from an average of 12 in 1976-85 to that of 15 in 1996-2004) (see figure 5). For weddings, the increase in the same period was by 59% in Hoai Thi (from an average of 222 guests partaking meals in 1976-85 to 349 in 1996-2004) and only by 24% in Khanh Hau (from an average of 139 to 173) (figure 6). Similarly, for funerals, the number of guests staying for meals doubled from an average of 117 in 1976-85 to 235 in 1996-04 in Hoai Thi, while increasing only by 25% in Khanh Hau (from the average of 215 to 269) (figure 7).

Figure 5: The Flow of Gifts on the Occasion of Birth over Three Decades: Average Number of Visitors at Birth as Indicator

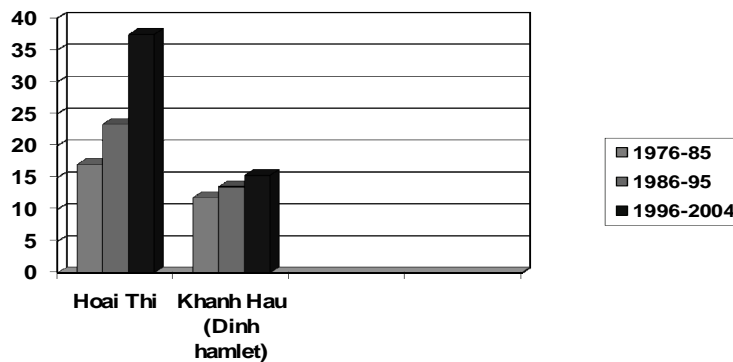


Figure 6: Number of Wedding Banquet Guests in Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau over Three Decades

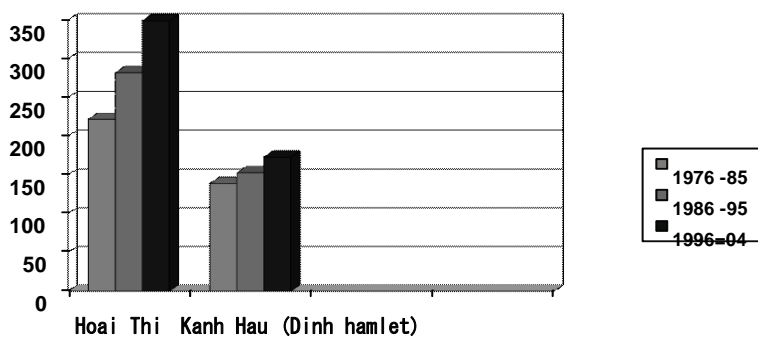
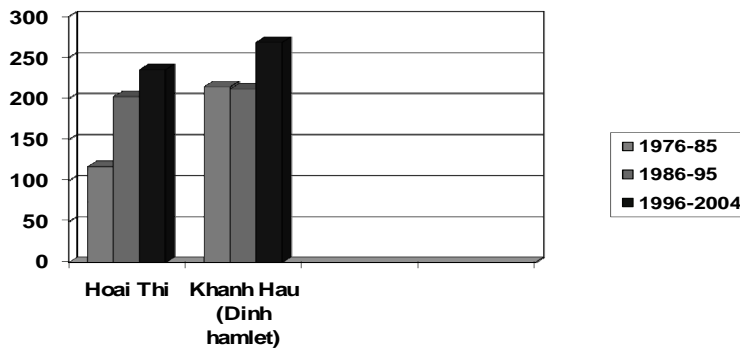


Figure 7: Number of Guests at Funeral Meal over Three Decades



From a synchronic perspective, notwithstanding the previously discussed similarities in the average per capita spending on gifts in 2005, northern households in Hoai Thi attended on the average more ritual events where gifts are potentially exchanged, and, as previously discussed, extended more interest-free loans as gifts than their Khanh Hau counterparts did.

The self-recordings from February 2005 to January 2006 by 64 households (23 in Khanh Hau and 41 in Hoai Thi) regarding the ritual events where gifts were potentially exchanged reveal that Hoai Thi households on the average attended many more such events a year than their Khanh Hau counterparts (55.8 events on the average in Hoai Thi vs. 32.8 in Khanh Hau)¹. The average number of death anniversaries and weddings attended by Hoai Thi households was twice as many as that attended by those in Khanh Hau; and that of house constructions, 11 times as many (see table 3)².

¹ In Khanh Hau, only 29 of the 35 households chosen for in-depth research recorded the events with gift exchange potential attended by the members of their households. In my interviews with 35 Khanh Hau households in November and December 2006, I determined that the self-recordings by 6 households were far from complete, and that we had reliable data from only 23 of the 35 in-depth studied households.

² We have two other data bases for comparing quantitatively the frequency of gift exchanges in the two studied communities: Lunar New Year visits and gifts (including “lucky money” (*li xi* or *mung tuoi*)) in 2005, and daily gift exchanges, especially the sharing of foods and meals, for about four weeks in January - February 2005 and for 20 days in July-August 2005. These data were collected from 76 in-depth-studied hamlet among the households in Dinh hamlet of Khanh Hau. For example, Hoai Thi households received on the average 11 “lucky money” gifts and gave 14.4 ones, in comparison to 6.8 and 6.3 respectively in Khanh Hau. Due to space constraint, in this paper, I focus mainly on the data from households in the two communities. They also reveal that northern households in Hoai Thi in

	Hoai Thi	Khanh Hau (Dinh hamlet)
Number of events attended	55.8	32.8
Of which:		
Death anniversary	27.8	13
Wedding	21	11.4
Funeral	2.8	4.5
House Construction	2.2	0.2
Other	2	3.7

Table 3: Average number of potential gift-exchange events attended over 12 months by in-depth studied households in the two studied communities, 2005-06

Another important difference revealed by the lists of ritual events and gifts selfrecorded over 1 year was the extent to which a household's network spread beyond the studied community. The percentage of events attended within the village/hamlet was 82% in Hoai Thi and only 48% in Khanh Hau. At the other end of the spectrum, the percentage of events attended outside the province was only 2% in Hoai Thi and reached 15% in Khanh Hau (including not only in neighboring communes in Tien Giang province but also in Ho Chi Minh City) (see table 4). This difference reflects the more open social landscape of the southern commune of Khanh Hau and its villagers' more far-flung social networks, in contrast to the stronger centripetal force and the intricately tight social networks within the village of Hoai Thi.

general exchanged gifts much more frequently than those in Khanh Hau, and that gift exchanges by Hoai Thi households were mainly within the village in contrast to the greater tendency to exchange beyond the h the self-recordings over 12 months by the 64 in-depth-studied households.

	Hoai Thi		Khanh Hau (Dinh hamlet)	
Number of events attended	55.8		32.8	
Of which:				
Within Village/Hamlet	45.8	82%	15.6	48%
In other villages/hamlets in the same commune	2.5	4.5%	5.8	18%
In other communes in the same province	5.6	10%	6.4	20%
In other provinces	1.2	2%	4.9	15%

Table 4: Location of potential gift-exchange events attended over 12 months: Household average

III. The Interplay of Ideology, Sociocultural Norms, and Strategic Choices in Gift Exchanges

Gifts and social exchanges have constituted major topics in the anthropological study of sociocultural dynamics in many parts of the world in the past century. One major line of research has focused on the ideological and normative dimensions of gift exchanges. For example, within the Durkheimian tradition of social analyses, Marcel Mauss (1967) examines gift exchanges in terms of the “obligations to give, to receive, and to repay”. He emphasizes how gift exchanges “fail to conform to the principles of so called natural economy or utilitarianism” (*ibid.*: 69). At the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum is the rational choice theory of social exchange which considers gifts as embedded in cost-and-benefit calculations (Homans 1974: 43ff.; see also Heath 1976). In this theoretical framework, norms are postulated to arise out of and transformed by the totality of individuals’ rational choices.

Among the important studies of gifts and social exchanges in a system which the Vietnamese case resembles the most, is YunXiang Yan’s rich ethnographic study of the flow of gifts in a Chinese village (Yan 1996). Partly in reference to the aforementioned theoretical debate on norms and instrumentality in the flow of gifts, Yan emphasizes the moral and emotional aspects of gift exchanges within the village, and the greater salience of the instrumental dimension of gifts beyond the village context (such as in the use of gifts to cultivate relations with high-level bureaucrats) (cf. Sahlins 1972).

On the basis of his research in a village near Shanghai, S. Wilson points out the greater importance of the cash nexus in the flow of gifts and social exchanges there. The greater flow of cash has enabled villagers to extend their social networks and to develop “sentiment” with others. It has also sharpened calculations in gift exchanges and transformed these exchanges even within the village into an arena of one-upmanship (Wilson 1997: 98). In more general terms, Wilson questions Yan’s sharp distinction between emotion-based and instrumental exchanges. He suggests that “norm-based exchanges are long-term investments in social capital that may produce delayed material benefits. Thus the boundary between *renqing* (human sentiment) and instrumental exchanges is ... fluid...” (2002: 177; cf. Kipnis 1997: 7-8, 185; see also Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002: 7-8).

Empirically, in the flow of gifts in Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, in order to understand how the northern households in Hoai Thi could attend many more events with gift exchange potential and did not spend more per capita on gifts in general than their Khanh Hau counterparts, we need to examine the differences in sociocultural rules between the two communities as well as the instrumental choices by studied households. These differences can be partly examined through statistical data on the amount of cash gifts and gifts in kind at death anniversaries, weddings, and funerals, three major events of gift exchanges which constituted 91% of all the events attended by in-depth studied households in the two communities (table 5).

Death anniversary

Value in 000 VND	Hoai Thi		Khanh Hau	
	N	%	N	%
0	658	51	21	6
1-20	269	24	198	56
21-40	55	5	76	21
50	54	5	34	10
60-100	54	5	17	5
101-200	32	3	8	2
>200	17	1.5	2	0.5
Total	1139		355	

Funeral

Value in 000 VND	Hoai Thi		Khanh Hau	
	N	%	N	%
0	9	8	15	12
1-20	31	27	13	10
21-40	38	33	29	23
50	27	23	53	42
60-100	7	6	8	6
101-200	2	2	5	4
>200	4	3	3	2
Total	116		126	

Value in 000 VND	Wedding			
	Hoai Thi		Khanh Hau	
	N	%	N	%
0	8	<i>1</i>	2	<i>0.5</i>
1-20	31	<i>4</i>	0	
21-40	251	<i>29</i>	7	<i>2</i>
50	410	<i>48</i>	200	<i>63</i>
60-100	129	<i>15</i>	91	<i>28</i>
101-200	21	<i>2</i>	15	<i>5</i>
>200	10	<i>1</i>	5	<i>1.5</i>
Total	860		320	

Table 5: Value of Gifts at Death Anniversaries, Funerals, and Weddings in Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, 2005-06

Across all three types of events, Hoai Thi households spent less on the average on gifts than their Khanh Hau counterparts did. In fact, at death anniversaries, the most frequently attended events with gift exchange potential, the majority of guests (51%) in Hoai Thi brought no gifts at all due to a local sociocultural rule to that effect. Hoai Thi villagers brought death anniversary gifts only when relations were relatively formal (e.g., attending a death anniversary in a son-in-law's or daughter-in-law's natal family or outside the village) or when a "guest" felt a strong obligation to the main organizer or the deceased due to a very close relation (e.g., adult child making a financial contribution to a deceased parent's death anniversary banquet).

In contrast, in Khanh Hau, villagers brought gifts (fruit, cookies, sugar, MSG, among others) to death anniversaries, unless the organizer specifically requested "no gifts" or unless death anniversaries were financed by incomes from land designated for ancestral worship (*ruong huong*

hoa)¹. The majority of death anniversary gifts in Khanh Hau were in the 10.000-20.000 VND range. More expensive gifts were presented in more formal relations (e.g., at a death anniversary in a daughter-in-law's natal family). Children also made financial contributions to the death anniversary of a deceased parent, especially when they invited their own friends and neighbors to such an event organized by a surviving parent. In Khanh Hau, death anniversary expenses were also higher because anniversary organizers also had to order special rice cakes as counter-gifts to guests. In Hoai Thi, the counter-gifts to guests bringing gifts could be selected among the gifts (such as fruits) received from the host, thus saving the host expenses on counter gifts².

In the northern community of Hoai Thi, in the light of the common practice of no gifts at death anniversaries within the village, villagers tried to reciprocate the invitations by others by inviting the latter to death anniversaries within their own households. This led to the pragmatic arrangement among adult male siblings to divide the organization of parents' death anniversaries among themselves: instead of death anniversaries for both parents organized by the eldest son, adult sons in Hoai Thi normally arranged to have one son organizing the death anniversary of one parent, and another son, that of another parent, so that at least 2 sons could reciprocate the death anniversary invitations by their own friends, children-in-law's parents, and other people within their own networks³. This arrangement in Hoai Thi brought the pattern of ancestral worship and death anniversary organization close to that in Khanh Hau and other communities in southern Vietnam, where brothers routinely arranged for a division of the worship of parents and other

¹ In Khanh Hau, a household which invited neighbors and relatives to a simple death anniversary meal might explicitly suggest "no gifts". This phenomenon was more frequent among poorer households in Khanh Hau.

² A Hoai Thi household responsible for many death anniversaries of deceased ancestors, no matter how well off, also limited its ritual expenses by organizing an annual banquet at only one of those anniversaries, and by making simpler offerings to the deceased at the remaining death anniversaries. The large-scale organization of only one death anniversary each year as a widespread pattern in the village also ensured that villagers could easily reciprocate each other's invitation. This institutional arrangement did not lead to the phenomena of too many death anniversary invitations from one household within one year that invitees might not be able to reciprocate. In contrast, in Khanh Hau, a well-off household would organize a few big death anniversaries a year. The gifts brought by invitees alleviated to some extent the need for reciprocation to the invitations to quite a few death anniversaries within a household each year and the feeling of imbalance among the organizer and invitees who had fewer or no death anniversaries.

³ (More data here on cases where there are three or more brothers.)

ancestors among themselves¹.¹¹ This phenomenon in Hoai Thi highlights how rational choices and pragmatic considerations led to a transformation of the old sociocultural rule that the eldest son was entirely responsible for ancestor worship.

At funeral, Hoai Thi villagers could also limit their gift expenses thanks to the sociocultural rule that adult siblings residing in different households made a joint cash gift to the deceased's household. This rule enabled a household not in a close relation to the deceased to make a modest cash gift (say, 10,000 VND) without making the actually presented gifts too small. Thus, in Hoai Thi, 68% of the funeral gifts by the studied households were under 50,000 VND, while in Khanh Hau, the percentage of gifts in this range was only 45% (see table 5). In Khanh Hau, the most common amount for funeral cash gift was 50,000 VND and each household with a representative offering condolences at a funeral had to present its own cash gift and not a joint one with the siblings of the household head.

In both of the studied communities, since weddings were joyful occasions, wedding gifts, normally in the form of cash, tended to be larger than those at death anniversaries and funerals. In non-special relations, wedding gifts were normally 50,000 VND in Khanh Hau (63% of the gifts offered by 23 households chosen for in-depth research) while they normally varied between 30,000 VND (29% of the gifts) and 50,000 VND (48% of the gifts) in Hoai Thi. Hoai Thi villagers commented that women tended to give 30,000 VND and young men with more cash incomes, 50,000 VND. Thus, in nonspecial relations, wedding gifts tended to be larger in Khanh Hau than in Hoai Thi, although there was a significant variation within each community. The understanding of this variation requires an analysis not only of the difference in local rules but also of the dynamics of givers' choices.

In both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, actors' choices of wedding gifts seem to be governed by the following emphases and principles:

1. Sentiment and the nature of social relations:

Gifts served as important symbols of social relations and actors' consideration of one another's circumstances. At the low end of the spectrum, in Hoai Thi, wedding gifts below 30,000 VND were accepted in good grace from the elderly without significant incomes, even when relations were fairly close. Similarly, in Khanh Hau, when givers were known to be in economic

¹ Professor Nguyen Chi Ben (Institute of Culture and Information) reported the same pattern in his own village in Thuan Thanh district of Bac Ninh province, dating back to at least 3 decades, and commented that this pattern of the parent worship arrangement among adult male siblings was widespread in the province of Bac Ninh (personal communication).

hardships, wedding gift recipients might return the gifts, either citing the former's circumstances, or presenting them as gifts to the former's children. At the high end of the spectrum, parents' siblings or the bride or bridegroom's siblings, if well off and living separately, might give as much as 200,000 VND or even more as symbols of the close relations to the bride or the groom or to his/her family. Among equally close relatives, gifts also varied, depending on givers' economic circumstances, as Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau informants pointed out in response to my inquiries:

Male Interviewee K: On one occasion, when I had my house constructed, I had to attend two weddings, that of Chinh [household 377]... and that of another friend in [the neighboring] Doc village. I did not have a lot of money left for wedding gifts. I asked my mother [household 544] for 50,000 VND, and borrowed 50,000 VND from a friend to give him a gift of 100,000 VND. Chinh [Household 377] was [a bit] older than me....

Interviewer: The gifts from the elderly are only 20,000-30,000 VND. But young people's gifts are different.

Male Interviewee K: Oh, the elderly! Stingy gifts of 20,000-30,000 [VND].... They just pay back past gifts.

Interviewer: Are young people not generous with gifts of 100,000 [VND]?

Male Interviewee K: When I have more money, I give a larger gift. Less money, a small gift.... (Tran Hoa's interview in household 544 in Hoai Thi)

Interviewer: I would like to ask more about [the gifts from] the maternal aunts and uncles of the bride [interviewee's daughter]... I see here that Mr. Nam gave 200,000 VND; that Mrs. Bay in Thu Tuu [hamlet] gave 500,000 VND; that Mrs. Tu... gave only 50,000 VND; that Mr. Tam gave 100,000 VND. Those four people are full brothers and sisters. Why were their gifts so different?

Male Interviewee: Let me tell you. ... Mrs. Bay gave 500,000 because she was wealthy. Mr. Nam gave 200,000 because although he was fairly well-off, he was less wealthy than Mrs. Bay. Mr. Tam gave 100,000 VND because he had to take care of ancestral worship in his house, and because he was not that well-off. Mrs. Tu was poor. She was married, but lived without a husband. She [consequently] gave 50,000 VND. When her children get married, I will give gifts of 50,000 VND.... And when a child of Mrs. Bay who gave 500,000 VND gets married, I will give back 500,000 VND... It [the gift] depended on the giver's circumstances. Whatever he/she gave, I will give back the same amount. (Hy V. Luong's interview in household 9 in Khanh Hau)

The size of the gift also depended on the circumstances of the recipient. When I asked the male head of household 48 in Khanh Hau why he gave a wedding gift of 300,000 VND to his nephew (elder brother's son) and only 100,000 VND to his wife's nephew (wife's elder brother's son), he emphasized the sentiment and sympathy for the former's growing up without a father and the much greater wealth in his wife's brother's household.

To informants in both Khanh Hau and Hoai Thi, while the emphasis on sentiment required generally larger gifts to closer relatives and friends, the consideration of givers' and recipients' particular circumstances rendered flexible the sizes of gifts.

2. Face

The principle of face operated in both Hoai Thi in Khanh Hau, and required that gifts to the close relatives of children-in-law be larger, in order to maintain the face of the giver or his/her own group in the context of more formal relations.

Interviewer: You gave the grandchild of Mr. Nghinh a wedding gift of 40,000 VND, and the young Mr. Khanh a wedding gift of 30,000 VND. Why a gift of 40,000 VND [in the former case] despite the lack of kinship relation [in both cases]?

Elderly male interviewee: 40,000 VND because he was a grandchild of my son-inlaw's parents. That's all. (Hy V. Luong's interview of household 470 in Hoai Thi in March 2007)

Interviewer: Why did you not stick to the average of 50,000, and why did you give a bigger [wedding] gift of 200,000?

Male interviewee: ... He was a step further away [in relation] but as the brother-inlaw of my elder brother, he belongs to [the category of] in-laws [to the members of my natal family]... When in-laws visit one another, they need to pay some respect and pay attention to each other's honor... That's all. (Huynh Ngoc Thu's interview in household 48 in Khanh Hau)

3. Reciprocity

The principle of reciprocity was strongly emphasized by informants in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau. Villagers meticulously maintained gift lists in order to make sure that gifts were

properly reciprocated. In Hoai Thi, many households kept gift lists as far back as 2 decades, and routinely crossed out gifts that they had reciprocated¹. Parents normally were responsible for the reciprocation of gifts by relatives, while their children, for reciprocating the gifts of the latter's own friends². The principle of reciprocity in Hoai Thi occasionally led to odd figures of cash gifts:

Interviewer: At the wedding organized by Mr. Huong's family, why was the wedding gift the odd figure of 135,000 VND?

Elderly female interviewee: We paid back 50 kilograms of paddy [given by him on an earlier occasion]. The cash value [of 50 kilograms of paddy at the time of that wedding] was 135,000 VND. (Hy V. Luong's interview in household 361 in Hoai Thi in March 2007)

In both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, the principle of reciprocity underlies the phenomenon of larger gifts at the first wedding (as a reciprocation by a giver of many past gifts to this giver) or a larger invitation list to the first wedding in a household (in connection with the cumulatively large number of weddings attended by the members of this household in the past). The number of invitations in subsequent weddings may decline in order to avoid accumulating more debts of gifts to be repaid.

Interviewer: The wedding of D. and H. [household 390] is bigger. Isn't it because both the bride and the groom are from the same village, or for some other reasons?

Elderly female interviewee: Because they are both from the same village, and also because it is the first child's wedding.....The wedding in Mr. S-H's household [household 515] is also big. Also the wedding of the first child. The weddings of first children are bigger. (Dang Thanh Phuong's interview in household 551 in Hoai Thi).

It should be added that the size of a gift was not simply a matter of sentiment and the norms of social relations. It also involved the allocation of scarce resources, especially among less well-off households. Villagers also took into account the probability of gift reciprocation. A wealthy

¹ As a reflection of the importance of the principle of reciprocity, a Hoai Thi household may not record gifts that it considered simply reciprocation of its past gifts and to which there was no need for future reciprocation.

² The principle of reciprocity also underlies the presentation of gifts that may seem one-way: gifts from adult children to parents at the New Year and from young students to teachers (on Teacher's day). These gifts are interpreted by native speakers to be tokens of the appreciation for parental care and the transmission of knowledge by teachers.

villager in Khanh Hau, for example, gave only 30,000 VND at funerals instead of the more common gift of 50,000 VND because his family, following a long-standing practice among many southern well-off families, would not accept cash gifts at funeral. His funeral gifts were therefore essentially oneway gifts, thus smaller in size. For another example, in Hoai Thi, the senior woman in household 503 decided to increase the wedding gifts from her household to 50,000 VND because her family would receive larger gifts at the weddings of her children in the coming years:

Interviewer: You [normally] gave 50,000 for a wedding gift? I have observed that the normal wedding gift in this village is 30,000. Am I right?

Female interviewee: Yes, normally 30,000 [VND]

Interviewer: Why did you give a bigger gift?

Female interviewee: 50.000 first because we have trading incomes, and secondly because our daughter will get married in a not-too-distant future. [Such a wedding gift] looks nicer. If our children were still small, we would give only 30,000. (Tran Hoai's interview in household 503 in Hoai Thi)

The size of a gift or an invitation list, even within a small village, involved not simply sentiment or norms governing social relations, but also the involved parties' conscious and occasionally instrumental choices at the same time. On the basis of his research in China, Wilson has properly suggested that "norm-based exchanges are longterm investments in social capital that may produce delayed material benefits. Thus the boundary between renqing (human sentiment) and instrumental exchanges is ... fluid..." (Wilson 2002: 177). I would suggest that socioculturally specific norms on the one hand and instrumentality and agency on the other were inextricably intertwined in the flow of gifts in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau (cf. Malarney 2002, Yan 1996, Kipnis 1997: 7-8, 185). In relation to the larger theoretical debate on gifts and social exchange, I would suggest that the difference between Mauss' and Homans' approaches is a matter of relative emphasis: Mauss did not ignore the self-interested and instrumental elements in gift exchange and the competition among some persons to outdo one another in gift reciprocation (1967: 1, 18, 27, 40-41, 71-72); and Homans sought to go beyond the particular forms and specific rules of social exchange in a group or community in the search for general processes, without necessarily denying the relevance of these forms and rules in social exchange.

IV. Social Capital: Regional and Region-Specific Class Variations

1. Regional Variation in Social Capital

It remains an open question why Hoai Thi villagers in the in-depth-studied households attended more events with gift exchange potential than Khanh Hau ones did. On one level, I would suggest that it had to do with the density of the kinship network in Hoai Thi. Due to the relatively high degree of community endogamy over generations, every Hoai Thi villager was related consanguinally or affinally to numerous others in the village. Of equal importance is the establishment or recreation of numerous institutions in Hoai Thi, a process which intensified in the past two decades. They ranged from patrilineages to voluntary associations, the most important of which was the same-age associations (*hoi dong nien*). Through these institutions in which Hoai Thi villagers invested considerable time and financial resources, they strengthened their social networks and social capital, social capital as defined by Bourdieu as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships...” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). The strength of Hoai Thi villagers’ social capital is partly reflected in the higher number of events with gift exchange potential which they attended.

a. Kinship:

Hoai Thi patrilineages were revitalized from the 1980s onwards. They played an increasingly important role in both rites of solidarity and rites of passage. For example, at the village tutelary deity’s procession during the village festival in the first lunar month, many lineages presented their offerings to the deity and had them carried in the procession in order to assert their identities. Many also organized the worship of lineage founders and established education-encouragement funds (*quy khuyen hoc*), recognizing the educational achievements of students in their lineages. At funerals, patrilineages made their own offerings to deceased members and organized their male members in order to assist with funeral processions and grave digging. A Hoai Thi villager related on how the patrilineage of her husband raised funds for funeral offerings:

Female interviewee: The [Nguyen] Sy patrilineage specifies that the patrilineal kin who [according to customs] wear [white] mourning head bands would each contribute 10,000 [VND] [to the funeral gift from the patrilineage to the household of the deceased]. So, when the mourning head bands are distributed to a household, the household gives the money. Three bands, 30,000 VND; 2 bands, 20,000 VND. (Nguyen Tien Loc’s interview in household 480 in Hoai Thi)

In Khanh Hau, the descendants of Nguyen Huynh Duc organized themselves into the only patrilineage in the commune, whose activities centered on the death anniversary of the lineage founder on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. The activities of the Nguyen Huynh patrilineage in Khanh Hau was more limited in scope than those of the patrilineages in the village of Hoai Thi: it neither had an education-encouragement fund nor actively involved in the funerals of its members. In the larger context of the Mekong delta, patrilineages were rarely established, and when they existed as in Khanh Hau, the scope of their activities was considerably more limited than observed in the Red river of North Vietnam. The reciprocal obligations among the members of the same patrilineage in Hoai Thi in particular and in the Red River delta in general strengthened their relations and enlarged their social capital.

b. Non-kinship:

In Hoai Thi, the strengthening of kinship ties through patrilineages was a part of the larger institutional framework for enhancing social capital. Hoai Thi villagers had established numerous non-kinship associations with formal rules for mutual assistance. Most notable were the same-age associations (*hoi dong nien*). About two thirds of Hoai Thi men between the age of 18 and 60 belonged to the same-age associations whose membership was village-bound. Same-age associations had strict rules regarding gifts and mutual assistance on major occasions in association members' households: wedding (a major collective gift, normally in gold, to an association member), house construction, and funeral (of members, members' spouses, and parents; with collective offerings and labor assistance at the ceremony). (Only 24 of the 319 women in the 18-60 age range joined the same-age associations.) One villager explained the importance of same-age association ties:

When asked about whether they were happy with the membership in the same-age association and whether the membership had led to a good amount of mutual assistance, the whole group concurred that a same-age association was better than a same-class alumni association. A same-class alumni association did not bring together all the friends of the same age from the village. If the same-class association was formed among classmates from a senior secondary school, some members would be from other communes. Such fellow association members could not understand one another as well as childhood friends of the same age and from the same village. When one joined a same-age association, one's household, although having only one son, would have 10 sons [from a same-age association with 10 members]. When one's household had a house constructed, all association members would come to help without pay and need to be fed

only. Even when an association member was absent, his younger or elder brother would come to help as a replacement [for the absent association member]. Or when a member's household had a wedding, fellow [sameage] association members came to help setting up the banquet area. Those who worked out of the village and could not help before the main wedding day would make an effort to be at the wedding. (Fieldnotes of Ta Huu Duc about household 383 in Hoai Thi)

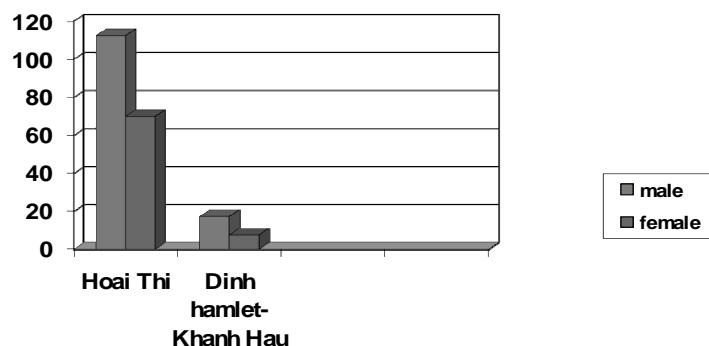
The remaining voluntary associations in Hoai Thi, while less important than same-age associations, were numerous: education-promotion associations (*hoi khuyen hoc*), elderly male group at the communal house, elderly female Buddhist association, allwoman incense-offering team (*doi dang huong*), adverse-circumstance woman group with incense burners at the pagoda (*nhom bat huong*), same military-service association (*hoi dong ngu*), same-circumstance woman associations (*hoi dong tam*), alumni associations, same-occupation associations, parallel-verse singing (*quan ho*) team, spiritmedium group (*nhom con nhang*), and a retired state worker group.

In contrast, in Dinh hamlet of Khanh Hau, which was almost 3 times bigger in population, voluntary association membership was much less common (see table 6)¹. The number of voluntary association memberships for every 100 person aged 16 or above was 112 among men and 70 among women in Hoai Thi, and 17 among men and 7.6 among women in Khanh Hau (figure 8)².

¹ The commune of Khanh Hau also had a poetry club and a traditional music club whose activities were partly sponsored by the local government. But relatively few Dinh hamlet residents were members of these clubs. The three Cao Dai temples in Khanh Hau, however, formed three communities within which there was mutual assistance in the form of praying at funerals.

² In both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, there were also state-organized associations such as women's association, peasant association, elderly association, youth association, and trade unions (only in Khanh Hau). The rate of participation for every 100 residents above the age of 16 was: 44 in Hoai Thi and 11 in Khanh Hau for women's association; and for other state-organized associations, 84 for both men and women in Hoai Thi, and respectively 14 for men and 9 for women in Khanh Hau.

Figure 8: Voluntary Association Membership: Number of Memberships per 100 Residents above the Age of 16



	Hoai Thi	Khanh Hau
Population	1032	2894
Association membership	648	166
Communal house association/group	41	42
Buddhist (prayer) association	75	40
Ritual team (“incense-offering” in Hoai Thi)	24	7
Spirit medium group	8	
Cao Dai children team		6
Education-promotion association	86	6
Same-military-service association	41	2
Same-occupation association/group	7	13
Same-age association	240	
Same-circumstance women’s association	45	
Adverse-circumstance women’s group	21	
Alumni association	24	14
Retired state worker group	14	9

Singing team	22	
Gymnastics club		5
Traditional medicine philanthropy group		22

If the high frequency of endogamous marriages rendered kinship ties in Hoai Thi multiplex in that the same two persons had different kinship roles vis-à-vis each other, depending on the tracing path (see Luong and Diep Dinh Hoa 2000: 50-51), the formation of numerous voluntary associations mainly in the past two decades rendered social relations in Hoai Thi considerably more so. At a major event like wedding, funeral, many villagers had to present multiple gifts, many through their associations, because of the multiple relations to the household with such an event. In the context of intricately tight intra-village social networks and multiplex relations in the village, it was difficult for any Hoai Thi household not to be fairly heavily involved in gift exchanges within the village.

From a diachronic perspective, the proliferation of voluntary associations accounted for an important part of the significant increase in the number of guests at such ritual events as death anniversaries, funerals, and weddings in Hoai Thi (figures 5-7), as explained by a Hoai Thi villager:

Male interviewee: When I got married, we served about 35 trays of food [to about 175 guests]. [In those days]..... a wedding was attended by close relatives like first patrilineal cousins. Nowadays, [given the] same-age and same-class alumni associations, invitations were sent out to a larger number or even the entire village... Not in my days. [in those days], not even the veteran association. It is only in the past few years when same-age associations proliferate, [there are] more wedding invitations. [Interview of Nguyen Anh Tuan in household 412 in Hoai Thi]

From a synchronic perspective, both the tighter kinship network in Hoai Thi than in Khanh Hau and the proliferation of social ties through voluntary associations in Hoai Thi also underlay the more frequent attendance of Hoai Thi villagers at ritual events with gift exchange potential. The larger number of events attended by studied Hoai Thi households reflects their generally larger social capital which they successfully mobilize for material assistance on numerous occasions, ranging from job introduction (heavy concentration of villagers with non-agricultural incomes in the alcohol retail trade and in the construction industry in Hanoi) to house construction in Hoai Thi itself (cf. Unger 1998).

The material assistance mobilized through social capital and institutional rules can be examined through the cases of 2 relatively poor households in the two communities, one renovating its house in 2003 and the other, in 2005. Both were in the second (below average) income quintile in their respective communities, with the Hoai Thi household having a per capita income of 4.7 million VND, and that in Khanh Hau, 3.7 million VND in 2005. The Khanh Hau household received a very modest amount of house construction gifts from 11 households, worth 1 million VND, while the Hoai Thi household received cash gifts from 106 households (85 from Hoai Thi) totalling 5.1 million dong on the occasion of its house renovation in 2003¹. The larger amount of material assistance for house construction in Hoai Thi enabled the Hoai Thi household under analysis to spend more on its house renovation than otherwise possible. In Hoai Thi, cash gifts and labor contributions came not only from kin and neighbors, but also from same-age association members, among other people whose social ties were formed or strengthened in the past two decades. The reciprocal gift exchange allowed Hoai Thi villagers in particular and northern Vietnamese peasants in general to build more expensive brick houses, even when they had very limited resources of their own, while in the Mekong delta, many poor rural dwellers constructed simple and less expensive houses with thatch roofs, wooden walls, and earthen floors.

2. Social Capital and Region-Specific Class Variation

Needless to say, social capital, as reflected in gift exchanges, was highly differentiated within each community. The number of self-recorded events with gift exchange potential attended by a household varied significantly within both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau. In Khanh Hau, the number of events attended varied from a low of 11 to a high of 76, while the range was from 18 to 128 in Hoai Thi.

As social capital, as reflected in the number of events attended by the members of a household with gift exchange potential, requires investment in time, labor, and/or material resources to be sustained and strengthened (Bourdieu 1986), one would expect that economic capital provides an important basis for social capital. However, the correlation between wealth, as measured in annual per capita income of a household, and social capital, as reflected in the number of attended events, is statistically significant in Hoai Thi ($r = .50$ and $s < .001$) but not in Khanh Hau ($r = .14$ and s

¹ Of the 1 million VND in gifts to the Khanh Hau household, there were 900,000 VND in cash gifts from the daughter-in-law's parents, 3 sisters, and the son's 4 maternal uncles; as well as 3 gifts in kind worth 110,000 VND from a neighbor and two of the son's cousins residing in the neighborhood.

= .51)¹. This is also confirmed in the appendix: in Hoai Thi, among the 41 households with available data, none of the households in the bottom income quintile emerged among the 10 households with the most amount of social capital, and only 1 of the households in the top income quintile was among the 10 households with the least social capital. In Khanh Hau, among the 22 households with available data, two households in the bottom income quintiles emerged among the top 6 attending gift-exchange events, and 1 of the top income quintile households emerged among the 6 households with the least social capital.

In Khanh Hau, in the context of more mobility into and out of the community than in Hoai Thi, the connection between economic capital and social capital seems mediated by local social structure, specifically by the extent to which a household is integrated into the local social network. This can be illustrated through the cases of 2 poor households attending gift-exchange events frequently, and of 2 households, one rich and one poor, not attending them that much.

Among the 23 Khanh Hau households providing reliable self-recordings of their attendance at gift-exchange rituals, household 706 attended only 11 events in the 12 months under study, less so than the 22 remaining others and than other Khanh Hau households with comparable per capita incomes. Household 706 was a Catholic nuclear family (husband aged 39 and wife aged 42, with a 15-year-old daughter and a 13-year-old son) Both husband and wife had been born elsewhere in Long An province. They lived in Khanh Hau because the wife's mother, having been born in the provincial capital, had settled in Khanh Hau before her death in 1999. The husband's siblings and parents had lived in Ho Chi Minh city for a long time. Of the wife's four siblings, one lived in Khanh Hau with her family, while the other three lived in neighboring communes. The wife was a housewife, while the husband worked in a local ricemill and supplemented his worker income with a secondary job transporting miscellaneous materials on a pedicab. Their annual per capita income of 4.8 million VND put them in the second income quintile (below average) of Khanh Hau population. Being Catholic, they interacted mainly with some neighbors and a few of the 38 Catholic households in the Dinh hamlet. The members of this household reportedly attended only 11 events in 2005-06, including 2 death anniversaries, 4 weddings, and 5 funerals. The fact that the members of this household attended only 11 gift-exchange events in 2005-06 reflects their limited integration into the local community and social networks in the immediate surrounding area due to their Catholicism and recent settlement in Khanh Hau.

¹ If we use the annual household income in 2005 instead of annual per capita income of a household as an index of the economic capital of a household, it remains unchanged that the correlation between economic capital and social capital is statistically significant among in-depth studied households in Hoai Thi ($r = .42$ with $s = .006$) and not in Khanh Hau ($r = .20$ with $s = .354$).

With per capita income of 24 million VND in 2005, household 707 was considerably richer than household 706. It was also a nuclear family household (husband aged 39, wife aged 37, with a 9-year-old daughter). The wife followed Buddhism and came from a local family, with numerous relatives in Dinh hamlet, while the husband had been born in another district of Long An and professed not to follow any religion. Their family income was derived mainly from the work of the husband as an animation film artist in Ho Chi Minh City. The husband's commuting between Khanh Hau and Ho Chi Minh City and his lack of root in Khanh Hau limited his social interaction in both areas. Their social network was based mainly on the wife's kinship network in Khanh Hau. The members of household 707 attended only 19 events in 2005-06 (8 death anniversaries, 5 weddings, 5 funerals, and 1 birthday). Except for 3 death anniversaries and 1 wedding elsewhere organized by the husband's parents or close relatives, all took place in Khanh Hau among the wife's relatives and the couple's neighbors. Their limited participation in the gift economy despite their considerable wealth reflects the husband's weak social network in the community and surrounding areas, as well as the couple's relative youth. Household 707 reportedly spent 2.3 million VND on events attended in 2005, but its gift expenses contained little else since it did not have any death anniversary on its own. The social capital of household 707 was limited despite its wealth.

At the opposite end of the spectrum were two households whose per capita income fell into the bottom income quintile in Khanh Hau and which participated actively in gift-exchange rituals.

In 2005, household 16 had 5 members, a couple (husband aged 44, and wife, 39), their two sons (aged 17 and 2), and the wife's mother temporarily residing with them to help with the care for the 2-year-old boy. Although the husband was technically born elsewhere during his father's work assignment to another province, he had a long root in Khanh Hau, and his maternal grandfather was a large and influential landowner before 1975. The husband had numerous close relatives in Khanh Hau, and the land on which his house was built was bequeathed by his maternal grandfather. The wife came from Tan Hoi Dong, a neighboring commune located in Tien Giang province. This household had .45 hectare of land on which the husband worked, and the husband also helped the wife in her beef noodle business in the provincial capital of Tan An (6 kilometers away). Their annual per capita income of 3.1 million VND in 2005 put them in the bottom income quintile in Khanh Hau. Despite their relatively limited household income, the husband had an extensive kinship network in Khanh Hau and that the wife had her own in her native commune as well as a sister married into a Khanh Hau family. Among their close relatives were the husband's parents and 4 brothers with their families in Khanh Hau, one married sister in Khanh Hau, and three sisters married to husbands in a neighboring commune or in the nearby provincial capital. The husband also had a maternal uncle, some maternal aunts, as well as numerous first cousins on

both his father's and mother's sides in Khanh Hau. The wife had her parents and 7 married siblings, as well as numerous aunts, uncles, and first cousins, in her native commune neighboring on Khanh Hau. The husband and wife in household 16 attended a total of 51 gift-exchange events in the twelve month period under study, including 25 death anniversaries, 12 weddings, 2 wedding-preparatory ceremonies, 7 funerals, 3 birth celebrations, 1 visit to a sick acquaintance, and 1 other ritual. Among the 25 death anniversaries were 4 banquets at the household of this husband's maternal uncle, to all of which he had to bring gifts¹. As the husband was not the youngest son in his natal household and as his parents were alive and living with his youngest brother, he did not have any death anniversary to take care of². He also reportedly cut back on the number of attended death anniversaries in 2005 out of the concern about gift expenses and the need to support his elder son's possible university education. But in 2005, this household still spent 3.1 million VND a year, about one fifth of the total family income, on gifts for 51 events organized by other households. This resulted from the couple's strong integration into the local social networks in Khanh Hau and in a neighboring commune.

Household 91 was composed of a 73-year-old woman living with her 12-year-old and 6-year-old granddaughters. The income of the household was derived mainly from the remittances from her youngest son and daughter-in-law (the parents of her granddaughters) who received 1.5 hectare of cultivable land in the Plain of Reeds as a part of the resettlement of landless cultivators in the late 1980s. The elderly woman's mother had a long ancestral root in Khanh Hau, while her father came from a neighboring commune. Her deceased husband's family had settled in Khanh Hau for at least one generation. Her daughter-in-law came from a neighboring commune located in Tien Giang province. The daughter-in-law returned to Khanh Hau during slack seasons to help taking care of the two granddaughters, while the son stayed in their new village to take care of the land. With an annual per capita income of 3.1 million VND in 2005, household 91 fell into the bottom income quintile in Khanh Hau. However, it had ancestral worship duties to 5 deceased persons, including the elderly woman's husband, parents-in-law, and grandparents-in-law. Due to its limited financial resources, it annually organized only one big death anniversary banquet (that of

¹ As a reflection of his wealth, the maternal uncle organized 4 death anniversary banquets with significantly overlapping guest lists (about 100 guests at the death anniversary of his father; 40 at that of his mother; and 40 and 20 at those of his two sons). In Khanh Hau, despite the widely reported pattern of dividing death anniversary duties among siblings and close relatives, it was not uncommon for a household to hold many death anniversary banquets in a year if it had the economic means to do so.

² In Khanh Hau and other rural Mekong delta communities, it is common for parents to reside with their youngest son and to bequeath their house to the latter. The youngest son also assumes the primary responsibility for the worship of parents after the parents pass away.

the elderly woman's husband), which cost about 2 million VND. The elderly woman in household 91 reportedly attended 53 events in a 12-month period in 2005-06 where she had to present gifts costing approximately 2.3 million VND (about a quarter of the total income of this household). They included 26 death anniversaries (mostly among the elderly woman's relatives and acquaintances in Khanh Hau), 12 weddings, 8 funerals, 4 birth celebrations, 3 visits to sick acquaintances, and 1 house construction party. The overwhelming majority were organized by the elderly women's relatives, children-in-law's parents, and neighbors. Although some of the elderly woman's gift money came from remittances from her elder son living in another province and occasional gifts from her 4 married daughters in Khanh Hau, the bulk of the gift expenses as well as more than half of the big death anniversary expenses had to be covered by her youngest son and daughter-in-law. This was a major source of conflict between the elderly woman and her daughter-in-law, to the point that they were barely on speaking terms with each other during our fieldwork periods in 2005.

Mrs. C. said that she would be ready to pass on her family affairs to whoever was willing to take them over.... that the family had no savings year in year out..., that money was heavily spent on ritual gifts.. [She referred to Mrs. K, her mother-in-law, in the front room] another reminder [to her] about the need to go to a funeral, the funeral of Mr. Tu in Thu Tuu [hamlet]. Mrs. Sau [a neighbor of Mrs. C.] also made a similar complaint that it was a heavy burden getting married to a youngest son and living in a family with ancestral worship obligations, and that earnings were heavily spent on ritual banquets.

Mrs. Sau went home to go to bed. I continued talking to Mrs. C until 10 p.m. Mrs. C. complained and talked about all sorts of things centering on the conflict with her mother-in-law and the high ritual banquet expenses in a household with ancestral worship duties.... Her mother-in-law [reportedly] spent a lot of money [on gifts to be 30 brought to ritual banquets]. [Mrs. C. said] no matter how hard she worked, money was always short, and that they were regularly in debt. Her mother-in-law readily accepted invitations, and spent 100,000 VND on a wedding gift [above the normal figure of 50,000 VND for a wedding] and 50,000 VND on a funeral gift.

Occasionally, Mrs. C. suggested [to her mother-in-law] to scale down the gifts. Her mother-in-law reportedly said that she could not behave like a dog. When [Mrs. C did not give the money for a ritual banquet gift], the mother-in-law, after changing her clothes [to go to the banquet], kept repeating: "Maybe I am a dog."

Mrs. K [the mother-in-law] would attend the funeral as the in-law of the deceased's in-law. Mrs. K called Ms. Sau the Fatso in to give the money, but Mrs. C understood that

it was her obligation to give the money to Ms. Sau. Mrs. C. talked quietly to Mrs. Sau, and the latter left with no money. Mrs. C left to visit a neighbor. Mrs. K. [the mother-in-law] walked in and out of the house and told me: She [C.] did not care about funerals, as if I would not die [implying that C did not care about the future reciprocation of acquaintances at Mrs. K.'s funeral]... Mrs. C said that [her mother-in-law] said that a gift of 50,000 VND was not adequate [at the funeral]. Because Mrs. K. would go with the mother-in-law of her children, she reportedly wanted to give a 100,000 VND gift. [Fieldnotes of Nguyen thi Nhung on household 91 in Khanh Hau in August 2005]

The large number of events attended by the elderly woman in household 91 had to do partly with her strong integration into the local social and kinship network, the need to reciprocate past gifts, given her husband's funeral in 1994 and her 5 children's weddings over the years, the formal gift-exchange relations with her children-in-law's parents, as well as the anticipated need for a good and large future funeral for herself attended by people in her and her children's networks, including the recipients of her ritual gifts. Despite its relative poverty, household 91 had a more extensive social and kinship network and thus more social capital than many other richer households in Khanh Hau.

The data from Khanh Hau suggest that the convertibility of economic resources into social capital was mediated by the structure of local kinship and social networks and the degree of integration of a household in these networks (cf. Bourdieu 1986). This integration was partly shaped by household demographics (number of married children and age of household head) as well as its past flow of gifts.

V. Conclusion

In terms of the dynamics of gift exchanges, in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau, villagers emphasized sentiment, face, and the principle of reciprocity. Despite the emphasis on sentiment, they meticulously recorded gifts and favours, and regularly made conscious decisions regarding the amount of gifts. Even when villagers talked about sentiment as the basis for gifts, gift exchanges involved the allocation of limited resources and conscious decisions. Socioculturally specific norms and ideology on the one hand and instrumentality and agency on the other were inextricably intertwined in the flow of gifts in both Hoai Thi and Khanh Hau.

I would suggest that we also need to go beyond the micro-dynamics of gift exchanges to examine the role that gifts played in social capital formation, maintenance, and expansion. As gifts involved the use of scarce resources, those with more material wealth had an advantage in social

capital. However, as the case studies in Khanh Hau reveal, this relation between economic wealth and social capital was mediated by the structure of local social networks as well as by the degree to which a household was integrated into these networks. I would suggest that the study of gifts would be enriched by the attention not only to sociocultural rules and the strategic dimension of choices, but also to the interplay of gifts, social capital, community structure, and class formation and development (cf. Yang 1994, Yang 2002: 466; Unger 1998).

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APPENDIX:**Khanh Hau**

Household Code	No. of events attended	Income quintile (5:top; 1:bottom)	Age of senior functioning household member(s)*	N of married persons born in		
				KH/ HT	Surrounding hamlets/communes	Elsewhere
9	76	5	53	2	1	1
79	59	5	47.5	1	1	
58	56	4	47.5	1	1	
91	53	1	73	1		
22	51	5	45	1	1	
16	51	1	41.5	1	2	
19	41	4	83.5	1		1
55	40	4	58.5	1	1	
46	37	5	42	1		1
43	37	4	35	1		1
7	31	4	67	2	1	1
67	30	4	47	2	1	1
94	27	1	46.5	2		
28	26	4	60	1		
40	24	4	64	1	1	
61	24	2	40	1		1
713	23	3	23.5	1	1	
707	19	5	38	1		1
39	18	4	45	1		

37	15	2	60	2	1	
31	11	2	40	1		1
706	11	2	40.5			2

* If the household was headed by a couple, the age here is the average age of the husband and wife.

Hoai Thi

Household Code	No. of events attended	Income quintile (5:top; 1:bottom)	Age of senior functioning household member(s)*	N of married persons born in		
				KH/HT	Surrounding communitites	Elsewhere
423	128	4	71.5	3		1
386	108	5	64.5	2	1	
359	106	5	46	1		1
529	100	5	46.5	2		
480	90	4	51	1		1
472	78	5	50	1		
511	73	4	51	1		1
510	72	5	75	2		1
473	71	5	44.5	1		1
412	71	3	62	1	1	
517	70	4	45	2		
470	69	5	73	2		
503	68	5	41	3		

366	66	4	44	2		
361	66	3	68	2	1	
452	65	4	51	5		
383	64	3	71.5	3	1	
415	62	4	42.5	2		
391	57	3	76	2		1
551	54	2	79	1		1
538	50	1	81	1		1
524	48	4	43	2		
432	48	3	40	2		
514	48	3	71	3		1
376	48	2	53	2		
531	46	4	36	2		
447	43	5	33.5	1		1
441	42	2	69	1		
397	42	1	34	2		
549	39	2	33	2		
457	38	5	48.5	3	1	
418	35	4	32.5	2		
544	32	2	56	1		2
462	32	2	39	2		
494	31	5	46	2		1
484	26	2	31	1		
354	23	4	28.5	2		

557	22	3	25.5	1	1
389	21	1	83		1
353	19	2	78	2	1
403	18	2	43	1	

2011 年度次世代研究「Alternative Intimate Spheres for Women in Vietnam」(研究代表：加藤敦典)による成果である。

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