

Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam

Jayne Werner



ASAA Women in Asia Series

Gender, Household and State in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam

This book examines gender in post-revolutionary Vietnam, focusing on gender relations in the family and state since the onset of economic reform in 1986. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources (including surveys, interviews, and responses to film screenings), Jayne Werner demonstrates that despite the formal institution of public gender equality in Vietnam, in practice women do not hold a great deal of power, continuing to defer to men in both the family and the wider community. Contrary to conventional analyses equating liberalisation and decentralisation with a reduced role for the state over social relations, this book argues that gender relations continued to bear the imprint of state gender policies and discourses in the post-socialist state. While the household remained a highly statist sphere, the book also shows that the unequal status of men and women in the family was based on kinship ties that provided the underlying structure of the family and (contrary to resource theory) depended less on their economic contribution than on family norms and conceptions of proper gendered behaviour. Werner's analysis explores the ways in which the *Đổi Mới* state utilised constructions of gender to advance its own interests, just as the communist revolutionary regime had earlier used gender as a key strategic component of post-colonial government. Thus this book makes an important and original contribution to the study of gender in post-socialist countries.

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To the memory of George McT. Kahin
scholar and mentor,
and to Charlie and Ben,
with love

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Credits

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Note

A person’s full name is given the first time they are cited; thereafter, they are referred to by their first names, such as Mrs. Liên or Mr. Vinh. Older women are referred to as “Mrs.,” while single and married women under 40 are referred to as “Ms.” This somewhat arbitrary distinction reflects, to some degree, Vietnamese age-specific kinship terminology.

Introduction

In the fall of 1995, I arrived in Quang commune (*xã*) in the Red River delta of northern Vietnam to study the effect of the state on gender relations since the launching of economic reforms and the return to a market economy, known as *Đổi Mới*, in the 1980s. I had been visiting villages in northern Vietnam on short trips since the early 1970s and, as a feminist scholar, had always interviewed rural women about their lives under the communist state.¹ Although these earlier visits had given me rare and useful glimpses into rural Vietnamese women's lives, this time I wanted to conduct a more thorough investigation of gender hierarchies and women's status in both the household and the community, especially as these may have been shaped by dramatic changes in state policies since the opening of northern Vietnamese society and markets.

As of the early 1990s, scholars had begun to examine gender issues in northern Vietnam, yet little was known about the actual dynamics of the household and the effect of the state on gender relations within the family.² To discover these, I recognized, would require a study based on extended field research.³ Thus I intended to visit households, witness the organization of daily life and economic activities, examine kinship and household structure, and conduct individual and group interviews. I hoped thereby to gather information about the dynamics of gender relations, the workings of gender norms and age hierarchies, and how ordinary households experienced the wider political environment. I was particularly interested in the interconnections between the personal and the political and wished to explore the role of politics and the state in shaping gender relations in the family and how a gender analysis might contribute to an understanding of governance. I also planned to address the extent to which gender relations had actually changed over time and how the mix of revolutionary experience, socialist ideology, and market reform might have shaped gendered transformations.

Because 75 percent of the population of Vietnam's population is rural, I had chosen to conduct my field research in a village setting. During the war years and immediate post-war period, the population base of most villages in northern Vietnam had been relatively stable, making it easier to examine

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changes over time.⁴ At the time of my study, northern Vietnam had not yet experienced vast migrations of rural people to urban centers and significant demographic changes. Yet population growth had been rapid during the twentieth century, and *Đổi Mới* had begun to accelerate social and spatial mobility as Vietnam opened itself to the outside world. The families in the village I studied were just beginning to experience the impact of modern communications, global forces, and cultural flows.

Despite the Marxist ideological orthodoxy that, under the leadership of the communist state, “women’s liberation” had been achieved in the north, western ethnographers studying the region claimed that the Communist revolution had left women’s unequal status in the family largely unchanged.⁵ The initial intention of this study was to test the validity of both sets of claims and to discover the reasons for the continued resilience of inequality in the family. But like many feminist scholars, I had also come to view “women’s liberation” not only as a social condition or personal issue but as a political discourse tied to state building under both revolutionary and post-revolutionary conditions.⁶ Such state discourses both reflect ideological imperatives and constitute meaningful formations or elements of the political and institutional frameworks within which social and political practices occur and through which social identities are produced and circulated.⁷ At the same time, as other scholars have pointed out, they are contingent, unstable, and contested, resisting the stabilization of meaning.⁸ This study thus views discourse as legitimating but not hegemonic – that is, as simultaneously a realm of agreement and disagreement.⁹ By examining gendered discourses in Vietnam, I hoped to better understand the persistence of gender inequality in a nation that proclaimed gender equality had in fact been achieved.¹⁰

Gender Equality in Vietnam

Gender equality (*bình đẳng nam nữ*) had been espoused as early as 1930 by the Indochinese (later Vietnamese) Communist Party (ICP) founded by Hồ Chí Minh. During two anti-colonial wars, the first against France (1946–1954) and the second against the United States (1960–1975), the revolutionary movement reformed the Confucian family, mobilized rural and urban women into new political organizations, and brought women out of the home into the public arena. When the Communist Party came to power in 1945, many of the formerly private functions of the family were socialized and transferred to the state during the collectivization of the private property and land holdings upon which the clan system was built. Thus economic and political power was transferred to agricultural cooperatives at the local level at the expense of the family and the former village apparatus, taking over many of the economic and decision-making functions of the village-based clans. As a result, the Confucian family structure that had kept women subordinated had been significantly undermined.¹¹

On the face of it, the Communist revolution had been successful in promoting gender equality in Vietnam. Marriage reform, greater access to education, the right to work outside the home, the ability to own property, and greater access to political power all accrued to women's benefit. Women's fertility levels declined, in part because of the state's birth-control programs. Women in Vietnam received the right to vote and stand for election in 1946 as well as the right to earn a salary commensurate with those of men. Legislation, public policy, and state institutions protected these gains.¹² A national woman's bureaucracy in the form of the Women's Union had been established to represent women and was in place at all policy levels.

Despite these gains in the public realm, my earlier visits and initial findings had largely confirmed the claims of earlier scholars that women's status within the family had remained unequal. Gender hierarchies in the family continued to place women on a lesser footing than men. As I would discover, women's and men's discourses signalled that a woman's place was in the home and that care of the family took precedence over public activities and employment. One of the aims of my study, therefore, was to discern why this was the case by undertaking a close examination of how formal, public equality and the "state effect" affected the public/private divide. I was particularly interested to see whether and how the state and gendered discourses affected family relations and how the two spheres of the public and the private interacted with one another.

Under *Đổi Mới*, the state has been reconfiguring its relationship with the private sphere, repositioning the household as a central location of productivity and an anchor for Vietnam's entry into the global economy.¹³ By the time of my field research, this shift had enabled the family to revert to its pre-Communist function as an economic unit and elevated the household to a new theoretical and practical importance. At the same time, the *Đổi Mới* state continued to intervene in the domestic sphere as it had during wartime, in this way maintaining continuity with its revolutionary past. Yet as my findings would ultimately reveal, the relationship between public gender equality and domestic inequality was in fact complex and nuanced, and the public/private divide in Vietnam defied easy dichotomizations.¹⁴

Previous scholarly work on gender and women's roles in Vietnam has tended to belie this intimate connection between the public and private spheres, seeing patriarchy in the family as somehow divorced from the politics of the state or, in more orthodox versions of this stance, as stemming from Vietnamese cultural traditions that the socialist state had tried its best to overcome. During the course of this study, however, I would come to see that these gendered discourses served both as markers of state power and as tools for governance. Thus constructions of femininity or womanhoods that appeared a function of the private sphere in fact seemed a result of state-derived gendered discourses. Some gendered constructions, I would find, had become public norms that infiltrated the private sphere in the form of "nested" categories of practices and identities, as delineated by Gal and

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Kligman in the former state-socialist regimes of Eastern Europe.¹⁵ As the following chapters will show, the *Đổi Mới* state has used gender as an intimate, personal mode of regulatory power by providing a direct, emotional connection to people's lives, employing gendered discourses as political tools to elicit political allegiance through identificatory but depoliticized processes.

Gendered discourses in Vietnam, which had been an essential component of the Communist revolution, thus retained their centrality to the *Đổi Mới* state's discursive panoply. But the concept of gender equality had undergone a subtle transformation in the early *Đổi Mới* years. As this study will show, the notion of gender equality as social equality (that is, as public gains for women) shifted to a concept of "family equality" (*gia đình bình đẳng*) that was in line with the *Đổi Mới* state's promotion of post-Marxist and post-Confucian discourses.¹⁶ The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1989 had undermined the ideological foundations of one-party rule in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese Communist Party had quickly moved to fill the gap with Hồ Chí Minh Thought as the official ideology, emphasizing the nationalist aspects of his life and thinking.¹⁷

The public and private spheres thus had undergone significant ideological and discursive change in the early 1990s. With the return of the household as the basic unit of production after the decollectivization of land and the resurgence of kinship in local and national politics, gendered discourses under *Đổi Mới* quickly displaced the iconic revolutionary images of Vietnamese womanhood. Pro-family discourses accompanied the revival of other neo-traditionalist and patriarchal themes. As portrayed in the *Đổi Mới* media, the new femininities tended to be much more family-oriented, virtuous, and consumer-oriented than during the past. The "Social Evils" campaign initiated in the lead-up to the Sixth Party Congress in 1996 had been ostensibly designed to counter the temptations of such Western cultural "poisons" as pornography, prostitution, and juvenile delinquency. This campaign featured negative images of female sexuality and licentiousness, denigrating "loose" women as symbols of Western depravity, social marginality, and feminine disorder: the reverse of the wholesome *Đổi Mới* womanhoods promoted elsewhere in the media.¹⁸

As I began my study, official *Đổi Mới* gendered discourses continued to target women in their many roles and symbolic functions, although with the adoption of the market economy they addressed women particularly in their household roles as producers and reproducers. The contributions of women to the household economy were seen as essential to increasing national income and prosperity. Women as partners in conjugal relationships were targeted for a host of government programs, including family planning initiatives, child welfare and health programs, and Happy Family campaigns. Besides the conjugal couple, the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship also became part official endeavors to reduce family tensions and promote "harmony" in the household. Given this salience of conjugal couples and mothers- and daughters-in-law in official discourses and to gender equality,

I decided that these two sets of family relationships would become major themes in my study. By examining the differing responses of these two generations of women to *Đổi Mới*'s gendered discourses, I would also learn that the state did not exercise a uni-dimensional effect, nor were official discourses themselves necessarily consistent and free of contradictions.

The Research Location: Quang Village

The research for this book was conducted in Quang village (*xã*) in Thanh Trì district in 1995–1996, with subsequent research conducted during short trips between then and 2000. I had chosen Quang *xã* as the site for this study in consultation with the sponsor of my research, Prof. Phan Huy Lê, a noted historian and director of the Center for Vietnamese and Intercultural Studies at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, based on a number of considerations.¹⁹ First, Quang *xã* was an ordinary rural commune, meaning that it did not differ significantly from other communes in the Hà Đông area. It was not unusually prosperous, nor did it practice a profitable trade that altered its economic status compared to nearby communes, such as wholesale textile trading, cross-border trade with China, or ceramics manufacturing. In addition, Quang *xã* was neither destitute nor dysfunctional, as were communes that had been plagued by corruption scandals and in which officials did not welcome researchers. In choosing a rural village for my study, I was primarily looking for one that would be largely representative of the agricultural areas of the Red River delta.

At the same time, I recognized that the communes of the Red River Delta are quite different from one another and historically semi-autonomous, with their own distinctive traditions. Quang *xã*'s own distinguishing features included an ancient history, many temples and pagodas, an old market, and, atypically, a population that comprised no Catholics.²⁰ The *xã* was located in an area famous for its literary and cultural traditions in the ancient cradle of riverine civilization south and west of Hanoi known as a “sacred land with talented people” (*địa linh nhân kiệt*), referring to its many laureates and scholarly clans who served the court. Quang *xã* is on the Tô Lịch River and was the site of an old market town. It had engaged in commercial activities with Hanoi and villages downstream for centuries. The village was part of the pre-colonial district of Long Đàm (Pond of the Dragon), so named because it was a low-lying area with large bodies of water located down the Tô Lịch from the royal capital of Thăng Long of Hanoi (City of the Soaring Dragon).²¹

In the 1990s, Quang *xã* was part of the outer belt (*ven đê*) of the suburbs surrounding Hanoi. Although it took only about an hour to go by motorbike from Hanoi to the village, psychologically the residents of Quang lived in a different universe from Hanoi, which seemed both close and yet very far away. Most of its inhabitants thought of themselves as peasants (*nông dân*) and eschewed what they perceived as the hectic lifestyle of the city. As a whole, village residents did not see themselves as middle-class strivers and frequently

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professed the view that life in the country was preferable to city life. Mr. Trần Văn Thành, the *chủ tịch* (president) of the People's Committee of Quang *xã* described the residents of the *xã* as people who did just enough "to get by," by which he meant that they were not overly ambitious and worked to earn just enough for a modest lifestyle. Although villagers always referred to Hanoi as the inner city (*nội thành*), as opposed to Thanh Trì district and their *xã*, many urban amenities such as motorbikes, televisions, and VCRs were becoming fixtures of village life, although not all residents had the means to buy these luxurious items.²²

The term *xã*, sometimes translated as *commune*, does not have an exact English equivalent. It is neither a town nor a village but somewhere in between. *Xã* could be called "administrative villages," which conveys their function of administering lower-level entities called *thôn* in which rural residences and fields are located. *Thôn* are not exactly "villages" (as they are often translated in the literature) because they are not autonomous political entities and their heads are directly responsible to the *xã* in which the Communist Party chief, the People's Committee, the People's Council, and the mass organizations are all headquartered. *Thôn* (sometimes also called *làng* but in Quang called *xóm* before agricultural collectivization) have their own distinctive and rival traditions within the same *xã*, and their inhabitants often strongly identify with them. The *xã* is the focal point of local politics and the lowest political and administrative unit in the countryside through which state power is directly deployed. This study uses *xã* to mean both "village" in the general sense and in its more specific administrative sense.²³

I was also interested in the area because it had a long tradition of market activity that included women traders. The presence of female trading in Thanh Trì district, part of the former colonial province of Hà Đông that was known for its handcraft and trading villages, indicated women's economic importance, if not their economic independence and authority. Quang village was famous for its local produce, which villagers transported up the Tô Lịch River to Thăng Long by sampan. Cucumbers, lychees, and longan fruits were sold in the capital city by women traders. (Pre-colonial traders are, in fact, commemorated in a stone inscription near the current market.) The primary embarking point for trade and commerce was the junction of the Tô Lịch and the Red River just north of the royal citadel in Thăng Long (Hanoi), which was also the location of the biggest rice market (*chợ gạo*) in the north. From there, goods were ferried down the Tô Lịch to points south and east; Quang market was one of the principal downstream markets. Even though cooperativization had been intended to supplant private economic activity, trading had never ceased altogether, and economic reforms in the 1980s renewed commercial activity. By the time of my arrival in Quang *xã*, virtually every family in the *xã* was engaged in some form of trading.

The Hà Đông area also attracted my interest because I was aware that the women there contributed substantially to the economic resources of their families, sometimes more so than the men. They performed the greater part

of the agricultural labor in wet-rice cultivation, raised pigs and chickens, and tended fruit and vegetable gardens near their houses as well as conducted most of the small trade in local and urban markets, selling their own or purchased produce. Women invariably managed the economic resources of the family, including the daily budget and cash reserves, and were expected to be good managers and financially adept. They handled many vital roles in the household upon which all family members depended. Competent, strong women were clearly valued and praised and were treated with considerable respect as they aged.

The geographical location of Quang *xã* also had a bearing on its political and military activities. During the American war, Quang had been an important part of the rear area (*hậu phương*) of the war effort, with a military depot and a weapons factory, and had been bombed several times by US planes, which killed seven people and wounded 37.²⁴ Historically, however, the Communist Party had not had strong roots in the *xã*, perhaps because the village may have received economic and political benefits from serving as a cantonal (*tổng*) administrative seat during the French period. During the French war, the French military had occupied the *xã* for most of the conflict, and thus the Communist Party had not established a party chapter in the *xã* until 1956. Hence the subsequent rapid mobilization of the *xã*'s residents during the American war and the development of an active women's movement had not been an inevitable outcome. At any rate, the *xã*'s involvement in the second resistance war, its commitment to the new Communist state, and its proximity to Hanoi seemed to make it a propitious location for a study on gender and the state.

Quang's proximity to Hanoi also suggested that it was more likely to have had a history of state penetration and institutionalization than more remote areas less affected by the reach of the state. Colonialism had broken down the reputedly autonomous character of the northern villages, especially in the Hà Đông area, and by the twentieth century the famous maxim "The Emperor's writ yields to the customary laws of the village" no longer applied to the areas around Hanoi.²⁵ The Communist revolution and war-time mobilization against the French and the US had certainly accelerated this tendency. Quang *xã*'s commitment to the Communist cause during the American war also presumably meant that Communist gender politics would have had at least some impact there. And my early research indicated that *Đổi Mới* was extending and deepening, not curtailing, the reach of the state; after the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, Hanoi had become the political epicenter for *Đổi Mới* reform. My later findings revealed that such penetration had indeed taken place in Quang *xã*.

Đổi Mới* in Quang *Xã

During the first decade of *Đổi Mới*, Quang *xã* had turned to the household economy (*kinh tế hộ gia đình*) as the basis for the transition to the market

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economy and to raise economic productivity. This was in line with Vietnam's new economic strategy adopted in 1986, which sought to reverse the country's economic crisis and to spur economic growth. Officials in Quang *xã* had returned agricultural land to individual peasant households and then restructured the local economy on the basis of the household economy. With the means of production back under household control, families were free to deal directly with the market, but under the guidance of *xã* officials. Quang *xã* planned its economic targets on the basis of the household economy, which it relied upon to encourage the diversification of economic activities, increase household incomes, and stimulate household-based entrepreneurial activity. These *xã* initiatives were consistent with the rural development plans set forth by the Seventh and Eighth Party Congresses.

The *xã* also developed other programs that were geared to the household. These included family planning and women's and children's health initiatives, as well as anti-poverty programs and pro-family campaigns. The new *thôn* chiefs took the lead in monitoring the economic progress of households, while the Women's Association provided institutional support for household economic activities and organizing pro-family campaigns. *Xã* institutions, reconfigured from their wartime mass mobilization duties to development functions, readily adapted to their new duties under the leadership of the People's Committee and the party branch. Efforts to "strengthen the family" were part of *xã* programs in the 1990s designed to build "new cultured" families in response to the party's concerns about perceived threats to the social order. *Đổi Mới's* new family model consisted of a blend of traditional and modern features meant to both facilitate the household's insertion into the market and safeguard Vietnamese cultural values that were consistent with state purposes and deemed threatened by the market economy and the opening to global forces.

As the following chapters will show, the *Đổi Mới* gender order in Quang *xã* consisted of a system of institutions that linked the political institutions of the *xã* – the People's Committee, the party branch, the mass organizations, and the *thôn* chiefs – to individual peasant households. This gender order focused on the household for purposes of production and reproduction and promoted gendered and family discourses to serve these purposes. Gendered discourses were used as tools to implement the programs and policies of the *Đổi Mới* state. These discourses were in line with the state's promotion of "gender equality" (*bình đẳng nam nữ*), although the definition of gender equality was being redefined. Gender and family discourses kept state agendas and goals visible to *xã* residents: family planning targets, "happy family" promotions, and economic goals to be achieved.

Đổi Mới gender discourses also represented women as reflecting the essence of Vietnamese national identity through their roles as revolutionaries and mothers of the nation. This was similar to their wartime roles as symbols of cultural authenticity and community morality. As later chapters will show, state messages and discourses were relayed through the party's *thôn* and *xã*

representatives in their personal relations with *xã* residents, public meetings, and the media, especially television. The *xã*'s gender order designated women as a special category distinct from men, with the Women's Association in charge of dealing with this part of the population.

In the Field in Quang Xã

The authorities in Quang *xã* agreed to give me unsupervised access to the commune to conduct my research, including permission to visit individual households alone and without prior clearance, an official guide, or guidance as to the direction and conclusions of my study. They also agreed to make arrangements for me to live in the *xã* with the president of the Women's Association. However, in the lead-up to the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, district officials, concerned about possible political consequences of my living with a family, put pressure on *xã* officials to cancel these arrangements.²⁶ This initially disappointing development gave me the opportunity to orient my research in another direction. Rather than being limited to contact with only one household and my hostess' guidance and supervision, I broadened the scope of my research. As a result, I decided to conduct a household survey, which gave me contact with a whole range of households in the *xã* that I otherwise would have missed. *Xã* officials, initially nervous about having an American living in their midst, soon relaxed and made an effort to be accommodating. I made arrangements to stay in Hanoi and make day trips to the *xã*, accompanied by an assistant. There we set up interviews with households, usually arranged through *thôn* officials, and walked unaccompanied throughout the *xã*. Some families invited me back for a second interview, which we arranged on our own. No cadres were present during the interviews or meals I had with the many households I visited. I also arranged for a household survey to be carried out under the auspices of the Institute of Sociology in Hanoi, which took several months to plan and complete and employed a team of students. *Xã* officials facilitated this enterprise, which was conducted during the agricultural off-season.²⁷

I found that my presence provoked curiosity but not awe and wonder on the part of villagers, as it had during previous trips when Vietnam had still been essentially closed to the outside world. Villagers soon became accustomed to my daily visits, and the only time I felt I was imposing on their goodwill was when we once arrived too close to the dinner hour at the home of a large extended family and upset their routine. Otherwise, virtually everyone, including officials, was cordial and gracious to a fault and willing to spend hours entertaining and talking to us. My funny Vietnamese and accent provoked amusement, but my middle age automatically gained me respect. These and my anti-war credentials appeared to override their feelings about my American nationality, which by itself still provoked a certain degree of suspicion.²⁸ At the same time, I was sensitive to the "speech acts" of citizens of a state-socialist country and expected that my informants

would furnish me with discourses deemed appropriate for a foreign guest. Thus, I was somewhat taken aback when Mrs. Đỗ Thị Nga, a prominent cadre in the *xã* whose home I visited, admitted without prompting that mistakes had been committed during the 1956 land reform and that collectivization in the *xã* had been rife with corruption.²⁹

The results of this study are based on several original data sets in addition to my personal observations. The first includes primary documents and reports from the People's Committee of Quang *xã*, as well as interviews with the chairman or president (*chủ tịch*) of the People's Committee, the party secretary, and the head of the security office (*công an*), the top three officials in the *xã* at the time. I conducted interviews with five of the nine *thôn* chiefs, all of the current and former women officials in the *xã*, and a number of former male officials. The written materials include a party history compiled by the History Committee of Quang *xã* in 1998, the Civil Register (*Hộ Tịch*) for Quang *xã*, the annual economic reports prepared by the *chủ tịch* of the People's Committee for the People's Council from 1991 to 1995, and the history and annual reports of the Women's Association of Quang *xã* from 1991 to 1995.³⁰ Through these, I intended to gather information on state policies, interventions, and discourses.

The second data set includes two surveys, a household survey and an individual household members' survey, that I conducted in Quang *xã* in the spring of 1996. The surveys formed a structured framework for interactions that allowed the collection of a large quantity of detailed, specific data from a relatively large number of respondents in a form that could be quantified and compared. I brought all the completed questionnaires from these two surveys back to the United States, where they served as a rich source of information about conditions in the *xã*. Many of the questionnaires also contained handwritten comments jotted in the margins by the survey team as they made their rounds, in many cases including diagrams of the residential compounds and actual household living arrangements.³¹

The third data set comprised a separate household database created from the Civil Register of Quang *xã* by a Vietnamese data analyst who traveled to the United States in 1999 on an ESL scholarship program and who resided with me for the academic year. The register identified members of households by name, gender, date of birth, place of birth, place of origin (if different from place of birth), occupation, and place of occupation. The head of household was identified, as were other family members according to their relationship to the head. The database created from the Register yielded statistical information on occupations, place of birth, place of work, marital status, type of household, and residence patterns in the *xã*. The data from the Register and the household survey were compared and checked against one another. Data from the household survey, however, was assumed to be more reliable simply because they were based on my own empirical data collection.

The fourth data set consisted of transcripts of structured in-depth interviews I conducted with members of 20 households selected from the 215

surveyed households in the *xã*. Visiting these households with my assistant, I interviewed its members about their gender roles and expectations, work histories, intergenerational relationships, kinship practices, and household economic conditions. I also asked about the wartime service and experiences of family members and about family difficulties and aspirations.³² In most cases, the questions were posed by my assistant, a researcher in the Sociology Institute and a single mother, 40 years of age, following our agreed-upon line of questioning. But in many cases, I took the lead, especially when the conversation became less structured and more casual. With the permission of the interviewees, all the interviews were recorded. They were then transcribed and double-checked for accuracy in Hanoi, and finally translated by myself.

The fifth data set comprised two structured group interviews of women in Quang *xã* that I conducted after they viewed a popular war drama, *Mẹ chồng tôi* [My Husband's Mother]. Two groups of women watched the film with my assistant and me and responded to the same set of questions. The first group included ten mothers-in-law and the second eight daughters-in-law. The participants were selected to represent a range of family types, economic status, and residence locations within the *xã*. The individuals selected for these interviews did not overlap with members of the 20 households surveyed in the household interviews.

Overview of the Book

In the following chapters, Chapter 1, “Revolutionary Discourses, the Resistance Wars, and Gender Politics in Quang *Xã*, 1944–1975,” examines the roots of gender politics in Quang *xã* both before and during the Communist-led uprising against the French colonial regime following World War II. As it shows, both revolutionary nationalists and the new Communist government installed in 1954 relied on gendered and familial discourses in their anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles. Gender discourses, state building, and memories of military conflict produced a discursive framework that provided the backdrop to the changes that would occur with the introduction of economic reforms in 1986.

Chapter 2, “Gender and *Đổi Mới* in Quang *Xã*,” examines how gendered discourses in the *xã* during the first decade of *Đổi Mới* shifted in focus from revolutionary mobilization to promoting the economic activities of the household and its integration into the marketplace, with women's work in the household assuming new importance. Gendered work roles underwent significant changes, as the occupational structure in the *xã* began to change. The chapter demonstrates that the reemergence of the market-oriented family in Quang *xã* legitimized and strengthened the state's ties to the household even as it revitalized kin and lineage networks and neo-traditional cultural and religious practices.

The *Đổi Mới* state's pro-family discourses as well as kinship and household structures are examined in Chapter 3, “State Discourses and the Family

Household,” where data from the household survey demonstrate that while the new emphasis on the household legitimated state intervention into the family, kinship provided the underlying structure of the family and social practice. Official alarms about the “disintegration of the family” were not sustained by the evidence from Quang *xã*; on the contrary, the family appeared not only to have been reinvigorated by the market reforms but some of the underlying family patterns in the *xã* appear to have been unchanged since the colonial period.

By the mid-1990s, households in Quang *xã* had become the main site for economic production, reproduction, consumption, and inheritance, assuming primary responsibility for the economic activities of their members. Chapter 4, “Married Couples and Equality Families in Quang *Xã*,” investigates the impact of the *Đổi Mới* economy on the conjugal couple in light of resource theory and the state’s promotion of “equality families.” The findings of my survey data and household interviews reveal that the unequal status of men and women in the family stemmed less from their economic contributions to the household than from conceptions and discourses about proper gendered behavior.

Chapter 5, “Womanhoods and State Subject-Making in Quang *Xã*,” examines the effect of state gender discourses on women by eliciting responses of a group of mothers-in-law and another of daughters-in-law to official discourses presented in a film about their respective roles, thereby exploring how public norms in Quang *xã* had become insinuated into the private sphere. The findings indicate that state subject-making in the *xã* was based on gendered interpellations linked to these women’s kin-based lives, their memories of the wartime past, and their present-day experiences. The older generation of women showed a deeper imprint of identification with state norms than did the younger group of women, who had come of age under *Đổi Mới*.

The conclusion of the book explores the theoretical implications of the findings of this study. Chief among these is that the *Đổi Mới* state in Vietnam governs in part through gendered discourses, the household, and the management of publicly constructed womanhoods, and that it does so to foster social stability and meet economic goals rather than to achieve gender equality in the family. Ultimately, I argue, the state undermines the very goals of gender equity it seeks to advance in other areas of social policy. The discursive framework of the state embraces and contains this dynamic tension between the public and private spheres, as Vietnam pursues the marketization and globalization of its economy.

Notes

- 1 An early study was Werner, “Women.” In December, 1972, I made a trip to North Vietnam as part of an anti-war delegation to interview historians in the Institute of History in Hanoi while the war with the United States was still ongoing. I was working on a political history of the Cao Đài religious sect, published as

Werner, *Peasant*. I continued to visit North Vietnam during the 1980s on short research trips.

- 2 Early studies included Nguyễn Tùng; Phạm Văn Bích; Gammeltoft; and Rydström.
- 3 Field-based approaches to political topics constitute a time-honored tradition within Southeast Asia studies, particularly to analyze the cultural logics and institutional bases of power. The work of Benedict Anderson is the most notable in this regard. Village-based gender studies that have viewed gender as a theoretical device to better understand broader systems of knowledge and power have made significant contributions to the field of anthropology and offered similar insight into issues of concern to political scientists. Among the most prominent of these in the field of Southeast Asian studies are the works of Shelly Errington, Aihwa Ong, and Ann Stoler. While I employed some ethnographic methods for this study, my research concerns and methods came primarily from the domain of political science.
- 4 Population changes are impossible to document accurately, but the household registration system (*hộ khẩu*) during the French and American wars required travel documents to leave most villages and effectively restricted free-moving population flows. Socialist economic policies also greatly curtailed trading and marketing activities. The state-sponsored migration from the Red River delta to the highlands from the 1960s onward affected mainly villages in the lower delta, not the villages around Hanoi where this study is situated. (See Hardy.)
- 5 Bergman represents the orthodox Marxist school of thought, while Hy Văn Lương and Nguyễn Đắc Bằng (*Revolution*) argue that male-oriented hierarchies in northern villages were virtually unaffected by revolutionary politics.
- 6 Scholars studying China, for instance, have argued that gender has been central to the construction of national and modern identity there and thus to the production of state power (see Anagnost, *National*; Barlow; Rofel). In a study of the former socialist systems in Eastern Europe, Verdery has similarly pointed to the strong discursive quality of state-socialist systems with weak states, which use political discourse as a primary unifying mechanism (Verdery, *National*, and Verdery, “Theorizing”). She notes that transforming consciousness through language and discourse is one of the prime aims of revolutionary states, where all language in effect is politicized. Mitchell argues that “the state effect,” in which symbolic and ideological features operate as particular practices of the state in concert with its material apparatuses, is a key component of state-building activities.
- 7 See Fraser 90. Fraser’s work grounds discourse in its historical context.
- 8 Laclau and Mouffe 105–114.
- 9 See Verdery, *National*, 11.
- 10 Gendered discourses, a prime feature of both revolutionary and national socialist systems, build on the strong affinities between kinship and nationalism, tying nation-building to maternal imagery, gender difference, defense of a feminine homeland, and “political love.” (See Anderson; Berezin 355–378.) As scholars have noted, women as mothers reproduce the emerging nation-state in five ways: as biological reproducers of the ethnic collectivity, as reproducers of the boundaries of the ethnic/national group, as signifiers of ethnic and national difference in discursive constructions of ethnic/national categories and as transmitters of the group’s culture, and as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles (see Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7; McClintock 62–80).
- 11 The standard study of Confucianism and the family is Đào Duy Anh. For a vivid account of the impact of the Communist revolution on one northern clan, see Elliott.
- 12 Information on women in Vietnam can be obtained from the website of Vietnam’s National Committee for the Advancement of Women in Vietnam, <http://www.ubphunu-ncfaw.gov.vn/?lang=E&func=0>.
- 13 The Vietnamese term for *state* (*nhà nước*) includes the government, National Assembly, and judiciary, and not the Communist Party. In this study, I use the

14 Introduction

term *state* to include all aspects of the government apparatus plus the Communist Party and its affiliated mass organizations. The Communist Party in Vietnam is the official, although not the sole, source of ideology in Vietnam, and polices conformity to its ideological imperatives.

- 14 Vietnam follows a state-led development model. Whether institutions and policy determine the direction of development (i.e., in terms of strategic planning and institutional capacity to implement policies) is debated by economists. However, the *Đổi Mới* state certainly tries to steer the development process, both at the national and local levels. The state sector is deemed the leading sector of the economy, and policies instituted in the 1990s were aimed “toward the construction of civilized markets and a strong regulatory state,” as Abrami puts it.
- 15 Gal and Kligman, *Politics*.
- 16 *Post-Confucianism*, coined by the China specialist Roderick MacFarquhar, refers to the Asian values paradigm used by the newly industrializing “Asian tigers” such as Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea.
- 17 Theoretically, the party shifted to Hồ Chí Minh Thought based on his ideology of the united front and national harmony.
- 18 Prostitutes, who were regularly rounded up by the police in Hanoi in early 1996, served as a scapegoat for displays of state control, although in fact most of their clients were party and state officials making business deals in the bars where they worked.
- 19 Quang is the *nom* or ancient Vietnamese name of the *xã*. Quang means “bamboo frame” and derives from the bamboo frames (for holding baskets or other loads at the ends of a shoulder pole) that used to be made in the village. Quang *xã* was established in 1801 on the basis of a village (*làng*), an atypical occurrence known as *nhất xã, nhất thôn*. The *xã* also served as canton seat during French colonial times, although its inhabitants still referred to it as their *làng*. In the colonial census records of 1921 and 1926, the Quang *lý trưởng* (mayor) used the term *làng* for the village, although the cover sheet uses *xã*. Therefore Quang *xã* appeared to have a corporate identity of its own apart from its constituent *thôn*. In the 1990s, there were two tutelary deities at the level of the *xã*. There were also considerable intermarriage and family ties between *thôn*, as discussed in Chapter 3 below.
- 20 Catholics live in most of the villages of the north and number about 10 percent of the overall population of the delta. Quang *xã* traces its origins to the period before the Chinese conquest, and one of its earliest inhabitants was supposedly a general in the Vạn Xuân kingdom who is the guardian deity or *thành hoàng* of the village and is worshipped in a temple at the far end of the *xã*. Another native son was a fourteenth-century literatus who served the court in Hanoi and is honored in the *đình* or communal house in the middle of the *xã*. The *đình* and the market, along with the adjacent administrative offices, comprised the political and economic center of the *xã*. In addition, there were three other pagodas, a *miếu*, a small temple to Trần Hưng Đạo, and numerous family shrines in the *xã* in the 1990s.
- 21 From the time of the Lý/Trần dynasties up until the nineteenth century, the Tô Lịch River had branched off the Red River north of the royal citadel, traveled west and then south downstream to join the Nhuệ. The winding Tô Lịch surrounded the inner flank of the royal center, while the Red River on the right protected the capital to the north and east. This natural configuration created an island center for the royal enclosure, giving it supernatural and sacred power. Rule from this seat could claim that Heaven and Earth were in alignment and peace and prosperity reigned in the land. Thăng Long was the name for the capital from 1010 to 1428, during the Lý/Trần dynasties. Hanoi has been its name from 1831 to the present. A soaring dragon is the iconic symbol for the imperial throne; “soaring” refers to the hump in the dragon’s back, or the bend in the river. Hanoi

means “the city that lies in the bend of the river.” All points north, south, east, and west are named in terms of direction from the center (*nội*): hence Hà Bắc lies to the north, Hà Nam to the south, Hà Tây to the west, and Hà Đông to the east. *Hà* is the Sino-Vietnamese term for river.

- 22 I was particularly struck by the population density of Quang *xã*. Crowding was such a problem that few of the residential enclosures contained the ponds that one usually finds in villages in the Red River delta. Space for garden plots had similarly been consumed by the pressure for housing, although courtyards, fruit trees, and rose gardens leavened the heavy preponderance of brick. The Red River delta has one of the highest rural population densities in Asia. In 1995, the population density for the rural district of Thanh Trì was 2,101 persons per square km. Although this seems low in comparison to the population density for inner Hanoi, which was 17,320 per square km for the same year, the Thanh Trì figure represents inhabitants by total surface area, including cultivated lands, and thus fails to capture the extremely high density of population on residential land (*đất thổ cư*), which resembles an urban city block in its density if not in its height. The population density of Thanh Trì was higher than that of Thái Bình province, further down in the delta, which was 1,141 persons per square km in 1992. (The figure for the Red River delta as a whole was 1,085.) See Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Cục Thống kê Thành Phố Hà Nội); Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Tổng Cục Thống Kê).
- 23 Most *xã* comprise several *xóm* or *thôn*. Contiguous residential buildings are clustered in the *thôn*. The spatial and residential features of a Vietnamese *xã* are completely different than those of an American village in that the residential areas in Vietnamese *xã* are tightly grouped into the sub-unit *thôn* and rice fields lie beyond the residential enclosures. Isolated farmhouses surrounded by fields have no parallel in northern Vietnamese rural communities. Nonetheless, like American villages, Vietnamese *xã* range in size from a few hundred people to several thousand and are autonomous political entities. Given the terminological complexity of *xã* and *thôn*, I retain these terms in this study, and use “village” to refer only to *xã*.
- 24 According to the head of the *công an* (security office.)
- 25 The colonial state in the north fundamentally altered the economic and political relationship between the village and the state through new taxation policies, administrative structures, and the commercialization of the economy. For an overview, see Nguyễn Thế Anh. A contemporary Communist source also mentions the commercial and political impact of the colonial regime on the villages in Thanh Trì district, where Quang *xã* is located (see Ban Chấp Hành Đảng Bộ Huyện Thanh Trì). In Quang *xã*, the colonial regime introduced a new governance structure in the 1930s by replacing the old Council of Notables with the Committee of Village Affairs. The 1936 village conventions (*hương ước*) of the *xã* explicitly refer to this change, one of many from the earlier 1889 conventions of the *xã*.
- 26 The presence of an American could set off criticism that could be used as a political weapon in a battle between opposing sides – a type of conflict that occurs regularly in Communist countries, part of why it is so difficult to do village research in places like Vietnam. A researcher can become a lightning rod for all sorts of disputes. Another problem with a home stay may have been that my designated hostess, the president of the Women’s Association, was not a member of the Communist Party because her class background (*lý lịch*) was considered poor, although she had been named head of the Women’s Association because of her competence. She was part of the local elite; her husband was the lineage head of *Chú Tịch Thành*’s lineage. Also, her son-in-law was in the construction business in Hanoi and had built a new imposing two-story house, one of the most impressive in the *xã*, for his in-laws. I conducted research in Quang *xã* from October 1995 to June 1996, with follow-up visits in 1998 and 2000.

- 27 It was impossible to conduct village research in northern Vietnam in the 1990s without the approval and cooperation of *xã* authorities. In my case I believe the cooperation of *xã* officials gave me some latitude in interviewing *xã* residents. No one trailed me as I walked through the *xã*. Nonetheless, the possibility that *xã* residents identified me with a state-research project and the state power structure, and thus provided me with officially sanctioned views, cannot be entirely dismissed. Yet, *xã* residents could also have seen me as a privileged American sent “on a mission,” as they would have put it, for some other purpose, although probably not a personal quest. In the banter that passed for casual conversation between *xã* women and myself, they often frankly told me, “You look so young for your age,” which condensed a host of disparities between *xã* residents and myself, and I often felt women cadres were studying me as much as I was studying them. As for the households selected for interviews, *thôn* officials told us no one refused an interview. I did not interview solely exemplary families, in that a number of households had problems that they might have chosen to hide. For instance, one household had been involved in an embezzlement scandal in the *xã* and the son/husband was in jail, while another seemed to have been involved in wife abuse or domestic violence. *Thôn* officials were often quite frank in telling us about personal matters between husbands and wives to help us better understand family relationships.
- 28 In the mid-1990s, officials in charge of dealing with Westerners in Vietnam still asked the year of one’s first trip to Vietnam and how many subsequent trips one had made. Because I had first been invited to the north as an anti-war academic and had revisited the north several times in the 1980s, my credentials were fairly solid, even though I was an American.
- 29 All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.
- 30 The unpublished economic reports of the People’s Committee and the Women’s Association reports are in the author’s possession. Quang *xã*’s party history, also unpublished, was written by a former *chủ tịch* of the *xã*, who was a member of the *xã*’s History Committee in the 1990s.
- 31 215 households (20 percent) were randomly selected out of a total of 1,058 households in the 1994 Civil Register. The household survey gathered information about household members from ages 15 to 65, dates of birth, educational levels, head of household, household income, household expenditures, value of household goods and household property (land and house), and amount and value of agricultural equipment, and data collected was for the year 1995. The individual household members’ survey (682 respondents) was conducted among members of the families included in the broader household survey, yielding additional data about the economic activities of the respondents, household members’ economic contributions to the household, budgeting and money management, and their perceptions of their role in decision-making. A sub-sample of 220 married couples who answered the individual household members’ survey provided data on decision-making. The teams that gathered the data for the two surveys were composed of researchers and students from the Sociology Institute. They, not the respondents, filled in the questionnaires at the homes of the respondents. No Westerners were present during this process. After the questionnaires were completed, a database was created using SPSS.
- 32 The households interviewed represented a wide range of family types and economic circumstances. Husbands and wives were interviewed both alone and together, depending on who was available. Since it was off-season in an agricultural area, most adults were at home and had the time both for the survey teams to administer the questionnaires and for me to conduct the interviews. No one refused to be interviewed.

1 Revolutionary Discourses, the Resistance Wars, and Gender Politics in Quang Xã, 1945–1975

Their toes are bony, with long black nails;
They spread like chicken feet.
For five, fifteen, thirty years, I've watched
The women go down to the river for water.

Their hair knots break in torrents
Down the back of their soft wet shirts.
They grip their shoulder poles with one hand;
The other holds white clouds.

As the river presses against its banks to turn,
The men bring fishing poles and dreams of the sea.
The magic fish turn away and cry;
Bobbers lie still on the surface of the water.
The men, angry and sad, go far away.

For five, fifteen, thirty years, I've watched
The women come back from the river with water.
Crowds of naked children running behind and growing up.
The girls put poles on their shoulders and go to the river.
The boys carry fishing poles and dreams of the sea,
While the magic fish turn away and cry
Because they've seen the hook in the dazed bait.

Nguyễn Quang Thiệu, *The Women Carry River Water*¹

The roots of the gender order that I observed in my visits to Quang xã after the initiation of *Đổi Mới* reforms go back much further in its history and are essential to understanding more recent changes. Gender and familial discourses were a key element in the origins and development of the anti-colonial movement against the French, a legacy that influenced the Communist revolutionary movement. As discussed in this chapter, revolutionary nationalist discourses viewed women as a significant resource in the struggle against the French, and the idea of gender equality was first developed as a function of national liberation. Anti-colonial activists urged women to

emulate patriotic models and disseminated the idea that women and their maternal functions symbolized the essence of the national community. The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), founded in 1930 under Hồ Chí Minh, also stressed statist values of revolutionary womanhoods and familialism. With the birth of an independent state under communist rule in 1945, as we shall see, gender and familial discourses were used to promote and justify state policies and reforms that led to both greater participation for women in the public sphere and their continuing secondary status within the family.

Gender and familial images embodied and transmitted in conscious state discourses were part of the new gender arrangements the Communists put into effect when they overthrew the colonial regime and came to power in Quang *xã* in August 1945. Although they only ruled for two years until the French military regained control, the Việt Minh Communists put a new gender order into place, which they then consolidated when they returned in 1954 following their victory against the French. Cadres in Quang *xã* mobilized and promoted village women into new political and economic functions through discourses of women's emancipation, class struggle, and national liberation. With the resumption of war in 1960, this time against the United States, Quang *xã* became part of an important rear base for North Vietnam, and war and military mobilization intensified the socialist gender order. During this second resistance war against a foreign power (1960–1975), gender politics, economic production, and wartime mobilization in the *xã* became firmly linked.

Vietnamese Revolutionary Discourses: Saving the Country (*Cứu Nước*) and Gendering the Nation

Gender and familial metaphors had been important elements in the development of Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism from its very beginnings. As early as the turn of the twentieth century, they appeared in the works of Phan Bội Châu (1880–1930), who had a seminal impact on the thinking of his generation and introduced the Western idea of political sovereignty and the right to rule based on the will of the people.² Phan's famous 1905 book, *Việt Nam vong quốc sử* [The History of the Loss of the Country], argued that the people (*dân*) needed to awaken their consciousness (*tỉnh giác*) and liberate their country (*quốc*).³ New ideas about nationhood, patriotism, citizenship, loyalty to the nation above king, and the concept of “the people” that he introduced began to take root among the literati and intelligentsia. The highly influential *Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục* (Tonkin Free School), one of whose founders was from Quang *xã*, helped to disseminate Phan's radical modernist and anti-colonial ideas.⁴

Phan viewed women as a key element in the struggle for national awakening. Reviving heroic narratives of women's resistance to foreign rule to motivate them to take up the national cause, Phan urged women to emulate heroic defenders of their native land such as the Hai Bà Trưng, or Trưng

sisters, who led a revolt against the Eastern Han in 40 AD. To Phan, as to Hồ Chí Minh, the idea of county/nation (*quốc*) was constituted by revolutionary heroism in which the heroine/hero personified the national spirit.⁵ Replacing the Confucian moral of the story of filial piety and the sisters' desire to avenge the killings of their husbands, Phan popularized a rereading that turned on their love of country and desire to expel foreign invaders, which became the standard account in Communist tracts against the French and the United States.⁶

Phan Bội Châu also introduced the idea of the country/nation of Vietnam as a single family to which individuals had to subordinate their own interests. Using the highly evocative term *đồng bào* (literally, “children of the same womb”), which can be translated as “compatriots” or “fellow countrymen,” Phan argued if the Vietnamese remained united, they would be able to expel the French, no matter what the odds.⁷ *Đồng bào* soon became intrinsic to the modern political vocabulary of Vietnam, capturing not only the common ethnicity and heritage of the Việt but the singular quality of the race. At the same time, the term implicitly condemned the French on moral grounds, suggesting they were illegitimate rulers, while instilling a fighting spirit among the Vietnamese. The Communist revolution would inherit this and other unity terms such as *đồng tâm* (unity of mind), using them to forge a sense of ethnically based nationalist identity to arouse resistance against the French.⁸

This stirring patriotic rhetoric, the focus on *heroism* and *unity* (terms associated with the ethnic singularity of the Việt), and the idea of the nation as one family were all crucial components of the gendering of Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism. According to this discourse, all Vietnamese women had the mettle to become revolutionary heroines. By having courageously stood up to foreign aggression in the past, Vietnamese women represented Vietnam's finest historical traditions. Moreover, because women were the mainstays of the family, were or would be mothers, and all Vietnamese could trace their ancestry back to the “same womb,” according to Phan, the symbol of feminine reproductive power was especially potent. Unity concepts implied that the Việt people were a collectivity differentiated from the foreign French (usually referred to derogatorily as *Tây*, or Westerner) and their illegitimate, abusive rule. In Phan's writings, women are portrayed as emblematic of the national group or national race itself (*giống*).⁹

Phan recognized that forging patriotism, instilling love of country, and saving the country/nation could not be accomplished without the active support of women, and thus he argued that women should be brought out of the home into the public sphere to serve the country and the national cause. Women needed to be educated like men because of their essential role in raising and educating their children to respond to the call of the nation. Defining the essential challenge of the Vietnamese nation in terms of the mortal danger posed by colonialism, Phan turned women's “natural” maternal instincts into their duty to defend their country. As such, Phan Bội Châu was the first anti-colonial writer to link the role of women to patriotism and

national sovereignty, arguing that patriotism (*yêu nước*) was the highest calling of women as well as men. Joining the struggle would lead women to claim their “rights” and freedom along with the sovereignty of their country. Phan was also the first to claim that women would achieve equality along with men with the freedom of their country.¹⁰

Building on Phan’s conceptions of gendered anti-colonialism, the Indo-chinese Communist Party blended these ideas with Marxist/Leninist ideology. While introducing Marxist notions of gender equality and mass mobilization, especially by using emulation as a new social strategy, the Vietnamese Communist movement fully embraced the spirit of nationalist thinking as represented by Phan Bội Châu in relying on family imagery, kinship models, and essentialist tropes of Vietnamese womanhoods. In these discourses, Hồ Chí Minh was also pictured as kin-related “Uncle Hồ,” the wise, older, male family figure referred to by the kinship term *bác*, “father’s older brother.” Communist publications extolled Uncle Hồ’s sacrifice of his personal family happiness in order to serve the people (ostensibly he never married and had no children of his own, and thus was often symbolically portrayed as the father of all Vietnamese children). The Vietnamese terms for state and nation also employed family imagery. The preferred word for state, *nhà nước*, is composed of *nhà* (home) and *nước* (water). The Sino-Vietnamese term *quốc gia* is composed of *quốc* (country) and *gia* (house/family), meaning nation, state, or country, depending on how it is used.

These Communist writings depicted women as essential to reclaiming national sovereignty and linked them to what was described as the historic tradition of women rising up against foreign aggressors. Women embodied the finest traditions of the ethnic Vietnamese nation and became symbols for awakening national consciousness and patriotic fervor. As early as 1925, Hồ, in his famous training manual, *Đường Kách Mệnh*, explicitly urged women to join the fight against the French and take inspiration from the international socialist movement.¹¹ The liberation of women, he argued, was essential to unite the country, defeat the French, and build socialism. Equality would require women to exercise their rights, to overcome their passive and dependent nature, and to help build the country (*xây dựng nhà nước*).¹² Equality was not just an equal division of labor in the family, he wrote, but included the right and responsibility of women to participate fully in national affairs. Above all, the role of all good citizens was to serve the people by displaying love for country and Uncle Hồ and respect for the state’s laws and the party’s policies.

At the same time, Communist militants saw women’s equality as a means to attack the Confucian family and to wage class struggle, especially during the early period of the movement in the 1930s. Vietnamese Marxists saw the patriarchal family system as a key component of “feudalism” and the social structure upholding the colonial regime. Equality for women would advance the struggle against the ruling class and undermine feudal attitudes fostering the exploitation of the weakest segment of society.¹³ Communist writings,

both before and after the August Revolution, focused on reforming the family to curb its worst excesses: arranged marriages, child marriage, and concubinage.¹⁴ During the American war, Marxist writings also incorporated Engels' theories regarding the bourgeois family and his analysis that women's domestic confinement stemmed from capitalist society.¹⁵

The Quang xã political and historical documents to which I was granted access incorporated the family-based themes of the anti-colonial Communist terminology of revolutionary nationalism through their frequent use of such terms as "revolutionary morality" (*đạo đức cách mạng*) to refer to virtuous family behavior, "compatriots" (*đồng bào*), and "gender equality" (*bình đẳng nam nữ*), which reflect the language of gendered nationalism and ethnic-based unity. Quang xã political documents included revolutionary nationalist phraseology such as the people "owe a debt to the nation" (*đền ơn đáp nghĩa*) and "when you drink the water, remember the source" (*uống nước nhớ nguồn*), themes used by the party for moral appeals and social welfare programs. The annual reports of the Women's Association frequently referred to the paternalistic authority of Uncle Hồ and freely invoked familial images of the Vietnamese people and nation.¹⁶

When he founded the Việt Minh Nationalist League (*Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội*) in 1941, Hồ Chí Minh's discourses were heavily inflected with moralistic, nationalist, and familial themes. Urging women to help save the country (*cứu nước*), he advised them to do whatever it took to assist their fellow countrymen (*đồng bào*). The Việt Minh's first women's organization, the Women's Association to Save the Country (*Hội Phụ Nữ Cứu Nước*), called on women to encourage their menfolk to join the army and to treat all soldiers as their own flesh and blood.¹⁷ Hồ urged women to join the militia and local defense forces and argued that in doing so, they would realize that love of family and love of country were one and the same. Following the lead of the first nationalists, Hồ also claimed that all Vietnamese women were worthy successors of the Hai Bà Trưng who should emulate their "golden tradition" of heroic resistance to foreign invasion.¹⁸ Moreover, in his view, such heroines were moral paragons who personified virtue (*đạo đức*) and revolutionary ethics and ardor (*đạo đức cách mạng*).¹⁹ By the time of the August Revolution in 1945, Hồ was counseling that patriotism and socialism were dependent upon women's moral force (*đạo đức người phụ nữ*). While women who had revolutionary consciousness (*tình cảm cách mạng*) would necessarily carry out revolutionary activities outside the home, within the home they also needed to serve as a model (*gương mẫu*) to their children, raise them well, and attain a civilized way of life (*nếp sống văn minh*).²⁰ "If families are good, society is good," Hồ counseled.²¹

While gender served as an important mobilization tool, the internal gender politics of the ICP were another matter. With the exception of Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai (1910–1941), few women were admitted to the upper reaches of the Indochinese Communist Party, and even Minh Khai complained about

patriarchal attitudes among male cadres and the difficulties she faced in asserting her authority despite her position as a member of the Central Committee.²² Clearly the gender hierarchies in the ICP contradicted its promotion of gender equality. According to Quinn-Judge, women members of the ICP had little opportunity to assert their individual equality, which they sacrificed to the interests of the party.²³

With the start of the war against the French in 1946, the Việt Minh Communists urged women to join emulation campaigns to instill revolutionary virtue and devotion to public duty and family service. Emulation, a central strategy of the new Communist state, incorporated patriotic emulation contests, production emulation campaigns, and family emulation campaigns as well as campaigns encouraging thrift and against waste and corruption. Emulation movements such as new life movements (*đời sống mới*) and patriotic emulation movements (*phong trào thi đua ái quốc*) were the life blood of the revolution's new moral mission. Following earlier revolutionary nationalists, the Việt Minh fostered the emulation of revolutionary heroes and heroines who came from the ordinary people. These models existed in real life and provided evidence that one could strive to become part of this noble pantheon. Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, the most famous of these heroines, gave her life for the country during the failed ICP-led southern uprising in 1942.²⁴ Later, during the American war, the National Liberation Front leader and military commander Nguyễn Thị Định seized the public imagination because she had suffered so much in her personal life; her husband had been killed by the French and she was separated from her child for the duration of the war.²⁵ Many heroes and heroines at the local level were also recognized by the state for their contributions to the nation, their bravery, and their noble sacrifices. In Quang xã, a former high-ranking cadre qualified as a charismatic and possibly heroic figure in the eyes of local population. Mrs. Lê Minh Châu had served as an underground Việt Minh liaison operative during the French war, leading to her arrest and incarceration in Hanoi. Later released, she became an official in the new Communist government in the xã, eventually rising to the position of president of the Women's Association. When I first met her in the offices of the xã, male cadres kept dropping by and interrupting the proceedings to pay their respects, treating her with unusual deference. Although she considered herself "just a peasant," she had been promoted to the district during the American War after her posts in the xã, suggesting that her well-regarded performance at the local level had led to the higher-level appointment.

As we shall see, the statist values of gendered revolutionary consciousness and heroism introduced by Phan and Hồ Chí Minh became instilled among the populace of Quang xã during 30 years of war against the French and then the United States. The discourses of gendered heroic exemplarity and saving the nation, along with the notions of revolutionary morality (*đạo đức cách mạng*) and the just cause (*chính nghĩa*) and the myths of national purity, collective unity, and brotherhood/sisterhood (the cult of *đồng bào*), combined

to impart a new collective morality to the people of the Red River delta.²⁶ These new discourses, including the notion of gender equality, were essential elements in the formation of citizenship and revolutionary fraternity in building a new nation and independent state in Vietnam.²⁷ In this sense, citizen subject-making in Quang xã actually required the acceptance of new gendered subjectivities to actively claim one's participation in the new national community. Through their revolutionary discourses, the Communist Party and affiliated mass organizations instructed the populace in the ethical pieties of revolutionary thought and action. Using emulation techniques and mass mobilization, the party also tried to imbue the people of the Red River delta with a new consciousness by stressing simpler lifestyles as the first step to a new life (*đời sống mới*.) The party urged peasants to cut back on ceremonial expenses, to improve village sanitary conditions (using clean water, building latrines), and to practice thrift. It targeted women in particular to practice simple lifestyles, observe "correct" behavior, and conduct honest market and trading activities.

Gender and Revolutionary Activities in Quang Xã during the French War (1945–1954)

In Quang xã, the Việt Minh first targeted women for revolutionary mobilization and political recruitment in 1944 when Việt Minh activists started to organize women's and youth salvation associations in the xã. By early 1945, xã men and women had also joined Việt Minh "armed propaganda" activities, resulting in four men's guerilla bands (*đội đội nam tự vệ*) and one women's guerilla unit (*trung đội nữ tự vệ*).²⁸ According to the party history of the xã, the Women's Association for National Salvation (*Hội Phụ Nữ Cứu Quốc*), the Youth Salvation Association, and the self-defense units mobilized the population to seize power from the colonial elite in August 1945.²⁹ An activist from the district assumed the leadership of the xã and formed a Provisional Revolutionary People's Committee. Women's Associations were set up in every *xóm* (which the *thôn* were called at that time), each with its own leadership.³⁰

The first revolutionary government in the xã (1945–1947) included women as heads of Health Care and the Women's Association (two out of seven positions). Henceforth, women in Quang xã would continue to serve in these gender-designated positions, but would eventually also hold other posts, including the party secretary and *chủ tịch* (president of the People's Committee).

The Provisional Revolutionary People's Committee used the Women's Association to carry out the struggle on three fronts: against famine, illiteracy, and foreign aggression. One of the first tasks of the Committee was to stabilize the people's living conditions in the wake of the disastrous famine of May 1945. Ten people had died in Quang xã that month, and 50 more would succumb to famine-related diseases the following October when floods destroyed the autumn crop. According to the party history, xã residents were

mobilized into labor teams to dig drainage ditches and canals, and a New Life movement was launched to encourage thrift and reduce ceremonial expenses. The well-off were asked to contribute to the new government's Gold Week (*Tuần lễ vàng*) to support the resistance. *Xã* residents also voted for their provincial representatives in the National Assembly elections in January 1946.³¹ Local men were urged to join the Việt Minh army in a March to the South (*Nam Tiến*) military drive.

These activities resulted in a “steady awakening in nationalism and a growing attachment to the fledgling Democratic Republic of Vietnam,” according to the *xã* history. But the French, having retaken Hanoi in late 1946, were intent on wiping out the revolutionary movement. Quang *xã* lay to the south along Route 1, a communications and military corridor crucial to the defenses of Hanoi. In December 1946, Hồ Chí Minh issued an appeal for a nationwide War of Resistance against the French. Việt Minh activists in the *xã* prepared to carry out the “empty gardens, empty houses” (*vườn không, nhà trống*) policy of the party to stop the French advance. In Quang *xã*, the bridge over the Tô Lịch River was blown up, and in February 1947 the first French advance into the *xã* was repulsed by guerillas. In March, however, a French armored column drove through the *xã*'s main road and fired into the thatched-roofed houses along the road, destroying 200 houses and killing 23 people. French troops occupied the town hall (*đình*), a nearby temple, the Memorial House, and market stalls.³² The Việt Minh then ambushed 40 French troops in nearby Hà Đông town, which gave the resistance in Quang *xã* a “shining example of heroic struggle,” according to the party-written history.³³ Nonetheless, the *xã* remained under French military occupation until 1954, with troops stationed at two posts in the village.

After the French reoccupation of the *xã* in 1947, the revolutionary movement went underground. Quang families sympathetic to the Việt Minh helped shelter revolutionary cadres and maintained liaison and communication links between the *xã* and revolutionary bases in Hà Đông province. When the French military tried to conscript local men for the auxiliary French forces, pro-Việt Minh women spearheaded anti-conscription movements and provided cover for Việt Minh reconnaissance and guerilla activities. Market women in particular were valuable liaison agents and spies, and one market woman, Mrs. Vũ Thị Trang, famous for her meat pies, assisted the movement undetected over a period of years.

The outline of the new governance structure established by the Việt Minh in Quang *xã* from 1945–1947 set up a new and explicit gender regime in the form of new organizations, new personnel assigned to them, and new political discourses.³⁴ Although this gender regime would become more fully developed during the American war, when the *xã* was under complete Communist control, the parameters of the new system started to emerge during the first resistance war. When fully developed, this gender regime was based on the political organization of the mass associations controlled by the party as well as on the mobilization/emulation techniques and political activities generated

by these organizations. It consisted of a web of organizations and activities with specific organizational, political, and ideological and discursive features. The regime defined gender in particular ways and set the parameters for how to discuss and think about it. “Gender equality” (*bình đẳng nam nữ*) was defined as incorporating women along with men as citizens in a new vision of the political community. Women were to participate equally in the building of the new society through revolutionary action and patriotic endeavors. As such, gender equality was conceived in the Engelsian sense of “emancipation” – liberation through mobilization and later collective labor. During the resistance wars, mobilization campaigns and political activities drew women into public activities to the end of making them “equal” with men in society. Gender equality was thus not viewed as a function of individual equality for women nor as empowering them on the basis of their own agenda and organizational initiative.

The organizations in the gender regime managed, mobilized, and enforced gender activities. As such, gender became a prime tool for the exercise of revolutionary power. Starting with the French war, the gender regime was primarily based on the Women’s Association, in alliance with the party. Policies specifically relating to women were channeled through the Women’s Association. Most, though not all, of the activities of the Women’s Association were organized into political campaigns and emulation contests. Instructions for launching these campaigns or movements (*phong trào*) mainly came from the central government and the district, but the local party organization also provided guidance for implementation.

The Communist Party and the Women’s Association began to establish this gender regime in Quang xã during the first resistance war against the French, although it did not fully function until the American war. It was instituted and maintained in four ways: (1) generating the goals and activities of the regime; (2) identifying, recruiting, and promoting women to fill administrative and leadership positions as a result of these activities; (3) setting discursive parameters or political lines for women’s activities; and (4) promoting a new model of feminine behavior that all women, especially women cadres, were urged to follow.

The gender regime was based on the assumption that the political preconditions for women’s emancipation (*giải phóng phụ nữ*) were the elimination of foreign rule, the landlord class, and the capitalist system. But gender equality, always defined as a function of state power, also relied on mobilization techniques and approaches that attempted to manage women’s lives both in the family and in the public arena. The gender regime also sought to tailor gendered political subjectivity and influence how people positioned themselves as gendered subjects. Finally, gender equality was defined as the liberation of women from the shackles of the family, by which means they would be able to achieve their full potential by serving the state. The model for revolutionary and patriotic woman had thus started to take shape in Quang xã as early as the August Revolution. From the beginning, the model woman

was defined as loyal to the Communist Party and to the country, devoted to her husband and to her family, skillful in housework, dedicated to raising her children well, and performing as a good worker in the family economy. In addition, she followed the law and implemented party policies correctly, maintained good relations with other family members, and joined in public activities when asked to do so. Feminine exemplars (*gwong mẫu*) set an example for others to follow. The Women's Association's history of the *xã* refers to exemplary revolutionary women (*gwong bà mẹ* or "model mothers") as those who fed and sheltered revolutionary cadres during the resistance war against the French. During the American war, these *gwong bà mẹ* included mothers who from 1964 onwards had sent three or more children to fight against the United States.

During both resistance wars, the ideals of heroism, stalwartness, and resourcefulness would become the new feminine standards. Revolutionary heroism stressed sacrifice and service to family and country, while "bourgeois" or urban indulgence was frowned upon. Revolutionary womanliness entailed conceptions of femininity based on civic consciousness, military duty, and a heightened sense of responsibility to the family. "Good" women citizens were skillful, resourceful, and respectful. New institutions in Quang *xã* reinforced these new notions of femininity, while exemplary women in the *xã* provided "shining examples" (*tám gwong sáng*) of womanly accomplishment for others to follow.

Gender, Military Violence, and Class Struggle under French Occupation

When the *xã*'s party historians wrote about the savagery and brutality of the French between 1947–1954, when the *xã* was a contested zone between the French and their allies and the underground guerilla forces, they explicitly used gendered discourses to condemn the victimization and terrorizing of the Vietnamese people and to convey their sense of outrage. Attacks upon women's virtue by colonial degradations constituted a longstanding grievance in Communist revolutionary writings. Hồ Chí Minh had attacked colonialism as an act of sadistic gendered violence on colonized subjects, pointing to routine rapes, torture, and even murders of women for minor infractions.³⁵ Quang *xã*'s party history similarly claimed that *xã* women were endangered by the depraved attentions of French soldiers who "strayed" from their barracks in drunken rampages and went on the lookout for women, referring to several notorious incidents in which local women were attacked and raped by marauding soldiers, both French and African (recruited from French colonies in West Africa). Prostitution, gambling, brawls, and drunkenness allegedly accompanied the presence of these soldiers in the *xã*. These themes are mentioned often enough in the *xã* history to merit attention, and they demonstrate how post-colonial discourses are often tied to portrayals of gendered violence and colonial victimization.

Gendered and familial discourses also run through the party's narrative of the revolutionary struggle against French military violence in the *xã* during 1947–1954. According to the *xã* history, as soon as the French reestablished control, they revived the colonial Council of Family Clans (*Hội đồng tộc biểu*) and the Committee of Village Affairs (*Hội đồng hương chính*), composed of landlords and the pro-colonial elite. The French started conscripting local men into the French Civil Guards to staff their two military posts. Village revolutionaries dispersed but came back to the *xã* for operations, in line with the Việt Minh policy to “cling to their home villages” (*bám đất, bám dân*) and build up the resistance movement. In August 1947, the French captured 86 guerilla fighters and brought them into the *xã*. Soldiers tied them up, pushed them into a trench, and shot them. According to the party history, “This was the most savage killing carried out so far, which the people of Quang xã would long remember.”³⁶

In 1948, a large band of guerrillas harassed French troops and carried out propaganda activities in Quang market and the main road, targeting the Civil Guards. In March 1948, guerillas attacked one of the French posts and Quang jail, releasing 48 prisoners and seizing numerous arms. A Việt Minh intelligence group (*báo quân*) was sent into the *xã* to develop the guerilla movement and “strengthen the party.” Guerillas were also active in nearby villages, where they destroyed six pro-French Committees of Village Affairs. As a result, officials in the Quang Committee of Village Affairs were forced to sleep in the French military compound for protection. In May 1949, guerillas again attacked the French post, freed the Civil Guards, and seized more arms. They staged two assassination attempts on the pro-French canton chief, but he escaped.

Retaliation was swift and severe. In April, 1949, a French mobile brigade entered the *xã* and arrested 24 guerillas, including Nguyễn Đăng Sơn from the intelligence unit, a Việt Minh military cadre who was born in the *xã*. The French carried out his public execution in Quang Market. He was said to have shouted, “Long live the Indochinese Communist Party, long live Hồ Chí Minh” before he died. According to the *xã* history, his wife and three-year-old child witnessed this event. The *xã* history notes that “his faithful wife refused to remarry,” an invocation of classical Confucian celebrations of chaste widowhood.³⁷ Son's daughter later became an official in the *xã* Women's Association and lost her own husband during the second resistance war.³⁸

Local guerillas then assassinated the newly appointed canton chief in Quang market. According to the party history, the French caught one of them, cut off his head, and displayed it in the market. The resistance movement was still strong, however, and core activists continued to operate in the *xã*. In January 1950, *xã* guerillas participated in the Việt Minh attack on Bạch Mai airfield, destroying 25 planes and gasoline storage tanks. But then the French, through an informer, discovered the remaining *xã* militants in Quang An pagoda, summarily executed them, and displayed their ears in Quang market to “terrorize the population.”

The French rounded up more local men for police and auxiliary military functions. In 1952, French troops made the inhabitants of the *xã* rebuild Quang bridge over the Tô Lịch. French soldiers were able to patrol the streets and alleyways in relative security; although Việt Minh armed propaganda brigades still operated in the area, virtually all the Communist Party cadres in Quang *xã* and families who protected them (*gia đình cơ sở*) had been killed or forced to leave the *xã*.³⁹ These experiences of violence and intimidation under French military occupation undoubtedly heightened peasant women's commitment to the resistance movement as well as their later political involvement during the American war.

Many years later, in 1996, 70-year-old Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Phương remembered the horror and panic experienced by her family during the French war:

When the enemy came, they forced [my husband] into the army, as a French "partisan." When our forces came, he was told to go to the Mạo Khương coal mine. He died on his way home, we don't know where. . . . [He was killed by the French. A few days later she gave birth to a son.] This house was left to us by our grandparents. My mother-in-law [re]built it on the land left by our elders. When the enemy came, they had totally dismantled and destroyed it. . . . The enemy forces arrested my father-in-law and mother-in-law and took them for detention in the mint (*nhà tiền*). On the 4th of May, my father-in-law was still alive when we brought him food. On the 5th he was dead. That was in 1948. My mother-in-law passed away in 1983. My mother and father lived nearby. When I went to the rear, the enemy came and arrested my parents. They took my father to the post there. The post was attacked by our men, and he died in that attack.⁴⁰

In July 1954, following their victory at Điện Biên Phủ, the Việt Minh returned to Quang *xã* and took over the government. The pro-French Committee of Village Affairs handed over their village seals and files to the new Việt Minh authorities, male and female cadres sent in from the district, although some former militants from the *xã* also apparently returned. Many landlords and French collaborators, but not all, had fled to the south, but the last French soldier did not leave until October 1954.⁴¹ Some Civil Guards stayed; others went south. The new People's Committee released 152 prisoners in Quang jail.

With the reassertion of Việt Minh control, gender became an issue in the land reform movement launched by the Communist Party in 1956. By breaking the power of the landlord class, the party wished to empower poor peasants and women, redistribute wealth, and substitute its own institutional structure in place of the kin-based landlord class for governing the villages.⁴² Land reform was thus an attempt to transform the economic basis of the new state and establish a new social and political structure. The Quang party history claims that 70 percent of "all peasants" were landless

by the end of the colonial period. Women did as much or more farming than men, and access to land meant economic survival for their families. The Women's Association history claims that *xã* women were very active during the land reform, referring to them as the "mainstays" (*nòng cốt*) of the movement.⁴³

According to Mrs. Châu, there were two big landlords in Quang *xã*, one of whom was classified as a "traitor" and the other as a "resistance landlord" because one of his sons had fought with the Việt Minh.⁴⁴ Of the landlords' ricefields, 150 *mẫu* (one *mẫu* = 360 sq. meters) were confiscated in Wave Five of the reform, along with 250 *mẫu* belonging to *giáp* (male peer-group) organizations in the *xóm* (pre-*thôn* units).⁴⁵ In all, 600 *mẫu* of land were expropriated and assigned to 2,500 landless peasants, averaging 1 *sào* 7 *thước* (528 sq. meters) per worker.⁴⁶ The houses, buffaloes, and agricultural equipment of the landlords and former colonial officials were also confiscated and redistributed to the peasantry on the basis of social classifications drawn up by a land reform team sent from outside the village.⁴⁷

According to the party history, seven landlords *cum* "tyrants" were put on trial, but this source does not say what happened to them other than to note that former colonial officials and soldiers were sent to "reeducation." Trials were held in the town hall (*đình*), two clan shrines, and the former military training ground at the end of the *xã*. Serving as "the judge and the peasants the jury," the land reform team used the land reform process to "fan up hatred towards the former ruling elite," which included former village officials, French collaborators, and "puppet" soldiers.⁴⁸ The party mobilized peasant women to take part in these denunciations. The land reform team ignited class struggle with the slogan, "Down with landlords; let us firmly overthrow the landlords and local tyrants; the peasants must give an account of their suffering and rise up" and carried out a policy they described as relying on the poor and landless peasants, acting in solidarity with the middle peasants and in cooperation with the rich peasants, overthrowing the landlord class, and giving land to the working peasants.⁴⁹

Socialist Power and Gender Politics during the American War (1954–1975)

As elsewhere in the Red River delta, the land reform had been carried out in a hasty and ideologically extremist manner, which created a setback for the new authorities. According to Quang *xã*'s party history, the land reform team was composed of "outsiders," which led them to make erroneous class classifications. They arrested most of the first People's Committee, including the *chủ tịch*, who were former Việt Minh resistance fighters, on the grounds they were members of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party (*Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng*). Taking over the leadership of the *xã*, the land reform team disbanded the People's Committee altogether, and no one dared challenge its authority.⁵⁰

The land reform in other *xã* in the delta had elevated poor peasant women to leadership positions, and when the party began to draw back from the “classism” and extremist actions of the land reform, these women were discredited.⁵¹ Quang *xã*’s party history only relates that in 1957, the first People’s Committee officials were exonerated and released from jail during the Rectification of Errors campaign and a new People’s Committee was elected, which included two women. There is no mention of a power struggle between former and new cadres or attempts to settle scores against newly elevated women leaders. Nor is the ratio of former to new cadres following the Rectification of Errors Campaign clear, although the *xã*’s branch of the party never abandoned its policy of promoting women to leadership positions, which is consistent with reports from other *xã*.

Following the Rectification of Errors Campaign, the post-land-reform leadership had to deal with the fear and division sown by the land reform. *Xã* officials were obliged to contact revolutionary families, demobilized soldiers, and former guerilla fighters to promise that mistakes would be corrected and land classifications would be changed, according to the party history. This source claims the new regime still lacked a solid core of cadres in the village and “failed to assert its authority.” Some of the cadres lacked the qualifications for running the *xã*, as they had virtually no education and were illiterate.⁵² The continuing presence of some of the former elite in the village had undermined the government. Prolonged drought in the spring of 1955 produced a poor crop, severely challenging the first administration, but the People’s Committee organized an emulation campaign in 1956 that apparently produced greater yields.

Following the land reform and subsequent rectification campaign, Thanh Trì district finally gave Quang *xã* permission to set up an autonomous party cell, comprising nine members, including two women. The new party branch (*đảng ủy*) and People’s Committee (*Ủy ban nhân dân*) were henceforth the governing institutions in the *xã*. The head of the People’s Committee remained the *chủ tịch*, who along with the party chief (*bí thư đảng ủy*) and the head of the security office (*công an*) were the top three officials in the *xã*. The party branch and the People’s Committee quickly developed the mass organizations throughout the *xã*: the Women’s Association, the Peasants’ Association, the Youth Association, the Veterans’ Association, and the Old Peoples’ Association. These organizations spun out from party headquarters to each of the *xóm* (pre-*thôn* units) and soon enveloped all facets of *xã* social life.⁵³

After the Việt Minh returned to Quang *xã* in 1954, it took three years for the new regime to consolidate its control. In stabilizing its position, the party tried to deepen and strengthen the gender regime. New land policies, mass organization activities, emulation movements, electoral and political campaigns, and military recruitment were means that the party used to both consolidate its control and to extend the gender regime. Women were included as political cadres in the *xã*’s People’s Committee in 1954 and 1957, most

of them peasant activists who had distinguished themselves in the resistance war against the French or during the land reform. Four women who had leading roles in the land reform subsequently became party members when the party cell was established in the *xã* in 1956. Mrs. Hoàng Thị Xuân became a party member in 1958, and went on to become a leading cadre during the post-land reform Rectification Campaign.

As it consolidated control, the party turned its attention to family reform. The legal efforts of the *xã*'s gender regime were directed toward reforming the "feudal family" and its worst features, such as polygamy, child marriage, and elaborate marriage ceremonies. The patriarchal power of the clans in the *xã* had been broken up by depriving them of their land. The most powerful lineages, which had controlled village life and politics, were deprived of their economic basis and lost their influence. As the heads of land-based lineages, men also lost much of their economic power. The party's cultural line focused on curtailing the private sphere of the family, suppressing individualism, fostering revolutionary awakening (*giác ngộ cách mạng*) and the revolutionary capacity to "let go of binding ties."⁵⁴ With the advent of the war against the United States, the party hardened its socialist policies, suppressed dissent, and strove to achieve a unified "resistance culture."⁵⁵

As to women's citizenship rights under the new regime, women were given voting rights along with men, and the party urged them to participate in political activities and in leadership positions if possible. As part of this process, the party urged women to voice their own opinions (*ý kiến riêng của mình*) rather than those of their male relatives. Mrs. Châu indicated to me that the party had also given women the opportunity to serve in official functions (*công tác*). Women's presence in the public arena was supported by the state, which encouraged them to exercise their civic responsibilities. Although some may have privately denigrated women's administrative positions or ridiculed their authority, many of the men in the *xã* recounted in their conversations with me that they acquired genuine admiration and gratitude for the women who took charge of the *xã*, especially during the American war. Women also told me that their own self-confidence rose as they proved their mettle, and going to the fields to work together in the cooperative rice paddies gave them a sense of social contribution and solidarity.

Following the land reform, as *xã* women related in their talks with me, the party had moved quickly to collectivize agriculture. The party initially urged the peasants to join mutual-aid production teams based in the *xóm*, but some adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward the new cooperativization policy. According to a party report, "It was not easy to make peasants who had just been given land to abandon their land and give it to the agricultural cooperative." Opponents spread rumors that cooperatives would lead to communal marriages:

The enemy used many propaganda tricks and distortions to undermine the policy of the Party (*chủ trương của Đảng*). At that time, the peasants

listened to the rumor that if you joined the agricultural cooperative, you could not go anywhere; the cooperative meant “all men are husbands of all women” (*công vợ công chồng*); all personal property would become public. A lot of people were deceived by the enemy, so before they were forced (*bắt buộc*) to join the cooperative, they cut down their fruit trees, killed their animals, and stuffed themselves with food, etc. A lot of people thought about quitting farming and going into trading (*đi buôn*).⁵⁶

According to the official *xã* history, the peasants finally joined the cooperative’s work teams because their consciousness was awakened (*nhằm giác ngộ*). By 1959, six agricultural cooperatives had been set up in the *xã*, based on *xóm* divisions. By 1963, 493 out of 544 households (2,421 out of 2,655 people) had joined the cooperatives. This number increased to 527 out of 538 households in 1967. Cooperatives were presented to the populace as a way to increase yields, and *xã* peasants staffed their managerial boards.

Mrs. Châu recalled how women worked together in the fields of the agricultural cooperatives during the American war:

When the bell rang, everyone left their houses to go to work in the [cooperative] fields. Women were like sisters – you could ask them to do anything and they would do it [*nhật tình chăm chỉ*]. Women practiced solidarity with one another (*đoàn kết với nhau*) to solve problems and help each other. They tried hard to fulfill their responsibilities. They were grateful to the country and the party. People in our *xã* were very poor; most didn’t have land. They had worked for landlords and traded fruit and vegetables (*buôn bán rau quả*). The land reform changed their lives.⁵⁷

By 1960 and the start of the war against the United States, gender activities, economic production, and military mobilization had become firmly linked in the *xã*. Women started to assume official functions in agricultural production, filling most of the managerial positions in the cooperative from 1960 to 1975. The *xã*’s cooperatives were required to supply a quota of products to the state before they addressed local consumption needs. The *xã* reportedly not only met its quota (set by the district) each year but tried to exceed it. One of the five cooperatives in the *xã* was awarded the *Quyết Thắng* (Determined to Win) distinction for every year from 1969 to 1972. The coveted *Chiến sĩ thi đua* (Emulation Fighter) award for outstanding achievement in various fields was awarded to four women in the *xã*. Women’s political participation and leadership were responsible for these agricultural gains and for educational improvements. In 1958, the *xã* claimed it could provide both elementary and middle school (Cấp II) education for all its children.⁵⁸ In the 1960s, Quang *xã* was rated by the greater city of Hanoi as having among the best nurseries and schools in the district. At the same time, the party history claims women leaders were “weak in technical expertise”

and unqualified for their tasks, and some were accused of authoritarian management and of unfairly distributing work points. This source also notes that there were few “resources,” presumably meaning agricultural inputs, and yields remained low.

Nonetheless, the “Green Revolution” came to the *xã* in the 1960s as women filled the ranks of the agricultural cadres of the *xã*. New rice strains and subsidiary crops were introduced; fertilizers, both chemical and organic, were applied and mechanization was introduced. A new irrigation system allowed the *xã* to effectively manage its water problems and cope with perennial floods and drought. Pumping stations were built at several locations along the Tô Lịch, and for the first time water was pumped to the fields. The fields started to produce two crops a year. Besides these major works, *xã* officials also carried out an electrification program in the 1960s.

Agrarian reform and cooperativization in Quang *xã* produced economic benefits, according to a reputable economic report, laying the groundwork for later economic progress.⁵⁹ The standard of living of most families improved, according to another report.⁶⁰ Half the households had new brick houses with three to four rooms. Most houses were furnished with a few pieces of furniture, mosquito nets, blankets, and one or two bicycles. The second report claimed almost everyone had a new outhouse, a well, and a clean source of water. Most families were also able to build new brick courtyards. The party history claims that average paddy consumption increased. In 1962, consumption was 18 kg paddy a person per month, close to the 20 kg considered sufficient for nutritional needs, and reputedly increased to 21 kg per month in 1964. The *xã* history also notes, however, that in 1964, “living conditions were less than adequate.”⁶¹

In addition to women’s role in collective agriculture, household plots run by women continued to serve important economic functions in Quang *xã*. During the American war, household plots presumably produced the bulk of food products for *xã* families, as they did elsewhere.⁶² Women almost exclusively farmed these plots, which produced vegetables, fruits, and even rice for family larders. Collective agriculture had high quotas of mandatory deliveries to the state; when supplies were low, the cooperative depended on households to feed their members from their own private plots. The vital economic role of the women’s household plots further underscored the state’s reliance on women and the family during the war years.⁶³

During the American war period, the main features of the gender regime in the *xã* were collectivization, mass organization activities, and emulation movements. Above all, agricultural improvements allowed the party to extend and strengthen the gender regime. Building the party, improving agriculture, and strengthening the gender regime went hand in hand. After a rocky start, in 1960 nine new members were inducted into the party (in addition to the original nine), three of whom were women. By 1964, the party branch in the *xã* comprised 47 members. In 1961, 20 new men and women party members in the *xã* were sent to agricultural training courses in the district. Gains in

party membership enabled the party to both increase women's recruitment and focus on priority concerns.⁶⁴

The first and only woman to become *chủ tịch* of the *xã*, Mrs. Phan Thị Hiền, did so during this period. Mrs. Ngô Thanh Vân would serve as party secretary from 1987 to 1993. She achieved her position because of her skills as a farmer and her work in the agricultural cooperative. Other *xã* women, including Mrs. Châu, as noted earlier, who performed well at the *xã* level, subsequently moved up to the district to assume positions on the district party committee, the district People's Council, and the district Youth Association.⁶⁵

Emulation movements of the period focused on adult literacy and improving production. Women peasants were targeted in "surging ahead in fulfilling the 5-year plan" and the Five Goods emulation movements. Potential women cadres were identified in movements such as the Drive against Drought and Saving the Ricefields, the Agricultural Tax Movement, and the Rectification of Errors Movement, and among those who went in to the army. Women who had been awarded *giấy khen* (praiseworthy citations) were selected to become party or government cadres. Women who performed well in emulation activities were also asked to join the mass organizations and/or the party.

The revolutionary gender regime was intensified in 1966 as the *xã* went into an increased war footing. All men of military age were registered for military service. In 1968, the *xã* sent 38 men to the front, while 230 residents served in the army, 94 were guerilla fighters, and 136 were militia members. In 1969, out of 495 guerilla fighters and militia, 319 were women and 176 were men. (More women than men joined local units, as most men went into active duty and left the *xã*.) The cooperatives increasingly assumed many of the political and military tasks of the *xã*. By the mid-1960s, the cooperatives had their own militia and guerilla units.⁶⁶

Both men and women in Quang *xã* participated much more fully in the party's military policies than during the anti-French resistance. From 1960 onwards, Quang *xã*'s proximity to Hanoi made it vital to the city's defense and the war effort of the north.⁶⁷ Military warehouses and arms factories were built in the 1960s as the *xã* became an important military hub, serving as the base for an anti-aircraft artillery unit comprising Missile Units 257, 263, and 241 from the Hanoi garrison responsible for defending Hanoi during US air attacks. Thanh Tri district was one of the most heavily bombed districts in the area around Hanoi, probably because it was a communications and logistics center and a depot for troops and military supplies going south.

The American war subjected the people of Quang *xã* to "terror from the skies" and direct hits from US B-52s and other aircraft. The *xã* was bombed five times from 1966 to 1972, including the Christmas bombings of December 1972 that targeted Hanoi and Haiphong. One American plane was shot down in April 1966 and a B-52 bomber in December 1972. In 1972, an American airman was captured and taken to the local prison.⁶⁸ In all, 54 men and women from Quang *xã* would lose their lives during the American war. A martyrs'

cemetery near Quang market commemorates their sacrifice, as well as those who died during the French war.

Women mobilized as “leading elements” (*nòng cốt*) built underground shelters in preparation for bombing attacks and joined the local village militia, guerilla forces, and the regular army. One young woman joined the Volunteer Youth Brigade (*Thanh Niên Xung Phong*) and served on the Hồ Chí Minh Trail. Women took over many of the administrative positions in the *xã* during the American war, although their numbers never matched those of the men. The Women’s Association became the most important mass organization at this time. Mrs. Lê Thị Thuý, the head of the Association, served in that capacity for 15 years and gained a reputation as the best Woman’s Association director in Thanh Trì district. On that basis, she was later promoted to the district. In addition to the Women’s Association, other women joined the *xã* party committee, the People’s Council, and other branches of the *xã* administration. In 1965 elections to the People’s Committee produced two women officials out of seven on the Administrative Committee of the *xã*.⁶⁹

When Mrs. Hiền was *chủ tịch*, she also became political commissar of the armed forces in the *xã*, a new responsibility for a woman. The heads of party cells were also political commissars of military units at the company and platoon level. Most of these were men, but women could serve in these posts as well. The army trained *xã* residents in anti-aircraft combat and erected watchtowers to track movements of US planes and sound air alerts. *Xã* teams were organized for medical relief for bombing victims, firefighting, bomb squads, and building air raid shelters. During the American war, 10 percent of the population of Quang *xã* joined the army, a relatively high figure for the district. In 1971 a battalion of the regular army from Hanoi was stationed in the *xã* to coordinate with 12 local militia units in case the United States invaded North Vietnam.⁷⁰

During both resistance wars, women who had set good examples (*gwong bà me*) in implementing party policies received awards of praise or distinction from the party and often became candidates for party membership. During the anti-French war, these included women who urged their male relatives to join the Việt Minh and struggled against the conscription of *xã* men into the French army. The history of the *xã* Women’s Association enumerates specific examples of women “exemplars” (*điển hình*) during the two wars and in political campaigns from the 1950s onwards. Between 1954 and 1956, “good representative examples” (*gwong phụ nữ điển hình*) included women who exerted leadership in developing ways to combat drought or flooding in the fields, urging their relatives and neighbors to pay their taxes, and participating in the land reform and agricultural cooperative movements.⁷¹

During the American war, the Women’s Association grew in strength and organizational capacity. The main focus of its activities was mobilizing women “to fulfill women’s responsibility to the household and to the state”

(*đảm việc nước, đảm việc nhà*). This was implemented through the Three Responsibilities Movement (*ba đảm đang*), a major mobilization and emulation campaign in which over 500 *xã* women reportedly participated.⁷² The “three responsibilities” (*ba đảm đang*) were: (1) fighting the enemy (in rear and guerilla functions) and urging male family members to join the army; (2) performing well in production; and (3) being attentive to family matters and raising one’s children well. Taking care of families meant caring for older parents, feeding the family, and educating children. Production, fighting, and rear military tasks were also women’s responsibilities, so that husbands could and would go to the front. This multi-faceted campaign lasted several years, but the formulation “good at housework and working for the state” captures its essence.⁷³

According to its written history, as part of the Three Responsibilities Movement, the Women’s Association carried out a number of subordinate campaigns, such as The Plow Line of the Three Responsibilities Movement (*Đường cây ba đảm đang*) and the Agricultural Emulation Fighters (*Chiến sĩ thi đua nông nghiệp*) campaigns.⁷⁴ Cadres designed emulation contests that set standards (*tiêu chuẩn*) for participants to meet. Women who reached the goal or exceeded it were given awards. Four women in the *xã* distinguished themselves in the Agricultural Emulation Fighters campaign and received awards. Another campaign focused on “anti-US rice jars,” whereby families were urged to put a handful of rice in their jar once a day to support the war effort. Some of the campaigns had both production and military features, such the Hold a Rifle in One Hand and a Plow in the Other (*Giỏi tay cây, hay tay súng*) campaign and the New Women Building and Protecting the Fatherland (*Người phụ nữ mới xây dựng và bảo vệ Tổ Quốc*) campaign.⁷⁵

Cadres from the Women’s Association in both the *xã* and the *xóm* played a large role in mobilizing women to participate in these campaigns, according to the Women’s Association history. Encouraging women to urge their husbands and sons to join the army, the Women’s Association also urged wives to promise to “wait faithfully for their husbands to return for more than 10 years, if necessary.” Similar efforts were directed at women to take care of their husbands’ parents, especially their old mothers, while they were away at the front. The goal of women’s mobilization activities in the *xã* was also to serve the military effort of the north both in terms of the specific military needs of the capital area and to ensure that adequate supplies of rice, pork, and vegetables were produced for local needs and for the state. All *xã* in the north had a quota of food products they were obliged to supply to the state at fixed prices. Women were urged to devote their efforts to producing as much food as possible.

Besides these efforts, other organizations mobilized *xã* women for military support in the 1960s, including the Association of Mothers of Fighters (*Hội Mẹ Chiến Sĩ*), which reputedly comprised 300 members. Assisting troops stationed in the *xã* by providing them with food and drink, this association also took care of soldiers when they were ill, did their laundry, and helped

them with weapons maintenance. According to the *xã* party history, these women also served on anti-aerial defense duty.

In sum, during both resistance wars, the new Communist state instituted a new gender order in Quang *xã* on the basis of revolutionary struggle, military mobilization, and new forms of governance. The Communist Party used gender and family discourses to build this order and promote its goals, with women as wives and especially as mothers being central to these formulations. Women started to assume political positions in the *xã* as early as the first revolutionary government in 1945–1947. When the Communists assumed complete control in 1954, the public/domestic divide that emerged under the new system came to comprise, in effect, only two spheres – the widely ubiquitous state sector and the domestic sphere of the family. As a result, state and society became so intertwined that it was difficult to discern the boundaries between the two. During the following American war, women were brought into more administrative functions, while emulation campaigns mobilized village women for economic production and military functions. Women's organizations grew in scope as gender politics, economic production, and military activities became firmly linked. Yet womanhoods centered in the domestic sphere also remained of prime concern to the state. Although their labor in the private sphere was officially invisible, state discourses reveal that women were held responsible for sustaining the household on their own while the men were away at war.

As a result of the resistance wars, the state became a pervasive presence in Quang women's lives. Statehood and revolutionary action were the context for the achievement of women's equality and the emergence of women as political subjects. Women's participation in the public sphere conferred full citizenship rights, although they were confined to the parameters of revolutionary socialism. By the end of the American war, the *xã*'s gender regime was firmly in place as the people of Quang awaited peace.⁷⁶

When I arrived in Quang *xã* in 1995, the passage of 20 years since the end of the American war had not dimmed memories among the people of the village. Although economic reforms since 1986 had increased prosperity and introduced residents to the global age, they had not erased memories of the hardships of war. When I asked, *xã* residents readily talked about their wartime experiences and military service, and the media – newspapers and television – were replete with wartime stories and references. As we shall see through an analysis of *xã* women's responses to a popular film about the war in Chapter 5, state discourses regarding womanhoods and gendered identities continued to have a substantial impact in the *xã* in the mid-1990s. The war was thus still a presence in the *xã* – represented and validated by official functions and commemorations, official observances at the Martyrs Cemetery which was centrally located in front of the *xã*'s administrative offices and next to Quang market, the frequent presence of disabled military veterans, and even the occasional military garb of some party cadres who still wore their olive-green pith helmets.

Conclusion

The origins and development of the revolutionary movement and the birth of an independent state under Communist rule were inextricably linked to images of gender and family embodied and transmitted in conscious state discourses. When the Communists took power in Quang *xã*, gender became a strategic component of Communist revolutionary power and post-colonial governance. During the American war, the party developed a gender order that regulated local gender activities and managed gendered subjectivities. Throughout the two resistance wars (1945–1975), state constructs of womanhoods were imagined and promoted to serve revolutionary, military, and economic goals. Womanhoods also played an essential role in imagining the national community throughout the era of wartime communism.

Through the discourses of equality and liberation, the Communist Party in Quang *xã* promoted new gendered meanings that spanned both the public and private spheres. Gender differences as a whole were de-emphasized and reordered along more androgynous lines. Women worked alongside men in wartime mobilization activities and, during the American war, replaced men in public service and collective labor on the home front. Their “equality” was to be achieved in terms of working in the collective economy and participating in public affairs. Serving in essential public duties during the 30 long years of military conflict, women were brought in as officials and cadres in the party, government, and military. Wartime activities intensified gender politics in Quang *xã*. After 1954, women became employees of the state along with men and were similarly valued for their labor power.⁷⁷ Quang *xã* promoted women into their new roles as workers in the agricultural cooperatives and as cadres in the *xã*’s administration through the discourses of national liberation, women’s emancipation, and class struggle. Although women never achieved full equality with men in the public sphere, the language of power regarding gender that emerged during wartime governance continued to shape gendered subjectivities and conceptions of gender equality in Quang *xã* to the present day.

At the same time, in the private sphere women were hailed by the state for their reproductive roles and for nurturing the family. As mothers, they were responsible for raising and socializing children. It was their political responsibility to make sure their families adhered to the policies of the party, the revolution, and the state. Revolutionary gender politics in Quang *xã* were thus also based on women’s primary responsibility towards the family. Maintaining the family unit was the *sine qua non* of revolutionary and socialist power during both resistance wars, despite radical collectivist discourse to the contrary. The family came to be seen as an emotional and material support system for wartime mobilization purposes. Quang *xã* institutions did everything they could to keep families intact and maintain soldiers’ morale. The party and the Women’s Association focused on giving direct support to families and assisting soldiers’ parents and wives. Party organs encouraged

wives' faithfulness and loyalty to husbands away at war. Thus family and military interests reinforced one another and served to ground new gendered norms in the revolutionary gender paradigm.

As new gendered meanings took shape in the *xã*, the boundaries between the public and private spheres shifted. The state and domestic spheres evolved into a complex set of relationships between the state sphere and the household. The Confucian patriarchal control of women in the family by men was replaced by revolutionary patriarchy, with the Communist Party appropriating many of the patriarchal and paternal functions of the family. The household was redefined in relation to the state or public sphere. The Communist regime weakened the institutional boundaries between the public and private spheres and integrated the household into the wider system of state and political power. What constituted properly gendered behavior became a function of both the public and private spheres. Women began to negotiate their subjectivities in relation to the public sphere and the state for the first time, independently of men and the family. And it was the public sphere that validated new forms of women's work, political activity, and gender relations in the household.

However, the tendency toward greater gender equality during the period of military conflict was coupled with a contradictory trend within which women were designated as a "special" category distinct from men. This approach became institutionalized in the bureaucratic and policy machinery of the *xã*. The attenuation of gender hierarchies in the household led to new gender hierarchies in the public sphere. Here men dominated the powerful institutions of the party, the *xã* and the military. The new Communist state gave women new access to the public arena, but usually on a lesser footing than men. With the return of peace, as the next chapter shows, women began to experience a decline in their public participation as state discourses on the family shifted in line with Vietnam's new economic policies.

Notes

- 1 Women, a powerful symbol for the nation, are connected to the life force of water (*nước*) and thus to the country (also *nước*). Their unending burdens and self-sacrifices for family and country, poignantly captured in this poem, are reflected in the image of impoverished women under the yoke of shoulder poles with water drums on each end (weighing up to 50 pounds each). Only very poor women transport water for sale, and their toes become splayed to balance the terrific strain of the weight.
- 2 See Marr, *Vietnamese Anti-Colonialism*.
- 3 Phan Bội Châu, *Việt Nam*. Phan spent most of his life in exile in Japan and China. Phan Bội Châu's conservative view of women and the family was a form of patriarchal modern nationalism.
- 4 Đặng Thai Mai. See also Vũ Văn Sạch et al. Vũ Hoàn, a leader of the Tonkin Free School, was born in Quang *xã* in the late nineteenth century. The purpose of the Tonkin Free School was to train and educate nationalist political leaders, and its classes included women students.
- 5 Phan Bội Châu, *Việt Nam*.

- 6 Phan Bội Châu, *Tuồng trưng nữ vương: Truyện Phạm Hồng Thái*, discussed in Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*; and Phan Bội Châu, “Bài diên.” Also see Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chủ tịch*.
- 7 Phan Bội Châu, “Hải ngoại.”
- 8 See Trịnh Văn Thảo. The exaltation of ethnic-based unity based on a common ancestry as well as the mythologizing of the land of Vietnam were hallmarks of Phan’s writings.
- 9 Phan Bội Châu, *Vấn đề phụ nữ* and *Việt Nam*. In his speech to the Đồng Khánh women’s school in 1926, Phan advised young women that they were the mothers of the people (*mẹ của quốc dân*) and that the source of Vietnamese civilization lay in their hands (“Bài diên”). As Barlow points out, modern nationalism constructs the term “woman” as a universal category, as it does gender “difference.” Pre-colonial females in Vietnam, as in China, were named in terms of relational categories in the family. The representation of “women’s” interests on the part of political authorities is part of the process of modern state-building. Therefore, “woman” comes into use through the state as a discourse that allows the state to act on behalf of all female citizens. See Barlow 132–160.
- 10 According to Trần Văn Giàu, *Sự phát triển*. In a primary-school manual Phan wrote in 1927, he advised schoolgirls that upon marriage, they would owe allegiance to their husband: “family name Nam, given name Việt” (Phan Bội Châu, *Nữ quốc*). Also see Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 88–113. As Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài points out, “woman” as a political discourse would gain currency in the political debates of the 1930s as a metonymic device to discuss taboo topics such as political maturity and independence.
- 11 Hồ Chí Minh, *Toàn Tập*, 177–254.
- 12 Hồ claimed that women’s passivity stemmed from their maltreatment in the family, which was why they had an inferiority complex and performed poorly in public work. Women themselves, he argued, had to make an effort to catch up with men and lift themselves up. Centuries of feudal customs had held them down, and the arbitrary privileges accorded to men in the aphorism “respect men but disparage women” (*trọng nam khinh nữ*) had to be overcome in their own hearts. See Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chủ tịch*.
- 13 See Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, and Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh. Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh was probably a pseudonym for Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai or another ICP cadre in charge of women’s issues. See Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 235–251, for a general discussion.
- 14 Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chủ tịch*; also Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh.
- 15 Lê Duẩn’s essays on women, in particular, reflect the view that women’s oppression is class-based and stems from bourgeois property relations; only when these are eliminated will women be truly emancipated. Lê Duẩn, “Role and Tasks,” 371–409, and “We Must View,” 111–130. Yet Lê Duẩn’s writings demonstrate a profound contradiction between class-based revolutionary consciousness and an essentialist view of women. In 1959, in a speech to the National Congress of Cadres of Political Work among Women, Lê Duẩn stated, “I think it is in women that we find the essence of our national characteristics. The fine traits of the Vietnamese character are first of all represented in Vietnamese women. I noticed in prison that most of our revolutionaries had fine women as mothers” (quoted in Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Lịch sử*).
- 16 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang. For instance, “Women are essential in pre-serving the race/nation [*đồng giòng đất nước*], lineages, and the family” and “Quang xã women are deeply proud that our party has liberated women from oppression and achieved equal rights for women [*dành quyền bình đẳng*] and protected the Fatherland of Vietnam.”
- 17 Dương Thoa. For Hồ Chí Minh’s role in the Vietnamese revolution, see Quinn-Judge, *Hồ Chí Minh*.

- 18 Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chủ Tịch*.
- 19 Dương Thoa.
- 20 This voluntarist aspect of Communist thinking stressed that women (as well as men) who “woke up” and became steeped in revolutionary consciousness would exemplify the revolutionary love (*tình cảm cách mạng*) that necessarily preceded and motivated revolutionary action. Thus having a right attitude was extremely important.
- 21 Dương Thoa. Postulating a virtuous symmetry between family and society is a classic principle of Confucianism.
- 22 Citing French and Soviet archives, Sophie Quinn-Judge states that Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai was a member of the southern-based Central Committee from 1940 to 1941 and suggests that she was married to Hồ Chí Minh in the 1930s (Quinn-Judge, “Women”). As a representative of the Comintern of the Overseas Bureau of the ICP in the 1930s, Minh Khai complained, “I know that the idea of a woman, even if she is just or has a good political character, does not inspire great confidence. However, I feel that since I have begun working with the comrades here, I have not made any suggestions or begun any activities which are against the principles or the policy of the Party.” Nguyễn Thị Thập and Hà Thị Quế became members of the Central Committee of the Vietnam Workers’ Party in the 1950s. Aside from Hồ Chí Minh, other party leaders hardly provided “shining examples” for others to follow. Lê Duẩn, Secretary General of the Vietnam Workers’ Party from 1976 to 1986, who had effectively led the party since Hồ Chí Minh’s death in 1969, reputedly had two wives during the American war, one in the north and the other in the south.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai was one of the leaders of the ICP uprising in southern Vietnam.
- 25 Nguyễn Thị Định’s memoirs, first serialized in the Hanoi press, have been translated into English. Along with Nguyễn Thị Thập and Hà Thị Quế, Nguyễn Thị Định served as president of the Women’s Union in Hanoi during the wartime years. Although a member of the Central Committee, she never became a member of the Politburo. The first woman to serve in the Politburo was Trương Mỹ Hoa in the 1990s, who was also head of the Women’s Union in that decade.
- 26 See de Tréglodé for a discussion of the moral and ideological features of revolutionary mobilization in the Red River delta during the French and American wars.
- 27 See Kim Ninh for a good discussion of the role of discourse in state-building in revolutionary Vietnam.
- 28 The women’s unit reportedly had 200 members.
- 29 The Vietnamese Nationalist Party or VNQDD was also active in the Hà Đông area, but the party history makes no mention of its presence in the xã, nor how power was seized from the colonial elite. For Việt Minh activities in Hà Đông province, see Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 375–376, 409–410, 472.
- 30 “The Women’s Association for National Salvation and the Youth Association for National Salvation were the core of the struggle leading to the general uprising for seizing power,” according to the official history of the xã.
- 31 Xuân Thủy, Trương Thị Mỹ, and Hoàng Minh Giám were elected from Hà Đông province.
- 32 This temple was Vực temple (*miếu*), which was dedicated to the *thành hoàng* (tutelary deity) Phạm Tu. It was the oldest temple in the xã, on a site apparently dating to the sixth century.
- 33 “Tâm gương dũng cảm, kiên cường.”
- 34 I am using *gender regime* in its general sense of a mode of governance, rule, or management that relies on the building of institutions with specific ideological and discursive features.

- 35 “Colonial sadism is unbelievably widespread and cruel,” Hồ Chí Minh wrote in his important essay, “French Colonialism on Trial,” written in French and published in Paris in 1925, which discussed his views on Vietnamese women and French colonialism at length. Hồ described the colonialists as a bunch of brutes and savages and said there was no humanity or “civilizing mission” in French colonialism, as they claimed. The French freely called native women “whores” and “monkeys”; the colonial police engaged in public beatings of market women just to clear a path into the market. Hồ charged the French had turned the natives into slaves, mercilessly exploiting them in the rubber plantations, coal mines, and construction projects. Starving peasants were left on the roads to die. The French kept all the natives, above all the women, ignorant and stupid. Families who couldn’t pay their taxes saw the whole family shackled in chains, including small children, and marched to the local jail. Where was French humanity when it came to treating the downtrodden, especially women, in the colonies? If the French in France, who had given the world “The Rights of Man,” really understood the extent of colonial brutality in Indochina, surely they would put a stop to it, he argued. (Hồ Chí Minh, *Selected Writings*.)
- 36 The bodies were exhumed in 1958 and moved to the Cemetery of Unknown Martyrs, *Mả Nhị*, in the *xã*.
- 37 According to the party history, “His wife remained faithful (*thùy chung*) in her love for him and did not remarry so that she could raise her child to worship her husband.”
- 38 The execution of Nguyễn Đăng Sơn entered into the revolutionary lore of North Vietnam as a result of the film, *The Military Intelligence Officer from the Tô Lịch River* (*Người quân báo sông Tô*), produced in the 1960s.
- 39 Former local party officials recording the *xã*’s history in 1998 suggested that the Việt Minh policy of “clinging to the home villages” had exposed local guerillas in unstable revolutionary areas such as Quang *xã* to detection, especially through informers. The revolutionary movement was thus evidently undermined by its own policies.
- 40 Mrs. Phuong’s marriage at age 21 was arranged by a go-between. After the death of her husband in 1948, she stayed in the maquis until 1954. Returning home, she remained a widow, although she said her mother-in-law told her she could remarry “if she wished.” Her son joined the army to fight the Americans in 1962, marrying when he returned home and producing four grandchildren. But the family’s economic fortunes remained very poor.
- 41 On October 10, 1954, Communist troops, the People’s Armed Forces, entered Hanoi.
- 42 See Moise.
- 43 During the anti-French war, from 1945 to 1947, the first revolutionary government in the *xã* abolished the colonial head tax, reduced land rents and urged landowners to permit landless peasants to farm their fallow land. *Xã* peasants were presumably aware that the party intended to carry out full-scale land reform.
- 44 Interview with Mrs. Lê Minh Châu, April 17, 1996.
- 45 According to the official history, one landlord owned over 100 *mẫu* of rice land, with the rest holding smaller parcels.
- 46 Lê Vĩnh Quốc and Đỗ Thị Phương.
- 47 According to a former *chủ tịch* who served during the immediate post-war period, there were no executions in Quang *xã*.
- 48 As elsewhere in northern Vietnam, households in the *xã* were classified as “poor,” “middle,” “higher middle,” “rich peasant,” or the “collaborating elite.”
- 49 The party history’s account of the land reform process in the *xã* is fairly consistent with standard published accounts, such as Moise.
- 50 According to the party history, “bad” elements took advantage of the situation to “undermine the prestige of the party.” Landlords allegedly spread rumors that the United States was planning a nuclear attack on North Vietnam; as a result,

government cadres were obliged to personally “provide explanations” to counter these claims. Pro-French elements also encouraged residents to go south. This source also claims that some residents dared not return home for fear of being accused of a crime.

- 51 Moise. In some villages, female cadres were hounded and arrested when former cadres returned to power during the Rectification Campaign.
- 52 A common occurrence, according to Moise.
- 53 The party branch in the *xã* reported to the district, which reported to the city of Hanoi. As the system solidified, the upper levels closely supervised the lower levels and did not give them much leeway. The parallel organization of party and state replicated each other on each level. The party organization controlled the flow upwards and downwards and took precedence over the state organization. Local government in Quang *xã* was highly institutionalized and politically controlled by the upper levels. But the horizontal and vertical lines of political authority in the *xã* found their hub and direction at the district level (i.e., Thanh Trì district).
- 54 Kim Ninh 83–117, 238–242.
- 55 Ibid. Kim Ninh stresses that party ideologues wished to construct the new state on the basis of a total break with the past, creating an integrated and organized society where all citizens enthusiastically served the state. During the American war, the soldier, not the peasant, was the idealized citizen of this new society. In rating the DRV’s success in family reform, Georges Boudarel notes that investigations undertaken in the early 1960s indicated that cases of domestic violence, child marriage, and other contraventions of the new Law on Marriage and the Family (1960) persisted in some parts of northern Vietnam; nonetheless, urban ideas had begun to penetrate the villages.
- 56 Nguyễn Đăng Thường.
- 57 The cooperative work point system, however, discriminated against women, as other cadres told me. Mrs. Châu’s view of women’s liberation was heavily inflected with Buddhist overtones of self-awareness and improvement. When we met a second time in the serene surroundings of Quang pagoda, she explained her philosophy: women could make themselves better persons by individual practice and self-respect. “If you want self-respect you need to live an exemplary life and speak well. Don’t be arrogant” (*Nếu muốn mọi người tôn trọng mình, thì phải sống tốt, nói thật. Không nên kiêu ngạo*). Women therefore needed to liberate themselves first through self-awareness and self-education.
- 58 The Cấp III school in the *xã* was built in 1980.
- 59 Đào Thế Tuấn.
- 60 Lê Vinh Quốc and Đỗ Thị Phương.
- 61 In 1975, all five cooperatives were consolidated into one large cooperative, with 602 *mẫu* of land, 900 laborers (3,304 inhabitants), and a reported average consumption of 29 kg paddy per month. According to an external economic report, the peak economic years in Thanh Trì district were from 1972 to 1980 (Đào Thế Tuấn).
- 62 Paddy was grown on household plots, where yields were two to three times those of the cooperatives (Kerkvliet). Paddy is unmilled rice; yields are usually calculated in paddy in Vietnam.
- 63 During the American war, the household and state sectors became interdependent and one could not function without the other. However, the family economy had no legal or official basis and was theoretically non-existent. See Werner, “Cooperativization.”
- 64 According to Kerkvliet, recruitment drives in Hà Tây province (most of Hà Đông province was incorporated into Hà Tây in the 1960s) targeted women, and by 1967, a third of all party members in Hà Tây were women (Kerkvliet 98).
- 65 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang.

66 Nguyễn Đăng Thường, party history.

67 Thanh Trì district had always been a strategic area because it was the southern gate and line of defense for Hanoi. Route 1 links northern Vietnam with the center and the south. In 1789, Emperor Quang Trung marched through Thanh Trì on his way to seizing the capital city. In the nineteenth century, troops of the Nguyễn dynasty were evidently stationed in the *xã* and the French fortified the defenses of Hanoi along this southern corridor.

68 The French built the prison in 1947 in conjunction with the military post at the strategic crossroads at the end of the *xã*. The Hanoi government took over the prison in 1954, and used it for the overflow from Hỏa Lò prison in Hanoi. During the American war, Quang prison, administered by the central authorities and not the *xã*, occasionally housed US prisoners of war (POWs). Vũ Việt Dũng, head of the MIA office in the Americas Department of the Foreign Ministry, recalled taking Congressman John Kerry to Quang prison in the 1980s to investigate reports of US POWs being held there. He did not find any. Vũ Việt Dũng also recalled that when he was in the army, he had his military training in Quang *xã* on what were reputedly the ancient military training grounds of General Phạm Tu, which was where the French later built their military compound.

69 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang. According to a list of *xã* cadres provided by the Women's Association, there was one woman *chủ tịch* (out of ten) from 1954 to 1975, and 33 women cadres compared to 158 men cadres in other *xã* posts during the same period. Sixty-one women cadres served in the agricultural cooperatives, compared to 233 men; 55 women in the mass associations, compared to 34 men.

70 Nguyễn Đăng Thường.

71 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang.

72 The national Women's Union launched the campaign on March 19, 1965. The Communist Party drew on Confucian notions of women's duties towards the family and the state in this campaign. See Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition*, 192–199, for a discussion of these traditional conceptions.

73 The formulation “*đảm việc nước, đảm việc nhà*” is attributed to Hồ Chí Minh. The Good at Housework (*Đảm việc nhà*) campaigns during the American war built on the New Culture Families campaign during the first resistance war that encouraged women to take good care of their families, raise healthy and well-behaved children, and send their sons to the front.

74 The “plow line” refers to women's replacing men in plowing the ricefields.

75 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang.

76 Hy Văn Lương and Nguyễn Đắc Bằng, relying on data from a village in Vĩnh Phú province, argue that the “male-centered” hierarchy of the colonial and pre-colonial periods in politics and the kinship system remained unchanged despite the revolution, the wartime period, and the land reform's “radical and collectivistic ideology.” Further, they suggest kinship and traditional family structures were important mobilization tools for the Communists that also served to preclude fundamental change in the gender order. The data from Quang *xã* suggest, however, that the power of the clans was broken up by the state, that women left the confinement of the domestic sphere and exercised administrative and political power during the American war, and that the state in effect set the parameters for the new gender order and the public/private divide. Furthermore, as Malarney has pointed out, the state appropriated many of the family's ritual prerogatives, such as weddings, funerals, and death anniversaries, while “familialism” (*chủ nghĩa gia đình*) carried a social stigma. Thus, although kin-centered moral and family discourses were not erased, they became the focus of moral controversy. Malarney's conclusions are based on data from a village in Thanh Trì district.

77 See Werner, “Cooperativization.”

2 Gender and *Đổi Mới* in Quang Xã

In real terms, the emancipation of women involves women seeking a real and positive livelihood, in creating new values, use-values for the society. Today, rice exports are precisely the symbol of the emancipation of rural women, both in the country and internationally, although their monthly income has not much improved. Rural women today labor and produce for their country, as well as for their families and for themselves. In the period of renovation, labor has acquired the character of women's emancipation, as has also emancipation of social labor in general.

Official history of the Vietnamese Women's Union (1996)

After the end of the American war in 1976, Vietnam was reunited as an independent country for the first time since 1884. The euphoria of having finally triumphed in their wars for national liberation was soon eclipsed, however, by the failure of the socialist economy. During the difficult years of the 1980s, food production in Quang xã dropped 35 percent compared to what it had been in 1975. From 1976 to 1985, average income in the xã declined by 50 percent. As such, the availability of food in 1985 was half of what it had been in 1975, lower than the northern average of about 12 kg a month per person.¹ By 1986, the command economy had come under fierce attack, primarily as a result of the profound crisis in agriculture. Consequently, the 6th Party Congress of that year turned to what it termed market socialism to increase agricultural yields and to stimulate the economy. These economic reforms ushered in a new era: *Đổi Mới*, which means “new path,” or economic renovation.

Đổi Mới in Quang Xã

As this chapter shows, *Đổi Mới* led to important changes in the gender politics of Quang xã as well as the realignment between the public and domestic spheres. Local political and economic institutions were reconfigured to meet the exigencies of a market economy as the household became the basis of economic production in the wake of the dismantling of collective agriculture. Although the *Đổi Mới* state continued to promote gender equality, the goal

of gender equity was undermined by development, family, and nationalist discourses. The first decade of *Đổi Mới* in the *xã* was also characterized by the revival of kin networks and other neo-traditionalist practices under official state auspices.

Ten years of *Đổi Mới*, however, had given *xã* residents a perceptibly new lease on life and new hopes for the future, as was clear from my field research and talks with *xã* residents. In the mid-1990s, there was a whiff of prosperity in the air. Economic opportunity beckoned in both the *xã* and the inner city, and families could dream of a life beyond farming. It was now possible to achieve a better life for oneself and a better future for one's children. But memories of food scarcity were still fresh, and the American war had left deep scars. The consequences of more than 30 years of war had been grim. The death toll in Quang *xã* during both resistance wars was 66 and hundreds more returned home disabled. It was the pervasive opinion in the *xã* that the high incidence of birth defects since the war was due to soldiers' exposure to Agent Orange when they had gone south to fight. The women left at home alone to feed their families had also been left to perform strenuous duties in militia and defense work and farm labor and to maintain their enthusiasm during constant political campaigns.

Peace had been restored, but the specter of food scarcity loomed over the *xã* like a sword of Damocles. The darkest years had been the 1980s, when food shortages were endemic. By 1995, according to my conversations with *xã* residents, people still lived on tenterhooks and assessed their economic and employment circumstances in terms of stability or the lack thereof (*ổn định, không ổn định*). They far preferred stability, even with less income, to instability. They said they would rather "work for the state" (receive a salary) than for the "private sector" (with no guaranteed income), as the state was still seen as a source of steady work, with benefits and a pension upon retirement. The socialist failure had not entirely shaken their faith in the state economy. Working for the private sector might bring in more income, but the job could vanish overnight. Fortitude was required to deal with the risk and unpredictability of the market, and their reserves of fortitude had been largely used up. People did not display much faith in being able to get by in the long term if they were out on their own. One member of the family might venture out and try his or her luck in the private sector, but the bedrock of stability was still rice in the larder and state employment. Therefore, holding on to one's agricultural land, no matter how little, and having one adult working in the state sector was a strategy that most families firmly believed in, no matter how much "the market" beckoned.

The economic anxieties that most families felt in the early years of *Đổi Mới* inevitably colored their participation in *xã* politics and their relationship to the state. The activities of the mass organizations, a salient feature of revolutionary and wartime politics, started to recede in level and intensity. On the whole, women's political participation in the *xã* declined during the first decade of *Đổi Mới*, as it did in other northern villages.² Although Mrs.

Ngô Thanh Vân served as party secretary from 1987 to 1993, the post-war posts of *chủ tịch* (president) of the People's Committee and the head of the security forces (*công an*) were held by returning military veterans. In 1995–1996, only one woman served on the People's Committee, and she was from the same lineage as its *chủ tịch*. In 1996, three out of ten members of the party's executive committee cell were women, all of whom were long-standing cadres. In general, fewer women served in leadership posts than in the past, both because they were not being actively promoted and because they were far less inclined to seek such posts. Former women leaders expressed the view to me that even when women gained access to the political arena, it was questionable whether they could exercise power as effectively as men.³ The public equality that the state claimed to have achieved was thus being undermined by post-war politics.

Women officials seemed to accept their declining political role. Former cadres claimed that they preferred not to compete with men, who anyway had more education and professional qualifications than they did. *Đổi Mới* and the economic opening of the market required that a *chủ tịch* have a high school education or university training, they said. But former women leaders were clearly also very tired. They had served the state for many years and now wanted to devote their energies to improving their families' standard of living. When asked why they no longer made the effort to be involved in "social work," these former cadres were somewhat diffident, claiming they could not be bothered dealing with "difficult" men who were constantly criticizing them and harping on their failings.⁴

In terms of women's leadership abilities, *xã* residents voiced the opinion that women had the ability to hold political office and be leaders just as men. They thus judged the capability of women cadres as similar to men's. But aside from their intelligence and political skills, women leaders were further evaluated according to whether they were upstanding citizens and of good character (*đạo đức*). The character and morality of women were subject to more stringent rules than men. Women leaders were always carefully scrutinized in terms of their personal virtue and whether they were attentive to their families or not, apart from their public responsibilities. Men were given much more latitude on these criteria. Thus although women had gained acceptance as political leaders in the *xã*, the double standard in judging their character still prevailed. As Mrs. Đỗ Thị Nga, a *xã* cadre, told me,

Women have to try hard and bring all of their ability to do what they say, and only then will they be given prestige. Women might be capable, but they also have to be honest; only if a woman is honest will her position be tenable. When women leaders seek help from [their superiors], the comrade managers do not want to help. Male managers are happy to receive a man but not a woman. It is very hard to change this attitude. Women have to have a higher educational level [than men] and men need to respect women's equal rights; only then will their respect [for women]

improve. People in the *xã* saw the talent of someone like Sister (*Chị*) Ngô Thanh Vân and voted for her. Women who are supported do things very well. If they are not supported, they will have an inferiority complex and will not be able to do it.

Households and the *Đổi Mới* Economy

After the adoption of *Đổi Mới* in 1986, Quang *xã* began to dismantle its agricultural cooperative and to shift economic production to the household.⁵ *Xã* officials focused on the household economy (*kinh tế gia đình*) to boost the *xã*'s economy and as the basis of their economic targets. Under the new economic system, economic targets in the *xã* were based on household production. In the early 1990s, the *xã* started to monitor the economic activities of all its households and to steer the reform process.⁶ In order to do so, it created the *thôn* administrative apparatus on the basis of the old production teams (*đội sản xuất*) in the agricultural cooperative. The number of *thôn* came to nine, equivalent to the previous *xóm* units. With 5,165 inhabitants, it was difficult for the *xã* alone to monitor all its households. The new *thôn* assumed responsibility for around 100 households each with reference to their production activities and economic status.⁷ I found that *thôn* chiefs were very active in their relations and communications with *xã* residents and seemed well informed of most aspects of their family life.

Đổi Mới linked households in the *xã* directly to the marketplace, making the household the core institution responsible for the economic survival of their members. The repositioning of the household as the basis for the market economy was initiated by the return of collective land to individual peasant families. From 1991 to 1995, agricultural land formerly belonging to the Quang agricultural cooperative was decollectivized and distributed to households as land-use rights rather than actual ownership.⁸ The household also assumed primary responsibility for labor allocation. Workers were freed from the confines of assigned labor, which meant that the choice and location of work became a household decision, subject to authority relations in the family. The main goal for the household was that it become “self-generating” (*tự cấp*) and “self-propelling” (*tự lực, tự cường*) so that it would no longer have to be subsidized.

In Quang *xã*, a key component of the *Đổi Mới* agenda was turning the household into a self-sustaining unit by developing the household economy (*phát triển kinh tế hộ gia đình*). The term “family economy” was used by local officials for the combined economic activities of all household members. The concept of the family economy had a long history in socialist Vietnam that readily transferred to the *Đổi Mới* era for purposes of the state.⁹ Quang *xã* was directly charged with encouraging and assisting households to develop their family economies and find new ways to bring in income. Party leaders and representatives from the mass organizations were directed to advise peasant households on how to diversify their sources of income. This meant

upgrading and integrating households' farming, livestock, gardening, and fishing activities and advising them on how to practice thrift, husband their resources, and invest in home-based income-generating activities.

One of the rationales for the development of the household economy in Quang *xã* and elsewhere was making greater and more efficient use of women's labor to increase household incomes and raise healthier and better-educated children.¹⁰ Under *Đổi Mới*, women's labor has been seen in terms of "encouraging and motivating women to participate [more fully] in production activities."¹¹ To this end, state policies regarding women's work in Quang *xã* focused on improving their farming practices, offering training programs, encouraging the diversification of their sources of income, and promoting family planning practices. The return to the household under *Đổi Mới* was thus explicitly linked by the state to women's work in production and reproduction by making work arrangements more flexible in order to improve women's productivity.¹²

During the early years of *Đổi Mới*, therefore, women in Quang *xã* continued to actively contribute to the economic livelihood of their households. But by the mid-1990s women's work began to be concentrated almost exclusively in the household sector. By 1995, 87 percent of all female employment in the *xã* was in the household and informal sectors. New patterns of occupational segregation by gender had begun to emerge: women's work predominated in agriculture, trade, and some service occupations. As the public sector declined, women fell back on agriculture and moved into home-based work. Agricultural work entailed full-time labor for only four to five months of the year, and a typical day's wage for farm work in 1996 was 5,000 *đồng* (50 cents), while a petty trader made at least twice that, and sometimes much more.¹³ Men's work predominated in the state sector, construction work, and transportation. Men were gravitating toward waged work, while women were leaving it. At the same time, women were working closer to home, while men were traveling for seasonal employment.¹⁴

Aside from farming, the *Đổi Mới* household in Quang *xã* also began to serve as the basis for new kinds of economic and entrepreneurial activities: small-scale businesses, trade, and cottage industries. Some of this was in the informal sector, such as wholesale and retail trade, food peddling, and hired day labor. Trade (called "buying and selling" [*buôn bán*]), traditionally a female activity and greatly circumscribed before 1986, was one of the sectors of greatest expansion in the urban and rural suburban (*ngoại thành*) areas of northern Vietnam in the 1990s.¹⁵ In Quang *xã*, small businesses sprang up along the main road, including retail shops (video rentals, wedding attire), small-scale service shops, and restaurants and tea stalls, usually operating out of family houses and predominantly run by women. These businesses used family labor and capital and provided goods and services for the local population. In addition, Quang market housed 60 stalls selling basic commodities in the mid-1990s.¹⁶ The *xã* renovated the market in 1990 and built 16 new stalls for rent on a long-term basis.¹⁷

Although new commercial opportunities were emerging, only a small percentage of families had opened up a shop and gone into business for themselves by 1995. Around 100 households (out of 1,054) in the *xã* were engaged in full-time business activities (*kinh doanh*), such as shopkeepers, large-scale traders, and construction businesses. This included ten “big” women traders in Hanoi, according to the *chủ tịch* of the *xã*. Households that engaged in these business activities were better off, but among villagers as a whole, this practice had yet to be widely adopted.¹⁸ About half of *xã* residents were engaged in services (*dịch vụ*) and trade as supplemental activities to farming, but these were seen as part of the household economy. In the 1990s, then, the family economy served as a kind of cover for market activities that were still not viewed as completely legitimate, as also noted by Abrami.¹⁹

Households in the *xã* were encouraged to contribute to the nation’s prosperity and to raise their families’ standard of living in ways compatible with national development plans. Authorities in the *xã* tried to enlist women to assist the national government and economy in these endeavors and assumed that men and women in the family had an equal obligation to contribute to the family economy. The *xã* encouraged all families to develop their family economies, thereby contributing to making the country “civilized, rich, and strong” (*nuớc văn minh, giàu, mạnh*). Thus household economic production was not assumed to be a private burden borne solely by individual households but was of direct concern to the state.

Although the household (*hộ*) attained greater status and economic importance under *Đổi Mới*, it had long been a tool of state governance in socialist Vietnam. During the American war, each household was required to keep its own registration book called the *hộ khẩu*, which listed all its members and had to be kept up to date. (Individual entries were termed *nhân khẩu*, which meant “resident” or literally “mouths to feed.”) The *hộ khẩu* registration book was presented to authorities to get food rations and to make requests for land or state assistance. In the 1990s, registration of the family household in Quang *xã* was still obligatory, and the records (*Sổ đăng ký hộ khẩu*, or Civil Register) were kept in the security office (*công an*) of the *xã*. The Civil Register identified all household members, their date and place of birth, native place (if different from place of birth), occupation, and place of occupation. The register also identified the “head of household” (*chủ hộ*), who was responsible for relations between the household and the state, including registration of births, deaths, marriages, household division (*tách hộ*), changes in occupation, and migration. In the 1990s, the list of families in the Civil Register was also used for the distribution and readjustments (*điều chỉnh*) of land, assessing taxes, and mobilizing attendance at meetings.

The term “household” (*hộ*) was in fact a socio-political construct used by the socialist state to draw the family into its orbit, register it, and regularize its relationship with the politico-legal order, in effect legitimizing and activating state intervention into the affairs of the family. The “head of household” (*chủ hộ*) in Quang *xã* was officially the head of the family economy

(*chủ kinh tế*) and represented the household to the agricultural cooperative and economic branches of the *xã*. The head either brought in the most income into the family, did most of the agricultural work, or handled the organization and planning of the family as an economic unit. (Of these household heads, 40 percent were women in the 1990s, according to the Civil Register and my household survey; family heads are more fully discussed in Chapter 3). In the late 1980s, the socialist term “family economy” (*kinh tế gia đình*) began to be replaced by other formulations, such as “family household economy” (*kinh tế hộ gia đình*) and “household economy” (*kinh tế hộ*), indicating the increasing stature of household farming *vis-à-vis* collective agriculture. By 1988, officials were generally using the term *khoán hộ* or household contract to refer to the transfer of cooperative fields to family households following the first Land Law in 1987.²⁰

Aside from its economic functions, the household also served a new political purpose. Under *Đổi Mới*, state subjects were defined as members of households subject to the interventionist mechanisms of the state. Households carried important responsibilities. They had to align themselves with the market and carry out the reproductive and economic policies of the state. They needed to raise their children in an exemplary manner. As members of households, women bore vital and consequential duties to the state as producers and reproducers. Through its programs and policies, the national government and local *xã* constructed the gendered subject of the *Đổi Mới* era as defined by the household and the development agenda of the state. The importance of women to the development agenda was stated forthrightly in the political report to the 6th Party Congress (1986), which launched *Đổi Mới*:

Women in general, and female workers in particular, have special features that should be taken into consideration. To bring into play the great role of women in the revolutionary cause, we should make sure that the party’s guidelines for motivating women permeate the entire system of proletarian dictatorship, and concretize them in policies and laws. State agencies, in co-ordination with mass organizations, should take practical measures to create more employment for women, to train and foster women cadres, to ensure mother and child health care, and to correctly put into effect the Law on Marriage and Family. We should help women to perform both their duties as citizens and their function as mothers engaged in the building of happy families.²¹

In basing its policies on the household, the *Đổi Mới* state also implicitly promoted and enhanced the prominence of the conjugal couple and the nuclear family as opposed to the extended family. The concept of the family household (*hộ gia đình*) was based on the conjugal couple whose two adult members contributed equally to the sustenance of the household. *Đổi Mới* development policies and discourses were based on this conception of the family and targeted the nuclear family. These included poverty reduction programs,

family planning policies, Happy Family campaigns (discussed below), land policies, taxation policies, and farm management programs. All these policies were conceived in terms of the neo-local household and its chief income earners. As such, they enhanced the authority of the primary couple, who were inexorably linked to the national agenda of making the country strong and prosperous in an increasingly competitive global economy.

The Return of Agriculture to the Household

The most important consequence of the early reform process in Quang xã was the dismantling of the Quang agricultural cooperative and the return of agriculture to the household. At the same time, agricultural production experienced a decline as men and some women gravitated to the urban areas to seek employment. Nonetheless, as during the American war, the main burden of agricultural and sideline production again fell on women, who were responsible for most farming tasks, except for plowing and harvesting. The market economy and the opportunities for making money from self-employment tended to pull men into the non-agricultural sector, leaving women behind to tend the fields.²²

Quang xã started to decollectivize its rice fields in 1987, its third land distribution since 1956.²³ The process of land redistribution was handled in three stages. In 1987, certificates for land were issued to 812 households that had registered for land, for a land-use period of three years. In 1989, the land-use period was extended to five years, and in 1994 to 20 years. The number of households increased during these stages, and the allocation was limited to 1 sào 5 thước (480 square meters) per person over the age of 16. Land titles were not given out, as they were elsewhere, and no plans to do so were in sight in the 1990s. A Land Council, chaired by Mr. Thành, the *chủ tịch* of the People's Committee, was set up in the xã to oversee the allocation process and subsequent readjustments according to demographic changes. The members of the Council included three representatives from the agricultural cooperative, a land management cadre from the xã, the heads of all the thôn, and a member of the xã party chapter. The Council divided up the land according to guidelines set by the agricultural office of the district. A difficult and contentious task was assessing the quality of the fields and the distances between the household and the land parcels, and the Council made its own deliberations in this regard. But the district determined the criteria for the recipients of land: those who were existing members of the agricultural cooperative, with state workers having the option to receive land. Retirees with pensions were not permitted to receive land.²⁴

Households were allocated land on a per capita (*nhân khẩu*) rather than a per laborer basis, that is, based on the size of the household. However, recipients needed to be of working age, which meant ages 16 to 60 for men and 16 to 55 for women. Children and the elderly were included in the head count, but were allotted land on a prorated basis according to their age. The

allocation for children was 1 *sào* 2 *thước*; parents with a third child received no land for that child. Households received a one-time allocation, with periodic future adjustments. After 1994, newly formed households received only 1 *sào* 2 *thước* for adults. Households that had already received their land allotment and then had children could not get additional land. Land was allocated on a community basis, and the total land per community was finite. Families that lost members through death and marriage still retained the land allocated to them in the reform. By 1994, all the rice land in the *xã* had been classified, but not entirely distributed.²⁵

But marriage was a tricky issue in the land allocation process. If a son married and brought home a daughter-in-law, it made a difference whether she was from Quang *xã* or not. If she grew up in the *xã*, she received land as a member of her natal family. If she was from the same *thôn* as her husband, a readjustment could be made. But if she was from another *thôn*, she had to apply to receive land in her new *thôn*, and would have to relinquish her earlier allotment or pay a fine. And there was a cut-off date – only so much land remained in Quang *xã*'s land fund. After a certain date, in-marrying daughters-in-law would get no land. In the case of divorce, there was no provision in the Land Law or a separate fund in the *xã* for divorced women. Therefore the land issue appeared to disadvantage women by tying them to a dependent relationship on the patrilineal household.²⁶ Furthermore, in the future both rice land and residential land could only be obtained through inheritance or purchase, which made newly married couples dependent on their parents if they wished to set up their own households.²⁷

After the decollectivization of agriculture, Quang agricultural cooperative continued its operations by offering households agricultural advice and services. In addition, the *xã* itself was directly engaged in overseeing household production. *Xã* cadres monitored, supervised, and advised households on their agricultural activities. In the early and mid-1990s, the *xã* urged farmers to plant two crops of rice and a winter crop of vegetables such as cucumbers, *rau muống* (water spinach), cauliflowers, beans, onions, potatoes, or tomatoes. In his 1995 annual report to the People's Committee, *Chủ Tịch* Thành complained that Quang *xã* was still a one-crop *xã*.²⁸ He urged farmers to grow more vegetables as a lucrative source of income and encouraged households to transfer rice land to vegetable production, although he acknowledged that vegetables required more care and had a greater risk of failure than growing rice.²⁹ The *xã* and the cooperative monitored the commercial and growing conditions of household products and were particularly concerned with losses from flooding or bad weather. In these cases, the *xã* appealed to the district for tax relief, usually with positive results, such as when severe floods destroyed three-fourths of the rice crop at the end of 1994.

Aside from promoting the household economy, *xã* officials also tried to come up with a niche or specialty product, like alcohol, candy, or meat/bun delicacies to improve all households' economic prospects. By the end of the 1990s, they still had not found the answer, although tourism was being touted

as a new possibility. *Xã* officials complained that, overall, the *xã*'s economy was lackluster at best, lamenting that compared to nearby villages, the economic level of Quang *xã* was just average (*trung bình*). Some villages in the rural areas near Hanoi had prospered by finding an economic niche in the inner city's economy by selling noodles or trading in textiles. Compared to these *xã*, Quang *xã*'s economy was overly reliant on agriculture and lacked commercial outlets. Rice prices were low, so rice farming alone would not raise incomes. Bringing back the *xã*'s fabled lychee production was not an immediate economic option. But the local economy had clearly benefited from proximity to the city, new rural-urban networks, and the availability of new jobs in the city.³⁰

The *xã* followed an integrated farm management program termed VAC, which stands for *vuôn* (garden), *ao* (pond), and *chúông* (poultry breeding or animal husbandry). Promoted in the *xã* for decades, the VAC program is an interlocking and interdependent system of intensive gardening in which all the elements contribute to increased productivity in the other elements. Fruits, vegetables, and eggs increase household nutrition, and their by-products are used to feed the pigs or the chickens. Manure from chickens and pigs is used in the garden. During the American war, the *xã* had 50 *mẫu* (1 *mẫu* = 10 *sào* = 3,600 sq. meters) of ponds, which were an element in the system. Women were invariably the focus of this program because they were responsible for sideline production.

In the early 1990s, the *xã* launched a major initiative to develop sideline production in pigs in line with a national policy to increase rural household incomes, especially those of women farmers. By 1994, 90 percent of all households were raising both breeder pigs and pigs for meat, which were a profitable and steady source of income and whose manure significantly increased paddy yields. However, the *xã* had neither slaughterhouses nor processing plants, which limited local revenues from pig raising. Middlemen came to the *xã* to buy pigs and took them elsewhere to be slaughtered and prepared for the urban market.

The return to the household economy in the 1990s thus had a substantial impact on the structure of economic activities in the *xã*. Before 1986, virtually all households in the *xã* had been exclusively engaged in agriculture.³¹ By the mid-1990s, however, most families in the *xã* had at least one member working outside agriculture. In 1995, only a third of the total households in my household survey relied solely on agriculture for their economic sustenance. The majority – 60 percent – were “mixed,” that is, they relied on both agricultural and non-agricultural work as sources of income. Only 8 percent of households were exclusively non-agricultural, usually with two wage earners working for the state as factory workers (*công nhân*) on the outskirts of Hanoi.³² By 1996, agriculture represented 23 percent of the total GDP in Quang *xã*, poultry and livestock breeding 40 percent, and handicrafts and services 37 percent, according to an economic report prepared by the *xã*.³³ Thus agriculture had undergone a sharp decline.³⁴

The occupational profile of the *xã* shifted accordingly. By 1995, 40 percent of *xã* residents had a second job in addition to farming by 1995. Four hundred young people were working in Hanoi. Most of this employment was in unskilled day labor, such as in construction, road work, carpentry, painting, truck driving, or other services (*dịch vụ*) in Hanoi or in the *xã*. Some of it was under contract, but was seen as temporary work. Skilled construction work was lucrative, offering up to a million *đồng* a month (\$100), but most men earned around 10,000 *đồng* (\$1) a day, according to *xã* sources.

In agricultural and mixed-income households, the predominant pattern was for women to farm the family's small plot while men worked in construction and industry (private firms or state factories). Most families lavished care on their newly acquired plots and kept trying to increase their yields. Two months of intensive work were devoted to plowing and harvesting, during which all able-bodied members of the family worked. During the subsequent, slower two months, women tended rice seedlings and did transplanting, weeding, spraying, and water control. Rice farming was hard work, unpredictable due to the weather, and not very profitable even when weather conditions were ideal.

The average agricultural landholding per household in 1995 was 6.1 *sào* (2196 sq. meters), which was not enough to sustain an average family of 4.9 persons. Average paddy (*thóc*) yield in 1995 was 120–200 kg per *sào*. Taxes and fees for agricultural services such as pest control and seeds were high, around 25 percent, which meant that only 100–150 kg *thóc* was left. The value of *thóc* in 1995 was 2,000 *đồng* per kg, which came to 200,000–300,000 *đồng* per *sào* per crop, or \$20–\$30.³⁵ Farming thus brought in little income, equivalent to about \$150 per year per crop. Most families, in fact, did not sell what they harvested but consumed it themselves.³⁶

Therefore *xã* residents were obliged to seek additional sources of income. Women who raised pigs, chickens, and produce from their gardens traded in the local market or further afield at Ngã Tư Sở, Mơ, Hà Đông, Cầu Giấy, and even Hanoi's Đồng Xuân market. In the 1990s, vegetables and flowers brought in about a dollar a day. Peasant women could get more if they were willing to bike into Hà Đông town or Hanoi. During the off-season, particularly in the fall, both men and women searched for other ways to earn money. Many men sought work as day laborers (*công nhật*), locally or in Hanoi, in construction, painting, or carpentry. Men who owned buffaloes could work for others as plowmen for a good wage.³⁷ On the whole, however, families sought economic opportunity within the confines of the *xã* and did not go further afield, as casual laboring work was available in the *xã*.

Now the *xã* rather than the agricultural cooperative drew up annual economic plans for the community in terms of GDP per person, production targets, commerce and services, and infrastructure projects. These, as well as the *xã*'s efforts to increase the standard of living, were all reported to the People's Council and the district on an annual basis. In the mid-1990s, the *xã* was particularly concerned to increase the number of what officials

termed wealthy (*giàu*) households and decrease the number of poor (*nghèo*) households. These programs were part of the rural development policy of “creating a new countryside” launched by the 7th Party Congress in 1991.³⁸

In this respect, the *xã* was achieving its goals because the return to the household economy in the *xã* had almost immediate economic benefits. By 1994, production and average income per household had risen dramatically. My household survey conducted in the spring of 1996 found that the average per capita income in the *xã* in 1995 came to \$282. In the survey, households were asked to provide expenditure data for 1995 because income figures have proved to be incomplete indicators of wealth in a peasant economy. Average per capita expenditures in 1995 came to \$332.³⁹ *Xã* residents were also asked to estimate the current value of their consumer goods. The per household figures averaged \$736 (8.1 million *đồng*) for 1995. Agricultural and mixed-economy households were asked the value of their agricultural equipment and buffaloes, which came to an additional \$312 (3.4 million *đồng*).

Average household income in 1995 was \$1,500 or less, and although the *xã*'s standard of living was higher than in other parts of the delta, most families believed their economic resources were stretched to the limit. They tended to compare their economic level with that of Hanoi and villages that had become more prosperous than they were. Both men and women in the *xã* felt they were under considerable pressure to improve their meager income. Families were thus experiencing heightened stress as a result of having to “get ahead,” compete in the market, farm their small plots of land, and get the best prices for their produce and services.

Yet household incomes in the *xã* had risen considerably. In 1995 this increased prosperity was reflected in new housing, new consumer goods, and new roads. *Xã* residents spent from \$100 to \$1,000 on televisions and appliances in 1995, according to questionnaires completed by the 20 households I visited and interviewed. The level of consumer goods was beginning to approach that of Hanoi: bicycles, appliances, VCRs, motorbikes (although still relatively scarce), even toilets. There was one bicycle or motorbike per two adult inhabitants. Families were spending from \$200 to \$1,000 on ceremonial costs (*hiếu hỷ*). One well-off household I interviewed spent \$1,500 for a large wedding, borrowing funds for the occasion. Among households I visited, 30 to 60 percent of their budget was spent on food; the average was over \$500 per year. Households were also upgrading and renovating their houses, but the costs were often spread over several years. Families typically spent about \$100 a year on school expenses.⁴⁰ The area's growing prosperity was also reflected in a completely new administrative complex for the *xã*, built with funds from the district. The new offices boasted a two-story expanse of offices and meeting rooms, with two sets of iron gates.

Diversifying sources of income and economic competition between households spurred increasing socio-economic differentiation in the *xã*. Changes in socio-economic groupings started to emerge by the mid-1990s, reflecting the new opportunities for accumulating wealth under the reform policies. The

richest household in my 1996 household survey had sold 50 sq. meters of roadside land for 120 million *đồng* (\$10,909) the previous year. With this money they built a new two-story stucco house for about \$6,500 and bought new furniture and a new motorbike. For a short time in the late 1980s, it was possible to transfer rice land (*ruộng đất*) to the category of residential land (*đất thổ cư*) and sell it. The most lucrative sources of income were selling land or sending a family member abroad. A number of families sent sons abroad, and their remittances of a few thousand dollars a year sustained a whole family very comfortably. Such fortunate families were reluctant to flaunt their newfound wealth, however. They tended to put the money into improving their houses by adding rooms, putting on an upper story or buying new furniture, while they maintained discretion as to the actual figures involved. I suspected that socialist sensibilities were still in effect.

Xã officials, however, were no longer using socialist and class-based models for categorizing the local population, but rather the new socio-economic classifications of rich households (*hộ giàu*), well-off households (*hộ khá*), average households (*hộ trung bình*), and poor households (*hộ nghèo*). The *xã*'s 1996 economic report stated that by the end of 1995, rich households comprised 15 to 20 percent of the population, with an average income of 10–20 million *đồng* (\$900–1,800) a year. Well-off households, representing 50–55 percent of the total, had an average income of 10 million *đồng* a year (\$900). The remaining households had 3–5 million *đồng* (\$275–450) a year.⁴¹ This brought the average income to \$156 per capita or \$764 per household for the same time period.

The *xã*'s income figures, however, came to only about half of those reported in my household survey.⁴² *Xã* were notorious for underreporting their income statistics. Under *Đổi Mới*, underreported income has been a strategy used by many *xã* to get more assistance from the district. Therefore, the survey results are undoubtedly more accurate, although underreporting cannot be ruled out here as well. If the *xã*'s 1995 figures are doubled, making the results more consistent with my survey results, then the most prosperous category of families in the *xã* were making upward of \$2,000–3,000 a year, while poor families made less than \$500 a year. I heard reports of “very rich” households, which I was unable to confirm, given villagers’ predilection to hide their wealth from neighbors and outsiders. But class divisions based on economic differences were clearly beginning to take shape in the *xã*.

As I walked around the *xã*, I was impressed by the abundance of new housing and handsomely bricked alleyways in the *thôn*. Courtyards, fruit trees and rose gardens could be glimpsed through the gates and behind the brick walls which closed off the residential dwellings from the main road and the alleyways. The economic transformation in Quang *xã* had been launched by the return to the household on the basis of which the *xã* had introduced the market economy, provided the initial economic momentum for economic growth, and increased family incomes.⁴³ *Đổi Mới* had boosted the urban economy in Hanoi and stimulated a boom in the construction

industry, drawing male labor into the city. The standard of living in the inner city had doubled in the decade from 1986 to 1996. While changes were less dramatic in the countryside, there was a noticeable economic vitality in the *xã*. Women's economic contributions as farmers in the *xã* were as vital under *Đổi Mới* as they had been during the American war, and although the agricultural cooperative no longer employed their labor, the household economy had become the primary focus of women's economic endeavors.

The Household and the *Đổi Mới* Gender Regime

With *Đổi Mới*'s new focus on development and economic growth, Quang *xã* began to shift its governance functions from wartime mobilization apparatuses into the development of institutions and economic levers of the *Đổi Mới* state. The mass organizations – the Women's Association, the Fatherland Front, the Peasants' Association, the Youth Association, and the Veterans' Association – were all reoriented and charged with new economic duties.⁴⁴ In restructuring the local economy, the *xã* relied on the household to spur production and increase incomes. Similarly the mass organizations, directed by the party, began to focus their attention on families and households to support the *xã*'s development programs. The Women's Association emerged as the prime mass association guiding and shepherding the household's new role. By the late 1980s, the Women's Association was directly assisting households with their economic activities, using a wide array of programs to encourage them to engage with the market and to assist women having problems doing so. Two of their primary targets were poor households and poor women. These included female-headed, labor-deficient, and poorly educated households and others that had difficulties coping with the market. The Association developed a range of programs to help women with cash payments for child immunizations, food baskets, small loans to buy seeds, rice transplants, or pigs, and small subsidies to take training programs for agricultural purposes. In 1992, the Association gave 80 women in the *xã* 24 million *đồng* to develop livestock production for breeding pigs over a two-year period. They set up credit groups (*quỹ hội*) for economic investment purposes. The Association also took care of policy families (*gia đình chính sách*, war-related welfare cases) by providing cash, labor, food and other benefits. Three mothers of martyrs (i.e., women who had lost their sons in the war) were also cared for by members of the Association because they had no children to look after them.

Yet Quang *xã* and the agricultural cooperative could no longer take on hardship cases and incur dependency from needy families. The cooperative no longer offered child-care facilities, as during the war. The local clinic continued to provide basic health services, but operated on an abysmally tight budget. Health problems had put some families in chronic debt. There had been reports of authorities in some villages taking land away from families who did not conform to family planning targets. This did not occur in Quang

xã, but representatives of the Women's Association encouraged their members and *xã* women to space their children and practice family planning. As for education, poor families were having difficulty keeping their children in school past the seventh grade, and if parents believed children were not promising students, they discontinued their schooling.⁴⁵ The *xã* showed concern for these adverse effects of the market, but there was only so much it could do.

The Women's Association, as well as the other mass associations, tried to foster a strong sense of social solidarity in helping the poor through what it called mutual assistance. Campaigns focused on supporting the party's economic policies, providing social services, and strengthening family values. The Women's Association launched three emulation movements in the 1990s, one to encourage the household economy, a second called Good Husband–Wife Relationships, and a third termed Raising Healthy Children. In 1993 the Husband–Wife Happiness (*Vợ chồng hạnh phúc*) movement encouraged “nice-looking and graceful mothers” and “healthy and well-behaved children” (*Mẹ duyên dáng, con khỏe ngoan*). The Veterans' Association in 1995 carried out a campaign titled Good People, Good Work (*Người tốt, việc tốt*) by which “the grandfather's morality will be present in the grandchild” (*Đức ông, lộc cháu*). The purpose of these campaigns was to achieve a well-functioning household economy as well as a morally fit family unit. A “happy family” meant a household where everyone contributed economically, practiced family planning, managed the stress in their lives with grace and good will (“worked in harmony”), and supported one another in terms of functioning in the *Đổi Mới* market.⁴⁶

In 1994, the Women's Association launched a movement titled Civilized and Happy Families (*Gia đình văn minh, hạnh phúc*) that focused on family planning, a “good” family economy, and well-behaved children. The Association's report of that year noted that 12 families received outstanding awards during this campaign. The goals of the campaign were to achieve a “good” family economy by raising the household's standard of living and having an “organized” family where everyone worked hard and made contributions to society, whose members loved one another, whose husbands did not engage in gambling, womanizing, and other “social evils”, and whose children were well-raised and attended school.⁴⁷ The successful *Đổi Mới* family was defined as a market-oriented, efficient unit ready to join the global age.

Women bore primary responsibility for implementing the Happy Family policy as well as the new vision of the social and economic community. As sustainers of households, they needed to produce for the market and carry out the reproduction policies of the state. Family planning in Quang *xã* was the responsibility of the Women's Association and the health clinic. The Women's Association, along with the *thôn* chiefs, made a concerted effort to remind *xã* women that the official policy was two children per family and to inform them that contraceptives were available from the clinic. By 1996, Mrs. Lê Thị Thúy, the head of the Association reported that the family-planning program in the *xã* had been successful; the population growth rate was reported

to be down to 1.5 percent per year. However, women cadres were not always the models and mirrors (*gwong mẫu*) they were supposed to be. Mrs. Phạm Thị Canh, the head of the agricultural cooperative and one of three women members of the *xã* party cell, had eight children, the first seven all girls.⁴⁸

The modernization project of *Đổi Mới* had thus set in motion new initiatives regarding the household and engendered a new idealized notion of the family. This vision of the family was a function of its development and reproductive responsibilities and came to serve as both a metaphor and a goal of the renovation agenda. It was based on the idea that Vietnamese families will achieve happiness (*hạnh phúc*) by following the state's economic and reproductive policies.⁴⁹ Hence, the very notion of citizenship in the newly imagined community of *Đổi Mới* was now tied to the development goals of the state.

Đổi Mới Happy Family movements in Quang *xã* were modeled on the emulation campaigns of the war years. All these movements set standards (*tiêu chuẩn*) for participants to achieve and selected models for others to follow. Members of the Association were called upon to be models themselves, while successful ordinary citizens of the *xã* were chosen for awards. These campaigns, in addition to relying on emulation, continued their statist prescriptions of reminding *xã* residents about the “debts” they owed the party – in the words of the Association's report, “*tỏ lòng biết ơn Đảng*” (we gratefully acknowledge our moral debts toward the party). Happy families were happy in the era of *Đổi Mới* because of the wise and judicious policies of the party, the Women's Association claimed. The Association also reminded its constituents that compassion needed to be felt for the less fortunate and those who had suffered during the war and had been left behind by the market. The 800 members of the Association were called upon to assist these people. The Association also continued to solicit gratitude for the party by repeating the pat phrases “If you eat the fruit, remember the person who planted the tree” and “If one drinks water, one needs to remember the source” to encourage greater outreach to war victims.⁵⁰

On balance, however, appeals based on moral exhortations had markedly declined in effectiveness, according to officials in the Women's Association, and the Association was obliged to turn to programs based on economic and family interests in order to engage women in the *xã*. Attendance at meetings was falling off and members were no longer paying their dues. Mobilization on the basis of social solidarity and charity no longer appealed to the sentiments of women in the *xã*; they wanted to see concrete results. The Association was therefore pressed to diversify its activities so that they were in line with women's changing interests and needs. In this sense, the Association was responding to its base and the new economic realities of *Đổi Mới*.

The Language of Equality

During the first decade of *Đổi Mới*, the gender order in the *xã* was thus in the midst of a fundamental shift and transformation from the war-time

socialist model to a new focus on the family and the household. But the definition of gender equality in the *xã* had not changed, according to a sample of married couples who were asked whether women and men had achieved equality or not. In their view, women's equality was still social equality, or equality outside the family. According to them, gender equality occurred through social promotion rather than change in the family. Gender equality was not judged in terms of individual relations between men and women, but in terms of the equality of opportunity for both sexes outside the household. In these terms, these *xã* residents invariably claimed that equality between men and women had already been achieved.⁵¹

Thus *xã* residents viewed gender equality in terms of social equity in line with the dominant discourses of the state. In my interviews with *xã* families, residents said equality for women meant that women could do any work and be leaders in any field just as men could. Equality also meant equal education for girls and boys. Women's authority in high social positions had to be respected. Mrs. Bùi Thị Ngân, a state irrigation worker, said gender equality meant that both men and women had a duty to do social work, that is, to take responsibility for state affairs (*công tác xã hội*). Mrs. Nga, the former *xã* cadre mentioned earlier gave a political definition of equality for women: social work required women to exercise their right to equality by speaking up in meetings and voicing their opinions. Only then would women truly achieve equality, in her view. Only two people gave non-statist definitions of social equality: friendships and wider social relations outside the family for girls and boys and for married men and women without negative repercussions within the family. Party member Mr. Lê Hải Quang cautioned, however, that social equality meant women's greater exposure in society might cause friction with their husbands.

Only Mrs. Nga defined equality in the sense of complete parity between men and women on an individual plane in all arenas in life. Mrs. Nga, in her fifties, had been a cadre in the *xã* since the American war, and she stated unequivocally that equality between men and women had not been achieved because women were still unequal in the family. However, she added, women in the *xã* had gained entry into the political landscape, and this had become a normal condition. Some men might have difficulty taking orders from women, but doing so could be justified in terms of the state's policy regarding gender equity.

As for equality in the family (*bình đẳng trong gia đình*), as we shall see in Chapter 4, many *xã* residents, particularly women, tended to see equality in terms of husbands not imposing their ideas or authority on their wives but making decisions in common. Equality was also perceived as a relationship based on equal respect (*tôn trọng nhau*). Some of the better-educated villagers had a more nuanced and wider definition of gender equality. If the wife did not agree with her husband, they believed, he should not arbitrarily proceed on his own but try to meet his wife's objections to solve the problem. Male unilateral and arbitrary actions signified a lack of respect. Equality did not

a priori mean an equal division of household labor nor an equal contribution to household income (although some were aware of these ideas). And it certainly did not mean individual freedom and expression, personal growth, or individual rights as understood in the West.

From *xã* husbands' points of view, respect took on a decidedly different cast. According to them, a wife demonstrated respect for her husband by being solicitous – to him, to his parents, and to members of his lineage. She managed the household well and “took good care” of his immediate family, meaning meal preparation, laundry, and education of the children. A woman who could not manage (*thu vén*) the household demonstrated a fundamental lack of respect.

Thus gender equality in the *xã* was defined primarily in terms of social equality (*bình đẳng ngoài xã hội*), of equal rights and duties in work outside the family. In general, it was not seen as applicable to relations within the family. *Xã* residents believed men and women should both work and could do the same types of jobs and get the same pay. Women could hold positions of power in the government and the army. The government should protect the social rights of women. Girls should be educated at the same level as boys. When speaking of equality in these terms, many older women remembered when girls were unable to go to or continue in school beyond third or fourth grade, have a vocation of their own, or participate in public life.

This ideal of gender equality was a strong legacy from the revolutionary past, and as such continued to bear strong statist and instrumentalist connotations.⁵² The *Đổi Mới* state continued to champion this form of gender equality, but now geared it to development goals and state-defined conceptions of women's role in the family. In 1994, the national government issued Resolution 04-NQ/TW, Renovating and Strengthening the Women's Movement in the New Situation, to improve the role and position of women in three areas: as workers, as citizens, and as mothers, “who are the first teachers of human beings, providing a hallmark and giving shape to the personality, spirit and mind of the coming generation.”⁵³ The stated purpose of the resolution was to spur development of the state-led women's movement, which had lagged behind as a result of *Đổi Mới*. The resolution implicitly criticized the party for not paying enough attention to women's work and called on party and state officials to improve their “perception and viewpoints in the question of women” and strengthen their leadership of the women's movement. In Quang *xã*, the resolution was interpreted in terms of strengthening the work of the Women's Association and assisting the household economy.

However, the *Đổi Mới* state continued to define the legal rights of women primarily in terms of social equality while asserting that the family was the “cell of society,” as shown by developments in state law. The new constitution, passed in 1992, stated that “male and female citizens have equal rights in all fields – political, economic, cultural, social, and in the family.” Article 63 reiterated the principle of equal pay for equal work, while reaffirming

that “the family is the cell of society and the state protects marriage and the family.” Marriage should conform to the principles of “free consent, progressive union, monogamy, and equality between husband and wife.” A new clause added that “discriminatory” acts against women were banned, as well as acts “damaging women’s dignity.”⁵⁴ This legislation demonstrated the state’s continuing commitment to public policy measures to ensure gender equality in line with its development goals.

***Đổi Mới* and Neo-Traditionalist Gendered Discourses and Practices**

At the same time, however, *Đổi Mới* was accompanied by the renewal of traditional discourses and reconstructed gender values that posed a direct challenge to the promotion of gender equality. Starting in the late 1980s, the *Đổi Mới* state mounted a vigorous campaign of cultural revitalization to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of socialist ideology. Women and the Vietnamese family were essential elements in the reassertion of traditional Vietnamese culture as Vietnamese national traditions, along with Confucianism, were revived and rehabilitated. Women were presented as moral beacons under *Đổi Mới* and represented as the essence of a historically inflected national identity. Throughout the 1990s, the portrayal of Vietnamese nationalism through gendered images included women as mothers of the nation, as prime defenders of the nation, and as always sacrificing their own interests for the family and the greater good. Top party officials and official academics extolled the virtues of “Vietnamese women throughout history” in *Đổi Mới* publications.⁵⁵ Womanhoods thus continued to serve as cultural markers for the *Đổi Mới* nation as they had during wartime. However, the idealized and essentialized socialist woman of the wartime revolutionary era was replaced with an essentialized model of woman *qua* mother of the *Đổi Mới* state.⁵⁶

In Quang xã, the reemergence of the household, the return of private property, and the new possibilities for economic accumulation all provided the foundation of the restoration of “traditional” family values. Many of the families I visited in the xã had restored their ancestor altars in their main front rooms and frequently pointed out the myriad family ties that existed between them and other lineages throughout the village. The cult of the ancestors reinforced patrilineal ties and reserved pride of place for the ancestors’ altar in the home. Mr. Lê Sỹ Vinh’s house, a typical one-story, three-compartment stucco house, was an example. The three contiguous compartments were open to the courtyard and divided by wooden columns supporting a common verandah, with concrete steps leading up to the house. The middle compartment had an elevated altar to the ancestors crowded with portraits of the deceased and bowls of incense and fruit. The plankbed (*sập gỗ*) in front of but lower than the altar was used for sitting and ceremonial occasions. Mr. Vinh, as the head of his lineage, arranged the rites to

be performed on the death anniversaries of the ancestors, gathering the clan for a meal. Men and older women, as honored clan members, sat on the plankbed during these occasions, but middle-aged and younger women did not, in my observations of these events.

Đồi Mói had revitalized kin and lineage networks by increasing the economic scope of the household and creating an economic and political agenda for them. The decollectivization of agriculture meant that families and lineages needed to rely on each other for mutual assistance. Female relations organized and shared labor for agricultural tasks for their kin-affiliated households. In part this was due to the pooling or proximity of family plots that local authorities had permitted when household land was redistributed. The reinvigorated household economy thus strengthened the social leverage of the family and lineage authority.

Although family business endeavors were not yet widespread, economic activity was now centered on households and their networks. When I was conducting field research in the 1990s, the full scope of the economic consequences of the linkage between kin and politics was not readily apparent, but holding party membership and state office in the *xã* obviously conferred economic advantages upon some lineages at the expense of others. Lineage domination of the local party branch or even simply party membership appeared to confer economic advantage for some types of business activities in the *xã*.⁵⁷ Family connections were a subterranean element in *xã* politics. The security chief and the *chủ tịch* were members of the same prominent lineage in the *xã*, and it was common knowledge among the villagers that local politics were linked to family ties. Lineages competed for the top party and state positions in the *xã*, and once a lineage was in power, it tended to colonize the administration.⁵⁸ As in other *xã*, Quang *xã* was characterized by several lineages rather than one big clan. Lineages are based on male descent lines, and authority usually resides in elder patriarchs. Women may be nominated and selected to public office by local party organs on the basis of their inclusion in their husbands' lineages, regardless of other considerations. Those without lineage connections were shut out of the political process, I was told, "until their group gets in."

There were 26 patrilineages (*đòng họ*) in Quang *xã*, dispersed throughout the *xã*.⁵⁹ The major lineages, such as the Vũ, Đặng, and Nguyễn Duy, traced the founding of their clans back four centuries, according to senior males in the lineages to whom I talked.⁶⁰ Family genealogy records (*gia phả*) were in the process of being restored by the major lineages, but had not been well-kept and were of unreliable authenticity, as they appeared to have been written or rewritten during the colonial period in the early twentieth century.⁶¹ The major lineages, however, were all searching for their long-lost family genealogies and having them translated from Chinese into modern Vietnamese.

The largest lineages in the *xã* had maintained elaborate worship houses before 1945, but these had fallen into disuse since the French war. Starting

in the 1990s, clan meetings were held to renovate family tombs and shrines or build new worship houses. Lineage ceremonies and the cult of the ancestors had returned to virtually all *xã* households by the mid-1990s. Social prestige was becoming attached to demonstrations of big family-ism, with the attendant elaborate and costly marriage, funeral, and death anniversary/*Tết* ceremonies. For the continuation of the family line and performance of the cult of the ancestors, sons were more valued than daughters. Inheritance returned as an issue in the patrilineal kinship system. There was a marked preference for sons rather than daughters to inherit the family property continued, as discussed in Chapter 3, although the Law on Marriage and the Family stipulated equal inheritance.

During the first decade of *Đôi Mói*, weddings and banquets in Quang *xã* also grew in importance and became more elaborate, as in other villages in the Red River delta.⁶² In 1995 and 1966, *Chủ Tịch* Thành was attending weddings and funerals on a regular basis, including that of his own son, who married the daughter of a *chủ tịch* of a nearby *xã*. The ceremony was elaborate and well attended and undoubtedly enhanced local political alliances. The restoration of marriage rites such as engagement parties, brides kowtowing before ancestral altars, and elaborate banquets were firmly in place at the time of my visit.⁶³ By and large, women performed ritual and economic functions for their husbands' lineages, organizing the all-important death anniversary ceremonies for their husbands' male and female ancestors.

While I was conducting work in the *xã*, two prominent clans held high-profile gatherings to collect funds to rebuild their family shrines. These two gatherings attracted lineage members from far beyond the *xã* for a weekend-long banquet. Each clan included a former high-ranking party official and military veteran in the *xã* (including a former cadre who had been the *chủ tịch* for many years). Both these officials were senior males in their lineages and proudly demonstrated to me their plans to elaborately renovate their lineage temples. In the 1990s, the People's Committee was dominated by a different lineage, although other lineages were also represented among state and party officials. However, lineage loyalties among men were cross-cut by the fact that virtually all male officials shared veteran military status, which also shaped their social bonds and general outlook. Yet returning military veterans were at the forefront of the revival of kinship and lineage practices in Quang *xã*, as they were in all the major socio-political activities in the *xã*, according to a *xã* Veterans' Association Report.⁶⁴

The revitalization of kin networks in Quang *xã* was accompanied by new practices of localism, village "traditions," and religious observances. The focus on local cultural and religious traditions renewed party cadres' interest in the *xã*'s historical artifacts, while it also facilitated a growing masculinization of politics and reassertion of male ritual power. In the first decade of *Đôi Mói*, the *xã* refurbished and reissued its old village rules (*hương ước*), obtained state certification of its historic sites and buildings, and revived its village festivals. *Chủ Tịch* Thành assured me, however, that the annual *đình* festival

had never been suspended during the war, although it had been scaled back. In 1996, the History Committee of the *xã* obtained the two former village conventions (*huong wóc*) of the *xã*, dated 1888 and 1936, which were translated into Vietnamese from Chinese. The *huong wóc* were customary laws that governed the rights and duties pertaining to the registered male members of the *xã*. They also included rules on village management, maintaining law and order, religious rites and ceremonies, and seating procedures in the communal house (*đình*).⁶⁵

The newly established History Committee of the *xã*, composed of two former high-ranking party members, both of whom were from prominent lineages, and a Chinese linguist, examined the two historic *huong wóc* and then issued a contemporary version of these rules, which were called *Quy wóc Làng Văn Hoá* (Cultured Village Rules). Unlike the former rules, the new rules detailed the obligations of the *xã*'s socialist citizens, "with a view to bringing into full play the fine traditions of [their] ancestors, family clans, and *xã* by developing [their] good customs and practices and eliminating backward practices, and, in solidarity, turning Quang *xã* into a village marked by prosperity, beauty, equity, civilization and progress." The new rules cautioned against "social evils," while stressing the importance of the education of children, protecting their health, and ensuring family planning. They also strongly promoted "stabilizing the family household economy" and local economic production and investment. Religious observances and festivals were praised and regulated, as well as the obligations of lineages to reconcile family conflicts.⁶⁶

Article 21 specified that all families needed to strive to attain the status of "cultured families," meaning they should be harmonious, happy and progressive; live in solidarity and mutual assistance with their neighbors; practice family planning; and perform their duties as citizens. While husbands and wives needed to live together on an equal footing, be faithful to one another, and assume the joint responsibility of raising their children, respect and care was also owed to grandparents and the elderly. Family violence was prohibited; good family behavior was defined as "hard work, thrift, integrity, incorruptibility, being law-abiding and ethical." Families who attained cultured family status would receive a prize and be publicly recognized.

Quang *xã*'s new village rules were part of the state's "cultured village" and local heritage initiatives, and the *xã* was granted status as a cultured village (*làng văn hoá*) in 1998 on the basis of its historic status, cultural institutions, and attainment of an "exemplary" social life and politics. The state and party actively encouraged other efforts to revive local "traditions." The *xã* applied for state certification of several historic sites and monuments (*di tích lịch sử văn hoá*), obtaining approval in 1989. Three pagodas, the *đình*, and two *đền* were refurbished with local and state funds. Worship ceremonies were resumed in the temple of the tutelary deity, and in the early 1990s the People's Committee started to hold some of their meetings in the *đình*.⁶⁷ Religious observances at the Buddhist pagodas were well attended and favored by *xã*

women. On the first and fifteenth of every month, even women officials prayed at the pagodas, bringing large trays of fruit as offerings. The annual *xã* festival was restored in 1989 with official state permission and upgraded, becoming much more elaborate, with new costumes, new statues, a longer ceremony, and a procession. The festival, held in February, was organized by the People's Committee. Not surprisingly, the chief officiate at the 1996 *xã* festival was the elderly father of the powerful chief of security (*công an*), who looked resplendent in his blue satin robes reciting chants in front of the main altar in the *đình*.

These new assertions of local pride by *xã* officials and the neo-traditional revival of religious and cultural practices occurred as the household assumed its new economic responsibilities. *Xã* officials encouraged the restoration of kin networks, big familyism, and male ritual activities, practices in which many of them were themselves engaged. At the same time, state discourses linked tradition to modernity through gendered imaginaries, as women were portrayed as symbols of the "finest traditions of the nation." These practices and discourses accompanied *Đổi Mới's* economic transformations and opening to the outside world. Filling the void left by the collapse of socialist ideology, development, family, and nationalist discourses provided the new basis for the practice of political power in the *xã*, strengthening the hand of the local state. But they were also linked to a shift in Quang *xã's* gender politics whereby women were increasingly displaced from their public responsibilities and confined to the economic and familial exigencies of the household. As such, neo-traditionalist practices and discourses undermined gender equality promoted by the state in other domains.

Conclusion

Compared to the wartime past, the household in Quang *xã* had assumed vital new economic responsibilities, but still retained strong statist features. It had hardly retreated into a "private sphere." Thus it is misleading to view the household during the early *Đổi Mới* period as what Thaveeporn Vasavakul describes as an autonomous unit outside the sphere of the state.⁶⁸ As we have seen, the return of the household and the revival of neo-traditionalist practices did not appear to immediately weaken the local state. *Xã* authorities steered and embraced the revival of household-based economic, religious, and "traditional" practices along with the development of the market economy.

As this chapter has shown, by the early 1990s Quang *xã* had turned to the household to restructure the economy, to tie its members to the market, and to facilitate new methods of governance. The state focused its intervention on women's and men's labor and reproductive functions as members of households. Development programs focused on the family household of the conjugal couple and their children. Continuing its intervention into the family, the state had merely reformulated the gendered subject. The household's productive and reproductive functions had become essential to the development

goals of the regime. Next we turn to the third facet of the state's intervention into the household: *Đổi Mới* cultural policies designed to strengthen the family in an era of rapid change.

Notes

- 1 Data from the Quang agricultural cooperative, 1976–1985. See also Kerkvliet 194, 246–247, 250. Kerkvliet provides data for the decline in food production and consumption in Vietnam from 1975 to 1985.
- 2 See, for example, Hy Văn Lương and Nguyễn Đắc Bằng.
- 3 The People's Committee had ten members and was formally elected by the People's Council. From 1994 to 1996, ten out of 21 representatives on this Council were women, including the three women party members. The People's Council's main responsibilities were to "listen to the views and opinions of the people and solve problems that have arisen, explain the policies of the party, and encourage (*vận động*) people to carry out their responsibilities," according to Mrs. Ngô Thị San, one of the *thôn* chiefs.
- 4 Former women cadres seemed rather wistful in recounting their views to me, but other women clearly relished the luxury of being able to serve the family after their exertions during the war.
- 5 The 6th Party Congress defined the household economy as a legitimate "economic unit of production," with the authority to operate alone or in conjunction with the private sector, for the first time in Vietnam's socialist history. In addition to the family economy (*kinh tế gia đình*), other economic forms such as private companies, household businesses, contract labor, foreign firms, and international joint ventures were permitted to operate. In the 1990s, the *Đổi Mới* economy was officially defined as a multi-sector economy. The other sectors comprised state-operated enterprises and the collective economy (e.g., agricultural cooperatives.)
- 6 The dismantling of the Quang agricultural cooperative shifted power to the *xã*'s People's Committee and the new *thôn* divisions (based on the old *xóm*), as it did elsewhere. The creation of the new *thôn* was directly linked to the promotion of the household economy in Quang *xã*, I was informed by local officials. All the *thôn* had party cells, whose chiefs were all men in 1996.
- 7 *Thôn* chiefs (*trưởng thôn*) administered the *thôn* in Quang *xã*. In 1996, they were elected for two-year terms and were selected from residents of the *thôn*. They reported to the head of the *xã*, that is, the president (*chủ tịch*) of the People's Committee. In addition to managing production, *thôn* chiefs led the mass organizations (*công đoàn đoàn thể*), ensured accurate registration of the population, collected taxes, and reconciled disputes among families. Land conflicts were an enduring source of dispute and conflict in 1995–1996. Not surprisingly, *thôn* chiefs in Quang *xã* considered their new jobs far more demanding than their former jobs as brigade leaders in the Quang agricultural cooperative. Yet as *thôn* chiefs, they were not full-time employees of the *xã*, nor did they have a separate budget. They worked out of their homes, did not have an office in the *xã*, and received a salary of 24,000 *đồng* (\$22) a month. Four out of nine *thôn* chiefs were women in 1996.
- 8 The Quang agricultural cooperative was still in operation in the 1990s, but its responsibilities were reduced to collecting taxes and providing services such as irrigation, seeds, and agricultural advice.
- 9 Up to the *Đổi Mới* period, the "family economy" (*kinh tế gia đình*) referred to the 5 percent of land that families held outside the agricultural cooperative and was considered an adjunct to the collective economy. With the restoration of family farming in 1986, the family economy referred to the economic activities of the household based on its newly acquired agricultural land, plus all its other sources of economic remuneration.

- 10 See Trần Thị Vân Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 See also Lê Thi and Vinh Thi. These authors see the household economy as essential to providing work and income for poor women in rural areas.
- 13 See Weijers.
- 14 In Vietnam as a whole, *Đổi Mới* also increased women's employment in the household and informal economies. Hanoi sources differ on precise figures. According to one source, in 1994 77 percent of women workers worked in the household economy, 12 percent in the state sector, 10 percent in the private sector, and less than 1 percent in the "collective sector." Among men, 67 percent worked in the household economy. See Lê Thi, *Phát huy tiềm năng*. According to another source, the "family, individual, private and collective sectors of the economy" comprised 30 percent of the total economy before 1986, but by the mid-1990s this figure had increased to 70 percent (see Trần Thị Quế). Employment for wages represented only 20 percent of the workforce in the early 1990s, according to the World Bank. In 1992, women made 72 percent of what men made in this sector; in agriculture, women earned 62 percent of what men did (World Bank et al.).
- 15 According to a World Bank survey, 78 percent of the labor force in the informal sector was in the private trading sector by the mid-1990s. This sector was almost exclusively run by women. See Desai, based on the 1992 Viet Nam Living Standards Survey (VNLSS), which surveyed 4,800 households in Vietnam. Rural and urban women traded primarily in food products, both on the wholesale and retail ends. Most trade was very small-scale. Hanoi food commodity traders made \$2–3 a day in the mid-1990s. A male *xích-lô* driver could make as much as \$5 a day. Seasonal construction work brought in marginally more income. Women worked on construction crews (street crews and construction sites), where they made more than from trading but less than men. Many of the women who did this work in Hanoi were from rural areas.
- 16 Other businesses in the *xã* included transport, paddy milling, tailoring, and carpentry.
- 17 The rental fee was \$60 a year on a 20-year contract (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã Quang, *Báo cáo thực hiện*, 1993).
- 18 Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã Quang, *Báo cáo tình hình*, 1994.
- 19 See Abrami 94–116.
- 20 According to Kerkvliet 220–227. The major *Đổi Mới* policy documents continued to refer to the household economy as a family economy (*kinh tế gia đình*), but Resolution 5 (1993) used the term *hộ gia đình*, as well as *kinh tế hộ xã viên* (cooperative members' household economy). Another formulation was *hộ nông dân* (peasant household).
- 21 Communist Party of Vietnam, "Political Report."
- 22 Because of its proximity to Hanoi, Quang *xã* did not experience the phenomenon of female-headed households as did other villages in the delta that had been depopulated by men in search of work, leaving women behind to tend the fields. According to the World Bank, 27 percent of households in Vietnam in 1993 were headed by females as a result of internal migration. Female-headed households on average were not worse off than male-headed households, according to the statistical data, but anecdotal and other evidence suggests there was a large percentage of female-headed households among the poorest rural households. See Desai; Trần Thị Vân Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng; Lê Thi, *Gia đình phụ nữ*.
- 23 Following the land reform (1956–1957) and the formation of the agricultural cooperative. In 1981, the *xã* implemented Directive 100, which delegated certain agricultural tasks to the household from the cooperative. I was told that Contract 100, as it was commonly known, was initially received well but that taxes were enormously high, and when yields began to decline, some people did not have enough to eat. The three-stage transfer of collective land to peasant households

- in Quang xã followed successive national legislation: (1) the 1987 Land Law; (2) the 1988 Resolution 10, also known as Contract 10; and (3) the 1993 Revised Land law.
- 24 Households could request specific parcels after the land classification maps were drawn up, but they were not always satisfied with their allocations. The 1993 Land Law retained state land ownership in principle but allowed households to lease, exchange, transfer, inherit, and mortgage their land-use rights.
- 25 Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã Quang, *Báo cáo thực hiện*, 1993.
- 26 Women in some villages in the Red River delta did not get their full allocation of land, nor were they issued titles in their own rather than their husband's names. Further, women heads of household in some villages were allotted poorer, less fertile pieces of land. There were reports in the 1990s that poor women with unpaid debts to the agricultural cooperative did not receive their full allocation or forfeited their right to receive land until their debts had been repaid. Some reports have claimed that discrimination against women resulted from the patriarchal attitudes of xã land committees dominated by men.
- 27 As explained by one of the hamlet chiefs, before *Đổi Mới* land was “cheap” and much easier to obtain for setting up a new household (*tách hộ*).
- 28 Although according to one of the hamlet chiefs, many families were planting two crops of rice and were starting to experiment with a winter crop of vegetables.
- 29 This was in line with the Hanoi Municipal Communist Party's program of rural development, which urged its agricultural villages to diversify agricultural production, both to raise incomes and produce a variety of products that could be sold in the urban market. The program also focused on infrastructure improvements including schools and clinics, achieving Cấp II educational level, developing rural industry and services, and solving environmental problems (see Phạm Thế Duyệt).
- 30 The xã was also trying to incorporate a state complex of factories and residences just across the river into its administrative boundaries to increase its population and tax base. This area included a paint factory and an engineering works and comprised 489 households (2,447 people). Xã residents had been employed in these factories for decades and there had been longstanding social and marital ties between the two communities.
- 31 Historically, xã residents were peasant farmers. According to the 1921 census, only 11 families out of 345 were identified as traders (*ngườì buôn bán*), with the others listed as “cultivators.”
- 32 Data is for 1995. Out of 215 households, 67 were agricultural households, 17 were wage-earning households, and 131 were mixed households.
- 33 Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã Quang, *Báo cáo tình hình*, 1995.
- 34 In fact, 20 percent of Quang xã's fields appeared to be farmed by migrants from other provinces, according to officials to whom I spoke.
- 35 Under optimal weather conditions: enough rain and no flooding.
- 36 After taxes were deducted, about 800–900 kg *thóc* was left, barely enough to feed a family of five for a year.
- 37 A good plowman could work 5–7 *mẫu* in one season depending on the strength of the buffalo, and get around 2,500,000 *đồng* (\$250). One *mẫu* comprises 36 *sào*.
- 38 Several plenums following the Congress focused on rural development, including the 5th Plenum (June 3–11, 1993), which adopted the goal of ending rural poverty by 2000 by diversifying the rural economy and stemming rural migration into the cities, which Secretary General Đỗ Mười termed “leave the fields, but not the villages” (see Đỗ Mười).
- 39 Household survey; data is for 1995. \$282 equaled 3,110,084 *đồng*, and \$332 equaled 3,652,680 *đồng*. By way of comparison, average per capita expenditures for all of Vietnam in 1993 was \$100, according to Socialist Republic of Vietnam (Ủy Ban Kế Hoạch Nhà Nước/Tổng Cục Thống Kê).

- 40 Based on my analysis of 20 households, plus their completed questionnaires from the household survey.
- 41 Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Xã Quang, *Báo cáo tình hình*, 1995. The *xã*'s report does not specify on how many households its figures were based. The *xã*'s socio-economic classification in its 1996 annual report reflected common conceptions of wealth and poverty: rich (*giàu*), well-off (*khá*), middle-level or average (*trung bình*), lacking (*kém*), and poor (*nghèo*).
- 42 Similarly inflated production figures had been strategies to obtain more assistance during the subsidized era (*thời gian bao cấp*).
- 43 A number of economists argue that the household economy was a significant feature of the early *Đổi Mới* economy in Vietnam as a whole. Melanie Beresford notes the importance of household production (both rural and urban) during the early *Đổi Mới* years in terms of employment and percentage of GDP (Beresford 79). Vijverberg and Haughton argue that non-farm household enterprises were crucial to the transition period "before the formal sector dominates," with one-fourth of all adults working in such enterprises in 1998 in combination with farming or another occupation (Vijverberg and Haughton 96, 124). Ronnas concurs that domestic enterprises were important to the first decade of *Đổi Mới*.
- 44 Other mass associations in the *xã* included the Old Persons' Association, the Committee of Retired People, the Red Cross Association, and the Gardeners' Association.
- 45 Girls' enrollment in Cấp II generally averaged around 90 percent of boys' enrollment in the first decade of *Đổi Mới*, although it fell to 77 percent in 1995–1996, according to figures given to me by the principal of the school. However, graduation rates were high, from 90 to 100 percent.
- 46 The Good People, Good Work, and Repay Moral Debts campaigns were cited by Phạm Thế Duyệt, party secretary of the Hanoi Municipal Party as important mass association programs in the rural development plans of the municipality.
- 47 See Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Xã Quang; Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*.
- 48 Family planning decisions were not always made by married women themselves, given the pressure to have male children. When discussing women's marital rights, hamlet chief Mrs. San said that in her view, "women have to accept the desires of their husbands." Vietnam issued a new population and family planning policy in 1988, with an upper limit of two children per family, relying on educational and non-coercive methods. At the local level, the People's Committees, mass associations such as the Women's Association, and health clinics had the responsibility for monitoring and reducing population growth. In 1989 the population growth rate was between 2.2–2.4 percent per year; in 1990, the government's goal was to reduce this to 1.7 percent. See Vũ Quý Nhàn; Phạm Bích San.
- 49 Gammeltoft rightly points out that reproductive policy was tied to a discourse of "happy families," but this new vision of the family was linked to both the production and reproductive goals of the state.
- 50 This was part of the Repay Moral Debts (*Đền ơn đáp nghĩa*) campaign. Mass associations not only had their own activities but were responsible for carrying out the party's policies in general.
- 51 In my 1996 couples' survey, 369 out of 440 husbands and wives said that equality had already been achieved. The question asked was: "In your opinion, what is the position (*vị trí*) of women compared to men in the countryside today? higher, equal (*bình đẳng*), or lower?"
- 52 The widespread division in the conception of gender equality into social equality and equality in the family is based on a Confucian division of social units. The Confucian social system comprises the individual, the family, the state, and the world, and the Confucian ideal is to achieve harmony among these levels by "perfecting" each

of them (*tu thân, tề gia, trị quốc, bình thiên hạ*: self-formation, serve the family, govern the country, and pacify the world).

53 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*.

54 Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Constitutions*.

55 See, for instance, Vũ Khiêu.

56 Women symbolize Vietnamese national identity as opposed not only to the West but also to China. It is the non-Chinese and Southeast Asian attributes of the Vietnamese family, Vietnamese culture, and the role of women that often emerges in official studies of Vietnamese tradition or culture. For Vietnam, the Other is often a historically constructed Han China. Vietnamese cultural historians have argued that Vietnamese popular culture “resisted” Chinese Confucianism. The role played by women in the family, economy, and society was an important element in their conception of the uniqueness of Vietnamese civilization and culture. As such, popular culture has been interpreted as being more Southeast Asian than Sinic. Historically speaking, not only was women’s position much higher than it was in China, but women in Vietnam took primary responsibility for maintaining their family’s wealth (while also contributing to it), giving them an important voice in family affairs. See Phan Ngọc for an exposition of this view.

57 It appeared that military veterans who had served in the American war were favored members of the *xã* party cell; in one such case known to the author, a veteran who was unusually active in a number of businesses in the *xã* that required licenses from the local government, and perhaps party protection, was a party member. On the other hand, having spent many years in the military, this individual had received training and exposure to the outside world that undoubtedly aided his business skills. The abuse of official connections in the *xã* was acknowledged in a 1996 *xã* Veterans’ Association report that remarked “some members were taking advantage of loopholes in economic contracts to gain unjustified profits at the expense of the people’s land resources” (Hội Cựu Chiến Binh Xã Quang). Illegal land sales by municipal party officials in Quang *xã* were also mentioned in a letter accusing the municipal party head Phạm Thế Duyệt of corruption that was sent to Lê Khả Phiêu, Secretary General of the Party, in 1998 by “senior revolutionaries in the party.” *Đoàn Nhân Đạo* and ten other signatories, “Letter from the Hearts to Improve the Party” (Hanoi May 1, 1998), <http://www.fva.org/0898story04.htm>, accessed December 10, 1998. This letter does not directly implicate Quang *xã* officials, however.

58 See Nguyễn Khắc Trường for a vivid fictional account of lineage politics in the Red River delta.

59 Several of the *xã*’s lineages had ancient roots, according to their representatives. Historically, some lineages may have dominated the present-day *thôn*, but by the 1990s, each *thôn* contained five or more lineages. Based on current evidence, it was difficult to deduce whether the original settlements in the *thôn* or the *xã* were lineage-based or not, despite the fact that some lineages were more numerically prominent than others in some of the *thôn*.

60 These heads were also senior cadres in the *xã*. It was impossible to compile a lineage profile of the *xã* based on the Civil Register because married women’s lineages were not identifiable by name alone. Although married women continued to use their own names, women usually had the middle name of *Thị*, such as Nguyễn Thị Nga, obscuring their lineage membership in, for instance, the Nguyễn Đăng or the Nguyễn Duy lineage. Men, on the other hand, carried the full lineage patronym.

61 The famous Chu lineage *gia phả* was of recent origin (1902) and fragmentary when I asked about it. Its major gaps are due to some branches’ evidently being forced to change their name to Nguyễn in the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, the eldest living male claimed the lineage went back 26 generations. The Chu lineage, based in Văn *thôn*, had 251 members in 1996.

- 62 See Nguyễn Tùng.
- 63 I attended two engagement parties and one wedding party while working in the *xã*. At the wedding, the bride, who had been chauffeured in a car to her new in-laws' house, wore a long, white wedding dress. During the ceremony, she kowtowed in front of her husband's ancestral altar and performed other rites to initiate her into her new family. New practices were also observed by Krowolski; also see Malarney 216.
- 64 Hội Cựu Chiến Binh Xã Quang; Phan Đại Doãn, "Về dòng họ". As for the linkage between veterans and the revival of lineage organizations, Phan Đại Doãn notes that veterans, state cadres, and educated members of society have all been active in reviving lineage and family networks in the north. Phan Đại Doãn, "Về dòng họ" and "Tìm hiểu". The current lineage revival, however, differs from past lineage practices. Lineage organizations today rely on cash contributions rather than worship land (*huong hoa*) for their ritual activities. Also, lineages do not always designate the eldest patriarch (*trưởng tộc*) as head of the lineage organization; other senior males can assume this position, including those in junior branches. Lineage meetings and ceremonies also assemble kin from near and far, whereas in the past, clans tended to reside in the same *thôn* or *xã*.
- 65 Both conventions were *xã*-wide rules, that is, written at the level of the *xã*. In both conventions, the "*khao vọng*" banquet, which important men hosted, entailed an elaborate set of rules. The *khao vọng* banquet, held in the *đình*, could commemorate a local official appointment, a candidate's successful examination results, or the appointment to a mandarin post for a member of one's lineage. Male officials were initiated into their ranks and hence social position by virtue of this banquet. If the banquet were not held, a man could not attain the prestige his position entailed. Women and certain classes of men were not permitted access to this ranking and honorific system and consequently held no special social status.
- 66 Xã Quang, *Quy ước Làng Văn Hoá*, January 1998. The People's Committee organized a public meeting to discuss the new rules and then instructed all the *thôn* to do the same, approving and publishing the rules in 1998, after they had been approved by the district. One of the History Committee members was a former *chủ tịch* who had served 11 years (2 terms). Official representations of the *xã*'s history and traditions were part of the state's general approach to narrate the lessons of the past, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.
- 67 Quang *xã* has two tutelary deities, one housed in the *đình* near the People's Committee offices and the other in a temple at the far end of the *xã*. Before 1945, women were not allowed access to the *đình*, the sacred and political center of the *xã*. In the 1990s, when the *xã* started to use the *đình* for meetings, albeit in a much-reduced capacity compared to the past, women cadres sat on floor mats just like men. The *đình* was built in 1765.
- 68 Vasavakul 75.

3 State Discourses and the Family Household

The objective of women's emancipation today is to improve women's material and spiritual life and their social position, and to enforce gender equality. It consists in helping them build prosperous, equality, progressive and happy families. It also consists in helping Vietnamese women to be healthy, well-educated, kind-hearted, dynamic, and enterprising citizens who know how to enrich themselves legitimately and who are concerned about the interests of society and the community as a whole. The cause of the emancipation of women and the mobilization of women are the responsibility of the Party, the State, and the mass organizations, the whole society, and each family. [The objective of Program 1 is to] create jobs for women, care for their livelihood and health, guarantee their work security and social insurance, and defend their interests . . . so that women can fulfill their two functions, namely social labor and bearing children and raising them.¹

In the 1990s, given the economic agenda of *Đổi Mới*, the household had assumed a vital development function full of nationalist significance. Local officials in *Quang xã* pinned their hopes for prosperity on the household economy and the industriousness of its members. While the kinship system in the *xã* was decidedly patrilineal, the state focused its attention on the household and the conjugal couple because of their value to the development agenda. Women as the target of state goals and programs therefore continued to have public and economic significance despite the return of the household to a more independent status. The national Women's Union spelled out the goals for women in 1992:

– improve [women's] knowledge with regard to economic management, credit, new techniques regarding crops, livestock, traditional handicrafts, housework (*nữ công gia chánh*), and social services.

– improve [women's] knowledge and experience in organizing their family life, family planning, raising children, maintaining their health, and maintaining family happiness in order to build stable families.

[. . .]

– family planning is the work of all of society and especially the responsibility of women and the Women’s Association, because the future and happiness of all the people, above all the future happiness of women, depends on it.²

The *Đổi Mới* family was thus linked to a discourse of modernity derived from the reproductive and development goals of the state and was based on the idea that the Vietnamese family would achieve “happiness” (*hạnh phúc*) by following state policies. The main slogan for the *Đổi Mới* era, “Rich population, strong country, an equitable and civilized society” (*dân giàu, nước mạnh, xã hội công bằng, văn minh*), was portrayed as a function of economic growth and planned parenthood. The image of the “happy, small family” was one of the more prominent subject categories promoted by the *Đổi Mới* state. A huge banner in red letters with the *Đổi Mới* slogan hung above the dais in the second-floor meeting hall of the *xã*’s central office. The *Đổi Mới* state’s focus on the household thus underscored the importance of women as producers and reproducers.

At the same time, however, starting in the early 1990s, the state took a series of initiatives to strengthen the family as a bulwark against the disintegrative effects of market change, which was linked to a broader campaign to stem cultural “pollution” coming from “noxious” “social evils.”³ The state and party renewed its efforts to “emancipate women” in the context of preserving “the traditional family” in the face of pernicious influences coming from the West. Women in the family were the focus of these family and cultural campaigns because they were the “most efficient link in family culture: they are the soul of the family and the warm sentimental fire of the family.”⁴

Women’s new roles in the household and the *Đổi Mới* state’s pro-family policies thus meant that family relationships had become more important than in the socialist or wartime past in shaping gender dynamics. Family relations in Quang *xã* were now mediated by both the market and the state but also tied to the existing kinship structure and patterns of family behavior. The *Đổi Mới* state’s new emphasis on the household and the family therefore made it particularly important to my project to investigate the actual function and form of the household and the role of kinship and how these affected structures of hierarchy in the family. To do so, I examined the *xã*’s household structure and residential features, kinship and marital patterns, and family headships, as well as gendered work practices and their associated discourses. As we shall see, the family exhibited many patriarchal features, although mitigating factors gave women more power than is often assumed.

Pro-Family State Discourses

The first decade of *Đổi Mới* was marked by official concerns that the family was in serious decline and that family “traditions” were being eroded by the

market economy and the opening to the outside world. Government publications and the state-controlled media carried stories about stresses and strains on families due to their new economic responsibilities, undesirable influences coming from the outside world, and the temptations and greed associated with making money. The *Đổi Mới* media took a particularly keen interest in family affairs in the 1990s, while women's publications publicized sources of conflicts (*mâu thuẫn*) in the family, airing urgent debates about the "modern" family. The media prompted discussions about unstable families, marital discord, and juvenile delinquency and offered advice on how to solve these problems.

Following the 7th Party Congress (1992), the state mounted a campaign to promote "cultured families" in order to preserve Vietnam's finest "national traditions." Cultured families would uphold traditional Vietnamese values and customs, educate the young in ethics, and guard against alien cultural influences.⁵ As Lê Khả Phiêu, secretary general of the Communist Party, put it,

Social evils are on the increase, both in urban and rural areas, eroding the cultural traditions and good customs and practices of our nation. The 5th Plenum of the Party Central Committee has pointed out that, along with the improvement of the material conditions, it is necessary to develop the cultural and spiritual life of peasants, to resolve social problems in rural areas and in the whole country, to promote an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity. The Vietnam Fatherland Front, the Vietnamese Peasants Association, along with all other mass organizations, should well carry out the movement "Let the whole people unite in the building of a cultural life." It is necessary to build cultural households, cultural villages, and village conventions on the basis of the law of the State; to organize various forms of entertainment clubs, to promote cultural traditions of the nation and the good customs and practices of localities, to promote a new style of life; to eliminate bad customs and superstitions; to organize cultural, artistic, literary, and sport movements to draw peasants' participation; to make rural areas increasingly richer and more civilized.⁶

The Social Evils campaign, efforts to stem the "disintegration of the family," and cultured families were linked patriarchal state discourses anchored in narratives of loss – of culture, tradition, and morality – which Communist Party ideologues used to assert their control over the party in the mid-1990s. These discourses signaled a shift from revolutionary discourses geared toward fighting external enemies to authoritarian discourses that focused on internal enemies, such as social deviants obliquely identified with the "depraved" culture of the former Saigon regime. The revolutionary metanarrative of national identity, rooted in a discourse of rural and communal belonging, was no longer relevant to the ideological needs of the new age and economic realities of *Đổi Mới*. Hence the search for something else to take its place.⁷

According to the new discourse, “new culture families” would stem the spread of noxious culture coming from abroad and “enhance the knowledge of the aesthetic sense of the people.”⁸ The cultured family was defined as exemplifying “family harmony” (*gia đình hòa thuận*), implementing family planning, strengthening solidarity with neighbors, and fulfilling the obligations of citizens.⁹ Further, an “advanced national culture,” the backdrop to this campaign, was seen as essential to ensuring social stability. In Lê Khả Phiêu’s words, “In the present context, culture is even more closely linked to social stability, to national security, to the nation, with a need to develop the material and cultural life of society.”¹⁰

In addition to the Cultured Family campaign, the state also began to voice concerns that *Đôi Mói* was posing a threat to the multi-generational family, particularly the three-generational family. Officials sounded alarms that the decollectivization of land and the market economy were accelerating the spread of nuclear households at the expense of the residential three-generational family unit. According to a government source, the rate of growth in nuclear families was outstripping that of population growth.¹¹ This seemed to augur a trend found in Western countries where the elderly no longer lived with their children. Given the state’s dependence on the family to provide for the elderly, this alarming trend garnered national attention. Trương Mỹ Hoa, president of the Vietnamese Women’s Union, suggested in 1996 that this trend indicated that the family was in a state of crisis (*biến động*). While acknowledging that nuclear families promoted greater equality between men and women, Trương Mỹ Hoa also argued that nuclearization did not bode well for taking care of elderly parents, raising children, and solving common economic problems.¹²

During the revision of the Law on Marriage and the Family in the National Assembly in 2000, heated debates about the multi-generational family took place. Some delegates proposed a new provision, Article 49, which stated that “the State encourages the maintenance and development of the multi-generational family, with the aim of preserving and promoting the fine traditions of the Vietnamese family.” Another new proposal, Article 35, on the responsibilities of children towards their parents, stated that children needed to “listen hard” (*lắng nghe*) to their parents, meaning to obey them. This language was ridiculed by other delegates, who said it was inappropriate for adult children, suggesting the language be softened to *nghe theo* – “listen and follow.”¹³ The final text included both new provisions, as follows:

Article 35: Obligations and rights of children. Children have the duty to love, respect, and demonstrate gratitude and piety [*hiếu thảo*] toward their parents, listen hard [*lắng nghe*] to their good counsel, and preserve the good traditions and prestige of their families. Children are obliged and entitled to care for and support their parents. Children are strictly forbidden to ill-treat, persecute, or dishonor their parents.

Article 49: Relations among family members. Co-residing family members are obliged to care for and help one another, and sustain and contribute their labor, money, and other property to maintain their family livelihood in proportion to their individual income and capability. All family members are entitled to mutual care and help from other family members. Their legitimate rights and interests are respected and protected by law. The State encourages and creates the conditions for all generations in the family to care for and help one another in order to preserve and promote the fine traditions of the Vietnamese family.¹⁴

While some state officials called for the preservation of the traditional family, others suggested that the family needed to adapt to the modern era. The work of Lê Thi, an important academic official in charge of state-funded research on women and the family in Hanoi, offered an officially acceptable view of the tensions confronting the *Đôi Mói* family. Examining the merits of both the traditional and modern forms of the family, she argued that the family always transmitted Vietnamese national culture (primarily through women) and that under *Đôi Mói*, the family provided a refuge for raising children in a time of economic uncertainty and instability. Therefore the family had a very important role to play in social policy. Families provided social stability, psychological and moral support for both adults and children, and important social services, especially given the loss of the social safety net formerly provided by the state, while they also played a significant role in the economic development of the country.¹⁵

Nonetheless, in her view, the Vietnamese family needed to adopt certain features of the modern model, particularly in terms of the way they conducted their internal affairs. Here Lê Thi made a forceful argument that women needed to be “emancipated” in modern families. Such families showed concern for wives’ individual happiness and followed a “civilized” way of life. Individual happiness meant that women should not be needlessly sacrificed in the name of the family but that their own self-development must be addressed. Their individual interests also needed to be taken into account. Modern families needed to foster a sense of independence and creativity on the part of both husbands and wives, who needed to have the requisite knowledge, fortitude, and initiative to confront and contribute to the market economy. In Lê Thi’s view, family “democracy” was essential to the *Đôi Mói* family because it was the only way women’s maturity and self-confidence could be developed. Wives needed to be able to participate in making decisions with their husbands, who could no longer rule the household arbitrarily. Modern families prioritized love between spouses and equal education and inheritance for boys and girls, limited the number of children they had and respected children’s rights. Lê Thi strongly criticized rigidly patriarchal families as well as those that allowed adult men to elude their financial, ethical, and parental responsibilities. But, in her view, the *Đôi Mói* family also had to accommodate the needs of the elderly, and she cautiously advocated the three-generation

family. Modern families thus combined the best of both worlds: they observed filial piety towards parents, promoted high ethical standards, and raised their children to contribute to society, but they needed to be also based on love and mutual faithfulness between spouses. Therefore, on balance, the state needed to manage both the modern and the traditional features of the family, keeping both in balance.¹⁶

What is striking about these state discourses is their shift from viewing gender equality in terms of social equity to seeing it as a function of relations within the family. As we have seen, in the pre-*Đổi Mới* era, women's equality was almost exclusively defined in terms of social equality rather than in terms of individual relations between men and women in the family. Under *Đổi Mới*, state equality discourses began to shift from conceptions of social equality in the public realm to new definitions of equality in the family, which included a blend of traditional and modern prescriptions of gender relations. While the state had always viewed "the emancipation of women" through the prism of its own goals and agenda, this was the first time that "equality" began to include gender relations within the family. The new discourse of "liberating women in the family" carried specific definitions of women's equality. It was based on what was deemed to be women's individual interests, personal development, and economic needs, while improving their cultural awareness, furthering their education and technical training, and improving their skills in household management, and supporting their efforts to care for children and the elderly.¹⁷ Child care was thus still assumed to be primarily women's responsibility; very rarely did state discourses refer to the need for husbands to share housework with their wives. Relations between wives and husbands were a topic of concern, however, as wives were urged to become fuller partners with their husbands in household decision-making.¹⁸ Official state discourses abounded with paeans to improving women's happiness and their quality of life without referring to women's rights or to improving their standing in the family as ways to achieve these goals.

The state's prescriptions of gender equality, therefore, began to take a broader view to include relations within the family. This reflected a subtle shift from viewing women's emancipation as "the woman question" to linking women to issues of the family.¹⁹ As Lê Thi and others pointed out, the state could no longer ignore nor deny that relations within the family affected the overall equation of gender equality, which was no longer merely a question of social equity. If gender equality now extended to the realm of the family, patently unequal relations between men and women in the family could not be ignored. When pressed, state officials responsible for women's issues were forced to admit that the state was less interested in actual gender equality than in families that practiced "family equality."²⁰ "Equality families" were meant to be "progressive," "happy," and "prosperous" (*no ấm*), meaning they needed to develop their family economy and increase their incomes. Further, "equality families" did not mean abandoning hierarchy

in the family, as Trương Mỹ Hoa, the president of the national Women's Union, elaborated in 1994:

we need to reject the mistaken idea that equality means not maintaining family hierarchies (*tôn ti trật tự*), and that everything in the family should be equally shared, etc. Building equality families means continuing the good aspects of the Vietnamese family from previous times until now: [“]inferiors show respect; superiors show patience[”], harmony, and loyalty.²¹

Trương Mỹ Hoa's statement demonstrated the inherent contradiction in the *Đổi Mới* state's policies of gender equality and promoting the equality family.

Kinship and Household Structure in Quang Xã

While it was clear the *Đổi Mới* state was promoting conservative family values after decades of revolutionary discourse, I found no evidence that the family in Quang xã was disintegrating or in the throes of crisis or profound change. The family in fact seemed remarkably robust and reinvigorated as a result of the market reforms. Comparing current data to that from the colonial censuses of 1921 and 1926 indicated that household structure had remained stable over the course of the twentieth century, as discussed below. In the 1990s, the kinship system was patrilineal, although deeper examination of the structure and inner dynamics of actual families showed that they were in fact quite complex and fluid and involved complementary and mitigating forms and forces that gave women more power than was often evident or assumed. Chief among these was the preference for a kin-defined “small family” residential unit within a broader patrilineal system. The market economy and state cultural policies had reinvigorated certain aspects of male familial authority, while women's economic roles in the household, as delineated in Chapter 2 and discussed further in Chapter 4, gave them financial and economic leverage. At the same time, I found that conceptions about the sexual division of labor in the family were highly gendered.

“Family” in Quang xã had many layers of meaning: it could mean the large extended family represented by the lineage (*dòng họ*) or the small family (*gia đình nhỏ*), and the small family could be a separate residential, neo-local unit or part of a multi-unit household. One's family could thus include not only one's immediate family, but all of one's paternal and maternal kin. People in Quang xã referred to the family (*gia đình*) as both patrilineal and matrilineal kin related through marriage and bloodlines. The family and household (*hộ*) were interrelated, although not necessarily co-terminous. One family could comprise one or more households. The family as household was also a social and economic unit (*đơn vị kinh tế, xã hội*) recognized and legitimized by the state, as discussed in Chapter 2. Statist features of the family were thus articulated through the household. However, family and

household came together in the *Đổi Mới* term “family household” (*hộ gia đình*), which reflected both its kinship and statist features.

The family household (*hộ gia đình*) was the family unit that, in its most basic sense, ate together (*ăn chung*). Eating together implied living in the same household, making common decisions, pooling labor and income, and functioning as one unit. Apart from this, however, the household took all sorts of configurations. Household composition in Quang *xã* was rarely fixed and was affected by many factors. When a married son and his wife left his parental household, they may literally have lived next door, in an attached house separated by little more than a wall. But they no longer ate together, and decisions were made and work was usually done separately. On the other hand, a household could comprise several separate residential units in which all the family members pooled their income and shared a common economy.

In Quang *xã*, I found that pooling labor and income was a less reliable indicator of what constituted a household than eating together. Labor, especially fieldwork, was often pooled across different kinds of households. Income came into and was managed on a separate household basis, but non-cash economic resources and cross-household transfers complicated this equation.²² Eating together implied functioning as a common unit and making decisions together.²³ When residents referred to *ăn riêng*, or eating separately, what they usually meant was that the family unit had its own separate finances, although it may have lived under the same roof with another unit. In general, a household was a unit that ate together, slept in the same house, pooled its income, and budgeted together, or as it is expressed in Vietnamese, “shares an economy.” Residence and labor may have been shared, but if revenue, rice, and meals were separate, a household was considered a separate unit.

The kinship system in Quang *xã* was patrilineal, but actual residential patterns favored small, neo-local residential units at the expense of large extended families.²⁴ The most common form of household residence in the *xã* in the 1990s was the neo-local household. According to the household survey conducted by this study, 52 percent of all households in the 1990s were composed of a couple and their unmarried children, or a single parent with children. The large extended family was a rarity. Only 10 percent of households comprised three or more units or four generations living together. Of these, only 15 (out of 215) were characterized by two brothers who lived together in the same house with their wives and children.

Patrilineality was observed in the form of three-generation and patrilocal residential patterns, preference for sons, and descent and inheritance through the father’s line. Regardless of the residence type, patrilineal inheritance was almost always the rule. The family house and residential land would be inherited by the son who continued to live with his parents and would pass it on to one of his sons. Although rice land (*ruộng đất*) was not officially inheritable at the time of the study, residential land was. Families practiced partible inheritance for residential land (which included a garden

plot and large courtyard), by which parents tried to follow an equal division of assets to sons, although the son who planned to live with them would get more.

Patrilineality was also practiced in the widespread, if not numerically dominant, practice of patrilocality, in which newlyweds moved into the husband's family home upon marriage. This was called following the husband (*theo chồng*); the young bride was called a child daughter-in-law (*con dâu*), placing her on a clearly subordinate footing with her mother-in-law.²⁵ Early fertility was strongly encouraged in the village, where it was seen as a filial obligation, thereby cementing the marriage and conferring a sense of respectability on the daughter-in-law.²⁶ Daughters-in-law were expected to contribute to the economic resources of their husbands' families, and it was anticipated that they and their husbands would eventually provide the chief labor and income to their households.

Parents almost never lived alone, as they needed a child to take care of them in their old age. If a couple had two daughters and no sons, they could have one of their daughters and her husband live with them, a practice known as *con rể*. Despite the apparent success of the family planning program in the *xã*, some couples who only had daughters kept trying for a son even if by so doing they incurred penalties from the authorities. Having a son was preferable to *con rể*, which depended on a daughter's husband agreeing to live with his in-laws.²⁷

Of the 215 households in the household survey (one-fifth of all households in the *xã*), 97 followed patrilocal residential patterns. Most were three-generational and included the husband's parents, the husband and daughter-in-law, and children. (For a breakdown of these numbers, see Table 3.1.)

The next large group of households was composed of 104 true neo-local or nuclear households comprising a couple and their children, which combined with seven single-parent households came to a total of 111 nuclear households. These households fit the definition of a nuclear family: living as a single unit, a two-generational household, and a separate residence. Living separately here refers to being independent from a multi-unit household that includes a third generation or multiple siblings.

In Vietnam, a nuclear family (*gia đình hạt nhân*) is defined as one that eats together (*ăn chung*), lives together (*sống chung*), has a combined economy (*kinh tế chung*), and does not rely on their relatives to keep themselves afloat. Yet in Quang *xã* these households did not function entirely like nuclear households in Western countries, as they also existed in conjunction with the pattern of patrilocal residence and the rules guiding the system of patrilineal descent.

For instance, married couples in Quang *xã* did not begin their lives together in neo-local households but rather lived with the husband's parents until they were able to acquire land and build a separate house. When the couple's children started to reach maturity, the cycle was continued as they made plans to have a son (if they had one) live in the household with his new bride, such

Table 3.1 Family Structure of Households in Quang Xã

| Single-unit households | | Number of Households |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| <i>Neo-Local Two-Generation</i> | | |
| Husband, wife, and children | | 104 |
| Single parent and children | | 7 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 111 |
| Multi-unit households | | |
| <i>Two-Generation Lateral</i> | | |
| Brother and family and his older sister and her child | | 1 |
| Grandparents, 2 sons, 2 daughters-in-law, no children | | 1 |
| Two brothers and families share a courtyard | | 2 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 4 |
| <i>Two- and Three-Generation Patrilocal</i> | | |
| Grandparent(s), parents, and children ¹ | | 56 |
| Grandparent(s), daughter-in-law, and children ¹ | | 3 |
| Parents, married couple, no children | | 5 |
| Grandparents, parents, and children with one additional lateral unit and <i>either</i> lives together, eats together, or shares economy | | 4 |
| Neo-local or three-generation patrilocal and shares courtyard with parents and/or siblings | | 6 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 74 |
| <i>Three-Generation Patrilocal or Mixed Patri-/Matrilocal with Two or Three Lateral Units</i> | | |
| Grandparents, 2 or 3 sons, daughters-in-law and children | | 6 |
| Grandparents, son, daughter-in-law and children, and shares courtyard with 2 other sons | | 5 |
| Grandparents, 2 sons, daughters-in-law and children, and daughter and her child | | 2 |
| Grandparents, son, daughter-in-law and children, and daughter, son-in-law and children | | 1 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 14 |
| <i>Four-Generation Patrilocal</i> | | |
| Great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and children | | 5 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 5 |
| MATRILOCAL HOUSEHOLDS | | |
| Three-generation: grandparents, daughter, son-in-law, and children | | 6 |
| Four-generation: great grandmother, grandmother, daughter, son-in-law and children | | 1 |
| | SUBTOTAL | 7 |
| | TOTAL | 215 |

Note

¹ Living as a single unit.

as by adding on a room to the house. Nor did the couple maintain a neo-local household as they grew old. If they found it difficult to support themselves alone or if one of them died, they would live with one of their married children. If the eldest son and the second child had moved out, leaving only the third child, a son, the parents would continue to live in the family house with their youngest son, who would then inherit the family house and land. If the youngest child was a daughter, when she married and left the household, arrangements would be made for the elderly parents to live with one of their sons, which might or might not involve a move. Only in cases where unmarried adult children were still left in the household would the original nuclear couple continue to live by themselves.

Furthermore, virtually all these nuclear households followed patrilineal rules of descent, worshipped the ancestors of the husband's family line, and planned to pass inheritance to sons and not to daughters. Sons would inherit the most valuable family property: the land and the family house. While this property was sometimes divided among all the children if ample enough, if scarce, it would be left to the son who ended up taking care of the parents. The expenses for the cult of the ancestors and family commemoration ceremonies such as *giỗ/Tết* would also be borne by this son and his family, which also justified why he and his family inherited the family house.

These households were also different from Western nuclear families in that there was an integral relationship between the 97 patrilocal three-generational households and the 111 neo-local households that did not assume responsibility for taking care of Father and Mother. For one thing, these households, while nominally nuclear, were formed within a larger patrilineal set of practices. They were nuclear during only part of their household cycle. The household cycle went from birth to marriage: living with one's parents and siblings until marriage, then living with the husband's parents until the birth of one or two children. With a growing family, the young family would move out (*tách hộ*) to establish a new residence until all their children were grown, when the couple would either stay with the last child in the family or, if all the children had established separate households, would choose one of their sons to move in with.²⁸ Households thus moved to and from neo-locality to patrilocality rather simply and with ease.

This transition was facilitated in Quang *xã* by the process of residential or household division (*tách hộ*). Nuclear families (parents and young children) would live in a family house on a plot of residential land (*đất thổ cư*) that was usually rearranged or divided in order to prepare for the first son's marriage and co-residence when he reached maturity. Because land was so scarce and rice land was not supposed to be converted to residential land, families with sons tried to divide their living space into smaller units, somewhat like cell division, to accommodate sons' residential needs.²⁹ If there was only one son, the side room in the existing house might be converted into a separate residence, an extension added to the main house, a side building converted to a house, or a new house built in the garden or courtyard.

In Mr. Nguyễn Hữu Công's household, for example, the original neo-local household comprised his wife and himself and their four children, three sons and a daughter. When their first son married, part of the house was sectioned off for the new couple's residence. Their second son married and moved out, building a new house in the same *thôn*. Their daughter married and joined the household of her husband's parents. The youngest child, a son, still lived at home with his parents. When their eldest son and his wife had a child, the residence that had originally housed a couple and their children then housed a three-generational household, the couple and their last child living on one side and their first son and his wife and young child living on the other. As in the case of five of the households studied, the original couple was caring for either the husband's or the wife's parents; with the marriage of one of their sons, a four-generation unit was formed. Residential and household patterns in the *xã* thus formed a kind of residential continuum from separate two-generation households to shared four-generation households.

Although division could produce a separate household and be registered as such in the *xã*, a new household remained part of the original household in many ways. Two nearby households often shared a common economy and budgeted or ate together. Therefore, separation was a relative term. Nine households in the sample of 215 provide an illustration. In five of these cases, separately registered households were contained within a sort of multi-generational compound grouped around a common courtyard. In these households, the courtyard was shared with the husband's or the wife's parents or with the husband's brother and his family or both. While these five households lived, ate, and budgeted separately, they in fact lived within the same enclosure, since they shared a common gate into the compound.³⁰

In four other cases, separation was less clear. These all had two family units living under one roof but did not eat together and had separate economies. In Mrs. Đinh Thị Hạnh's case, for instance, she lived with her 35-year-old unmarried daughter in the same house as her son and his wife and four children. Although the two family units lived under the same roof, they ate separately and did not share an economy. While these family units were registered in the *xã* separately, they fit into the larger patrilineal pattern.

The nuclear household in Quang *xã* thus reverted back to the patrilineal pattern as soon as there was a change in the life cycle of the household. Independent two-generation families were characteristic of living arrangements of couples during only one cycle of their marriage – when their children were growing up and they themselves were in their thirties, forties, and early fifties. The nuclear household thus represented a stage in the larger patrilineal system that returned to patrilocality for sons' marriages and the care of the elderly. So, while it was true in terms of numbers that neo-local residence predominated over patrilocal residence, it is more accurate to see these nuclear households as part of a larger patrilineal system. Neo-local households were the norm, but close intergenerational relations in the *xã* remained strong.

It was very rare to find single persons or even a husband and wife living alone. An older person registered as living alone was likely to have a relative living very near by. In no instance did a couple whose children were grown maintain a separate household; they lived with one of their children. Thirty women in the *xã* were single and had never married, 20 of whom were single mothers.³¹ My household survey included five cases of single mothers with their children who lived by themselves or with their own parents. These women included divorcées and single, never-married mothers. I found general acceptance of one much-discussed case of single motherhood, that of Ms. Hoàng Thị Chiêm, who had been engaged to be married when her fiancé was killed in a motorbike accident while distributing their engagement party invitations. After discovering she was pregnant, she considered an abortion but her fiancé's parents encouraged her to have the child, saying they would raise it, and her own parents said it was her decision to make. Ms. Chiêm gave birth to a daughter and decided to live with her parents; her fiancé's parents visited her frequently and continued to help her. She said she did not intend to marry.

On the whole, divorce rates were low in the *xã*, but women without husbands either lived alone or moved back into their natal households with their young children. Typically, a divorce settlement would divide the children between the parents, although a mother would never be deprived of all her children unless she was deemed unfit. There were a number of cases of daughters-in-law who continued to live with their husband's parents in the absence of their husbands.³² There were very few cases of people not related to one another who lived with one another; in one such case known to the writer, the non-relative had been adopted as close kin.

In a deviation from the patrilocal model, seven out of the 215 households in the sample were matrilocal residences. These included six instances of *con rế*, sons-in-law living in a daughter's parents' household, and one four-generation matrilocal household. *Con rế* is an ancient practice in Vietnam that continues to the current time. The exception to the rule of daughters marrying out of their natal households when they marry, it only occurs when a couple has daughters and no sons. Inheritance in these households will pass to the daughters because there are no sons, but if there are grandsons in the third generation, they will inherit the family property.

Patrilineality thus found strong expression in Quang *xã*, though it was balanced by a pattern of neo-local residence that served to mitigate a fully patriarchal system. In daily practice, the system favored small units. Although three-generation patrilocal households with the husband's parents, husband and wife, and children usually formed a single unit, in some of these households the grandparents ate separately from the parents and their children. Moreover, in 30 of the 38 multi-unit households, the extended family almost always broke up into smaller units for separate meals. Two or more sub-units may have lived under one roof, but they either used separate kitchens or maintained separate eating schedules.

The prevalence of neo-local households in the *xã* showed that small family residence was preferred over the compound family. Even when a family was listed as a large extended family in the Civil Register, a visit to the household often revealed that the small families had separated out and were living in their own. Registration data therefore was not always consistent with actual living arrangements.³³ Sub-units of larger multi-unit households were also called small families (*gia đình nhỏ*) in the *xã*. Therefore, this terminology included both nuclear families or units in multi-unit households. This usage of “small family” reflected the prevailing view that the most basic family unit in the *xa* was that of a husband and wife (*vợ chồng*) and their children. In a small-family household, the couple is known as husband/wife (*vợ/chồng*) and addressed by the outside world as such. In a multi-generational household, the same husband/wife become the children (*con*) of their parents. In this sense, the building blocks of all families were small families, which occurred in virtually all households in the *xã*.

The conception of the *gia đình nhỏ* as the most fundamental unit of the family underscored the importance of the complementary relationship between the marital couple.³⁴ In the small family, husband and wife shared the primary responsibility for their own family in terms of its economic livelihood and raising their own children. In these households, both husbands and wives saw themselves as full economic partners, with equal responsibility for sustaining their own family unit. Since marital endogamy was very high in the *xã* (as shown below), chances were they had chosen each other as life partners. A number of young wives I interviewed told me that they and their husbands planned to set up their own household and live as a separate unit when it became economically feasible.

The majority of older women interviewed, all of whom had married children, also said they preferred separate household residences for their children’s families, for practical, economic, and psychological reasons. Mrs. Phạm Thị Hai, 60 years old and a former midwife, said young married couples should learn how to live on their own to become more independent and work harder. As such, they would enjoy greater “freedom.” Mrs. Hồ Thị Diệu, a 70-year-old farmer, claimed that small-family residence required young couples to make decisions for themselves and therefore ensured more equanimity and less fractious relationships among adult siblings and thereby promoted solidarity (*đoàn kết*) among siblings. Mrs. Bùi Thị Ngân, a state irrigation worker who raised flowers on the side, voiced this opinion:

Nowadays, after a time, almost all the children who get married want to live separately; naturally you have to let them. But if they want to live separately and if they have the means, then they should buy land. I will give [my sons] money for land, but if I don’t have the money, I won’t. There are very few cases of brothers’ families sharing one roof [in this *xã*].

Women had more influence and power in the small family, especially in neo-local residences, compared to women living with their husband's parents. In this case, some wives tried to keep their small family separate. This meant keeping their finances separate, eating separately, and making their own decisions without reference to their elders. If they ate together, discussions about household matters usually ended with the older couple's wishes taking precedence. Most husbands' parents insisted on controlling all matters, including family finances, and expected a contribution from the young couple. Young married couples living with the husband's parents typically gave a large portion or all of their waged earnings to his mother.

Mrs. Đinh Thị Hương, head of one of the *thôn* and the sister-in-law of *Chủ Tịch* Thành, as well as a skilled farmer, described her own family situation:

When my husband and I got married, we lived with my husband's parents for 10 years, serving the big family. We didn't have our own separate economy. What we produced or earned went into the common fund. In this *xã*, if the daughter-in-law is a good worker and is very conscientious (*vất vả*), her labor can support many people in the household. Her husband's siblings, for instance, may be lazy and very happy to live off the fruits of her hard labor in the fields. When we decided to set up our own household, we had nothing, but we built our own house, and now life is much better.

When a group of nine daughters-in-law watched and discussed the film *My Husband's Mother*, as discussed in Chapter 5, several respondents claimed that eating separately reduced conflicts in the family. One daughter-in-law said,

When we eat separately, we can do our work as we please, but if we eat together, our parents will give us work to do (*phân công*), and if we do not satisfy them, troubles arise. Eating separately avoids a lot of disagreements.

Xã officials told me that the Land Law had spurred household division as couples hurried to marry in order to qualify for their rice land allocation. Yet, as the preceding discussion has shown, given the scarcity of residential land, new households often cropped up inside the compound of one family, with older parents, siblings, and married children of both sexes and their spouses living side by side, in various combinations. This, along with the new sources of income available to young people who wished to set up their own households, contributed to the many factors affecting household division or aggregation. Although I was unable to determine which of these variations was the trend in Quang *xã*, national officials responsible for family welfare firmly believed that *Đổi Mới* had inexorably set household division or nuclearization in motion, as discussed above.

Kinship and Marital Relationships

Marriage in the *xã* was endogamous, that is, most couples who married were born in the *xã*. Data from the Civil Register indicated that 88 percent of married men were born in the *xã*, compared to 81 percent of women.³⁵ Studies have shown that endogamy is high in other villages in the delta as well.³⁶ Marital endogamy enhanced the position and status of women in Quang *xã*. A young married woman's kin lived either in the same or a nearby *thôn*, and she was in almost daily contact with them. Even though women were thought of as "belonging to their husband's family" (*con gái thuộc về nhà chồng*), they maintained strong filial and economic ties with their own families. The major clans were represented in most of the *thôn* and it appeared that there was considerable intermarriage between them. Women kept their own names after marriage and retained obligations to their own lineage.³⁷ A married woman was still a member of her own lineage, and she had an obligation to attend and assist in the death anniversaries of her own ancestors and other important family commemorations. It was not rare to hear a daughter-in-law comment that she visited her own mother every day. Endogamy contributed to economic alliances among households related through the wife's line. Women often pooled their labor with their natal family members to transplant and harvest together. Sisters as well as mothers and daughters worked together. The division of labor in the *xã* was therefore not strictly patrilineal, although shared patrilineal labor was more common.

Kin were terminologically separate according to paternal or maternal line. On the father's side, kin were identified as inner (*họ nội*), whereas on mother's side, the term was outer (*họ ngoại*). Both sets of grandparents were addressed as *ông/bà*, parents as *bố/mẹ*, siblings as *anh/em* or *chị/em* (older brother/younger sibling and older sister/younger sibling). Grandchildren were distinguished according to their lines of descent: inner (*nội*), or paternal, and outer (*ngoại*), or maternal.³⁸ Kin terms for in-law relations were marked by parent/child terms of address. In mother and daughter-in-law relations, for instance, the mother-in-law was the "parent," not a lateral relative as implied in English-language "in-law" terminology. This gave mothers-in-law higher status and seniority than their daughters-in-law simply by the form of address. Although daughters-in-law were not exactly "child brides," they were called child/daughters-in-law (*con dâu*) or, in the case of a four-generation extended family, grandchild/daughters-in-law (*cháu dâu*).

I found that filial bonds between parents and their sons and daughters remained strong. Filial obligations were reinforced by ancestor worship and the desire for sons to continue the family line. Several *xã* residents said a son was needed to perform the rites for ancestor worship.³⁹ Parents also stressed the importance of educating children in moral values (*đạo đức*) and filial piety (*hiếu thảo*). In rural families, the purpose of marriage has been to have children rather than for emotional ties between husband and wife. The major emotional bonds in the family were between mothers and their children and

fathers and their sons.⁴⁰ Sons were raised to embody morality (*đạo đức*) and fulfill family obligations (*nghĩa*), while daughters were taught to be respectful, obedient (*ngoan*), and display *tình cảm* (warmth).⁴¹ The hierarchical parent-child relationship therefore often took precedence over an egalitarian relationship between spouses.

Kin relations determined the pronouns used for terms of address based on the principles of seniority, hierarchy, and gender. Seniority took precedence over gender, but members of the family were assigned a place in the terminological hierarchy according to both principles. Forms of address followed the dichotomous and hierarchical conceptualizations of older/younger, inside/outside, and male/female. Kin-related men and women and married couples of the same age addressed each other as *anh/em* – older brother/younger sister. Mr. Nguyễn Văn Tiên, a member of the History Committee of the *xã*, told me that only a couple decades earlier husbands and wives typically addressed each other as *ông/bà* (Mr./Mrs.) after their children were born, but this usage was now rare. Daughters-in-law in the *xã* also used to refer to their mothers-in-law using third person pronouns for themselves or their husbands, such as “his” mother (*mẹ nó*) or “the girl’s” mother (*mẹ con gái*), rather than the more familiar “my” mother (*mẹ tôi*), and this practice had changed.

Although *anh/em* pronouns put men on a higher footing than women, women preferred these terms because little sister (*em*) and older brother (*anh*) implied intimacy and affection between spouses and husbandly protection. Mrs. Nga, the former high-level cadre in the village, put it this way, after claiming that both she and her husband were equal to one another:

Both [of us] are equal; we have never argued with each other and never used rude language, both in hungry times and in times of plenty – no bad words. All the time I have lived with him I have never called him *mày tao*; it has always been *anh/em*.

Mày/tao is an exceedingly formal term of address between spouses which implies a hierarchical relationship and lack of deep affection. With the adoption of new pronouns between spouses and daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law, despite the fact that *anh/em* still indicated the subordinate position of the wife, kin terms of address in the *xã* had become less hierarchical, presumably because of the social changes associated with the Communist revolution.

Nonetheless, the language of kinship in the *xã* was pervasive. In the very act of addressing one another, individuals identified their age/gender relationship to the person to whom they were speaking. Younger individuals, but older persons as well, usually identified themselves in the third person using kinship terms such as *em* or *con* (younger sibling or child) instead of using I (*tôi*).⁴² This had the effect of minimizing their individuality and establishing a bond between themselves and their interlocutor, thereby putting the relationship on a firmer footing emotionally and ensuring a warmer, closer

relationship with those they knew. For the junior partner, it could also provide some protection against scorn or arbitrary treatment should the relationship become strained. Such a strategy of self-effacement built on the cultural assumption that the individual who acts alone exposes her/himself to risk and possible shame (*xấu hổ*). It is a generally recognized Vietnamese cultural value to align oneself with others, take solace in the comfort of “warm feelings” (*tình cảm*) and the paternalistic care of others and the group rather than to express one’s personal sense of integrity or individuality. Consequently, individuals in the *xã* were defined in terms of their relationships with others, which reinforced the notion that the individual is no one without his or her family. It is the group that confers social standing; without it, the individual is powerless.

Cadres in the *xã* administration used kin forms of address with one another (*anh/em; anh/chị*); no local official I observed used the state’s official term *đồng chí*, comrade, which I had heard in the north before 1985. I used *anh/chị* (brother, sister) for adults within my age group. Kin terminology could reflect the politics of the times and was not immune to the political environment. During land reform campaigns in northern villages in the 1950s, for instance, landlords were denounced in both class and kin terms by accusers who used the insulting pronouns of *mày/tao*.⁴³

Gendered Work Practices and Conceptions

The sexual division of labor in the *xã* occurred mainly within the context of family relationships. That is, women’s and men’s work was not simply divided into male or female categories, but was assigned by both generation and gender categories within the family. As children, boys and girls performed work according to their gendered and junior status in the family. In a rural community such as the *xã*, children were expected to help out with housework and farming tasks. Daughters were trained from an early age to do virtually everything in the household. There were cases in which sons fed the animals but also cleaned the house, and sometimes started the evening meal for their parents. As young adults, younger unmarried daughters (*con gái*) or daughters-in-law (*con dâu*) were given appropriate work. Older married woman, wives, and grandmothers started to reduce their share of heavy work by age 50. The same age-related distinctions applied to men. Work was thus a function of gendered relations up and across the generations.

Discourses about work practices both in the household and in the broader society reflected stereotypical and discriminatory views about gendered practices and the sexual division of labor, as gleaned from in-depth interviews with over 20 families in the *xã*.⁴⁴ These data made clear that gender equality in Quang *xã* was far from being achieved. Although the state may have curtailed the worst abuses of patriarchal kin authority and made gains in women’s public equality, gendered discourses in the household were decidedly hierarchical. *Xã* residents termed “women’s work” (*việc làm của*

phụ nữ) as housework, going to the market, and field labor. Housework (*nội trợ*) also included cooking, washing clothes (by hand), cleaning the house, taking care of young children and family members who were sick. In general, *xã* residents saw women's work as being of a minor nature (*công việc nhỏ*), while men's work involved major matters, such as repairing the house or plowing the fields. Most men were very reluctant to go to the market (*đi chợ*): of all the women's tasks, this was seen as the most gender-stereotypical. Only men who stayed at home due to retirement or disability while their wives worked full-time ventured out to the market. Otherwise, they would be exposed to ridicule. The prevailing view was that men did not know how to shop and get the best prices. Men sometimes helped with housework, such as cleaning the house or even cooking (washing clothes was somewhat beyond the pale), but it was always in the context of "helping out" (*giúp vợ*), not sharing responsibility.

"Men's" jobs involved either greater strength or technical knowledge and thus had more prestige. In agriculture, men plowed and handled machines. Transplanting rice seedlings was women's work, as was weeding and buying seeds and fertilizer at the market. Agricultural work such as irrigation, spraying, harvesting, and raising animals was seen as either men's or women's work; both sexes did this work. Before there were rice milling machines in the *xã*, the labor-intensive work of pounding rice in foot-driven mills was women's work, meaning that women's jobs that required strength and endurance were not acknowledged as such. The same was true with paid work. Women worked on construction and road crews doing heavy and dirty work that, to Western eyes, would belie their feminine status. Peasant women performed backbreaking work in farm labor as well, but none of this was seen as abnormal or as indicating strength or resilience. Some other jobs in the *xã*, such as teaching, sewing, and medical work, were stereotyped as feminine. Men's jobs on the whole involved "superior" technical ability, such as working as chauffeurs, soldiers, or police. Working as a state cadre was gender-neutral, except for the highest positions, which were thought to be more appropriate for men.

Women in large multi-unit households tended to do more home-based work than men did, while those in neo-local households (husband, wife, and children), where work was more often shared by husband and wife. Age hierarchies and gender-specific patterns were noticeable in households with daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law. In those households, daughters-in-law were expected to take care of most of the routine daily chores, such as cooking, washing, and shopping. Mothers-in-law could be counted on to babysit and help with the cooking and cleaning, especially if they were retired. Daughters-in-law handled a large part of the fieldwork, and/or worked full time in outside jobs. During ceremonial occasions such as *giỗ/Tết*, both older and younger women did practically all of the work – shopping, cooking, serving, and washing up. Most men would not lower themselves to assist women on these occasions. In extended families, the women of the household did

virtually everything around the home. The husband's father, even if retired, did virtually no housework at all. In some three-generational households, husbands who assisted their wives in a nuclear household could be criticized by their mothers for helping their wives too much.

Based on my observations, younger women did their best to look busy. If not, they could be criticized by their mothers-in-law for being lazy (*lười*), talkative (*thích nói chuyện nhiều*), or irresponsible (*không trách nhiệm*). They had to know how to cook; if not, they were called clumsy (*vụng về*) and lacking in skillfulness (*không khéo*). One mother-in-law complained that daughters-in-law did not put in their best effort at the houses of their mothers-in-law, but applied themselves with astonishing efficiency to help their own mothers living nearby.

Family Heads

Family dynamics and gender relations were also gauged by the various designations for who served as the head of the family or the household. The kinship system in the *xã* followed patrilineal rules on headship, conferring that status on senior males. But the state also had a designation, head of household, used for the person who represented the household to the government and civil authorities, and women often assumed this position. These headship distinctions are important designations in the rural areas of northern Vietnam. Since the Vietnamese view the world in terms of an inner and outer realm of family and society, someone needs to represent the family to the outside world. The casual, individualistic, and democratic notion of the family prevalent in Western societies does not apply in the Red River delta, since the family is seen as a corporate and hierarchical unit that, as a normal state of affairs, must have a head.

The family in Quang *xã* had different types of heads. The head of the lineage was called the *trưởng tộc*, while the head of the residential unit of the family was called the *chủ gia đình*. Each term was invested with different kinds of authority. The lineage head was usually the eldest male of the senior branch of the clan and assumed the financial, worship, and moral responsibility for all members of the clan. He had the obligation to organize the lineage death anniversaries (*giỗ*), look out for the interests of the clan, assist other members of the clan with their education or employment, and help any member in dire need. The costs incurred for the honor of being the *trưởng tộc* were significant, amounting in one case in the *xã* known to the author as high as \$1,000 a year. This individual, Mr. Lê Hải Quang, was a trader and entrepreneur who rented a stall in the market where he and his young wife sold assorted metal and iron goods, so he had a good source of income. The *chủ gia đình*, by contrast, was the head and guardian of the family as residential unit, including this unit's direct descendants. Women could fill this role. This person was usually the eldest grandparent and was responsible for family decisions such as assigning work responsibilities, building or renovating

the family house, and planning and arranging important family occasions such as death anniversaries, weddings, and funerals.

The head of household (*chủ hộ*), by contrast, was officially responsible for the household for registration purposes. Civil registration required all families to name a head of household for purposes of interacting with the state. This person represented the household to the *thôn* and the *xã*. According to the Civil Register, in Quang *xã*, 40 percent of all households were headed by women. Despite this seeming equity, closer investigation showed that only 39 percent of these women-headed households had spouses present, while 92 percent of the men listed as head of household had their spouses present. Thus the household head of families having both spouses was more likely to be male as opposed to female by a margin of four to one. When the data are adjusted for comparability, with both spouses present, the percentage of women head of households came to 22 percent; in slightly less than half of these was the husband an active worker.⁴⁵

This figure is not inconsequential, and it suggests that for the purposes of the state's management of the local community, women in Quang *xã* could and did represent the household to the local government. However, this statement needs to be qualified by two additional observations. Most women in the *xã* who had assumed this position were usually widows in multi-generational households, living with a son and his family. Second, *xã* residents made a distinction between an official head of household for purposes of registration and a real head (*người quyết định trong gia đình*), who tended to make the most important decisions in the family and held the most power. As part of the survey, all 215 households were asked who acted as the "real head" of their household. In neo-local and small families where husband and wife were both present (117 cases), men were three times more likely than women to be identified as the real head of household, 88 compared to 29 women (see Table 3.2). In multi-generational families, the gender imbalance was attenuated by the high number of older women who were heads of household, mostly because they were widows. Of the 31 older women who acted as heads of households, 21 were without husbands. In comparison,

Table 3.2 Gender of Heads of Two-Generation Households

| <i>Type of Household</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|------------------------------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| <i>Neo-local</i> | | | |
| Husband, wife, and children | 79 | 25 | 104 |
| <i>Small Families</i> ¹ | 9 | 4 | 13 |
| TOTAL | 88 | 29 | 117 |

Note

¹ Who share a courtyard or live in an attached house next to relatives but eat separately; includes 1 matrilineal compound.

the 29 cases in which the elder father was head of the household, his wife was present in 25.

In terms of head of their household, three-generation families exhibited far more stratification by age than by gender (see Table 3.3). Father or Mother was the real head in 66 percent of these cases (60 out of 91 households); their son was head of household in 22 of the remaining families, which meant that his mother was the head of the household more often than he was (31 cases). This finding reflects women's increasing authority as they age and sons' deference to that authority. A daughter-in-law was the head of the household in only 9 out of 91 cases.

Among the grandparents' generation, with both spouses present, women were heads of household in 10 out of 31 cases. Among the parents' generation, with both spouses present, daughters-in-law were heads of household in three out of nine cases. When both sets of spouses and generations were present, women were real heads of households in 13 out of 40 cases (32 percent), which mainly reflected older women's authority.

While investigating who was the real head of household during my interviews with *xã* families, I found many cases where women who were listed as the official head of household for registration purposes were also the real head. In the case of older women, some had become heads of their households when their husbands were away for military service, such as Mrs. Phạm

Table 3.3 Gender of Heads of Multi-generational Households

| <i>Type of Household</i> | <i>Men</i> | <i>Women</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| <i>Three-generation single-unit¹</i> | | | |
| Grandfather/Grandmother | 17 | 18 | 35 |
| Father/Mother | 18 | 3 | 21 |
| Subtotal | 35 | 21 | 56 |
| <i>Multi-generation unit²</i> | | | |
| Grandfather/Grandmother | 12 | 13 | 25 |
| Father/Mother | 4 | 6 | 10 |
| Subtotal | 16 | 19 | 35 |
| <i>Total Multi-generation units</i> | | | |
| Grandfather/Grandmother | 29 ³ | 31 ⁵ | 60 |
| Father/Mother | 22 ⁴ | 9 ⁶ | 31 |
| TOTAL | 51 | 40 | 91 |

Note

¹ Grandparents, father, mother, and children.

² Patrilocal or mixed patri-/matrilocal three-generational units: 2 or 3 sons and/or daughter; includes 1 four-generation matrilocal.

³ 25 with spouses present.

⁴ 9 with spouses present.

⁵ 10 with spouses present.

⁶ 3 with spouses present.

Thị Hai. An attractive and well-spoken woman, Mrs. Hai had worked for 30 years as a midwife and cadre in the *xã*. After the end of the war, with her children grown, one of her sons left for Bulgaria, where he was still working and sending money home, having contributed funds to build his parents' new, imposing three-story house. Her eldest son lived in Giảng Võ in Hanoi, and two daughters had moved to Hanoi as well. Her youngest son and his wife lived nearby; they were all preparing *Tết* cakes in one of the spacious rooms when I arrived. Mrs. Hai was both the official and the real head of the household, even though she said her husband brought in considerably more income than she did (apparently from the sale of land.) When asked why this was the case, she said "the reason is because he is gentle (*hiền*) and isn't stern with the children. Educating children means you have to be strict (*ngghiêm khắc*)."

In other cases, *xã* women who were the real heads of their households had either married men from other provinces or were state workers. Mrs. Dương Thị Lan, the daughter of a former *chủ tịch* of the *xã*, married a soldier originally from Hải Phòng. Her family status plus the fact that her husband was often absent working on construction projects in Hanoi may have been contributing factors. Mrs. Ngân, the state irrigation cadre, was both the real and official head of household because her husband, retired with a small pension from the military, was in ill health with war-related disabilities.

Mrs. Nga, the former cadre mentioned earlier, said her husband was the real head of household in her family, although she was a native villager and he was from Thái Bình. He was assertive and liked to take control. Still another instance was Mrs. Hồ Thị Diệu's family, the farming household living in a multi-generational compound. Mrs. Diệu, a lively and jovial woman, indicated that she, her daughter, and daughter-in-law did virtually all the work in the family and made all of the decisions. Mrs. Diệu was the official head but said that her husband was the real head of household although she claimed he could not do nor decide anything. Several people mentioned that wives were often listed as official head of household for the 1994 land redistribution, since it was principally women who farmed in the *xã* and on that basis were likely to be given more land.

However, in households where men and women both farmed, men tended to be the real head of household. In Mr. Lê Sỹ Vinh's case, Mr. Vinh received seven *sào* during the 1994 land distribution, which he farmed with the help of his four adult sons. He and his wife lived with his third son, daughter-in-law, and their two young daughters. The other three sons had their own land allocations and houses, which Mr. Vinh and his wife had taken great pains to help them build. Mr. Vinh, a lean, wiry and intense man, and his sons consulted each other closely on farming matters, and lent each other considerable assistance. When I visited the family, Mr. Vinh seemed to enjoy the role of *paterfamilias*. While we sat, sipped tea, and talked, both his wife and daughter-in-law were sitting on their front steps tying up bundles of water spinach that the younger woman would sell in Hà Đông market early the

next day. Mr. Vinh said his third son was registered as the official head of household because he (Mr. Vinh) had already given the children their residential land inheritance. But he was the real head of household.⁴⁶

Mr. Vũ Văn Nguyên, a plowman and forceful personality, had three sons and a daughter who had married and left home. His eldest son moved out upon marriage, but when his second son married, he remained at home with his bride. His youngest unmarried son also lived at home, worked in Hanoi, and contributed to the family budget. Mr. Nguyên brought most of the income into the family and determined the work assignments for his wife, two sons, and daughter-in-law. While the younger couple said they “mostly” ate separately, their economy was dependent on the father. Like Mr. Vinh, Mr. Nguyên clearly had a strong sense of family responsibility and desire to help his adult children. Both felt that fathers should lead the family and assume the main financial burden; both viewed *Đổi Mới* as an improvement over the collectivization period since it rewarded individual initiative and provided a decent standard of living.

Although female authority as head of household was recognized and exercised in Quang *xã*, most real heads of households were men. But it was in the kinship system where male power was most pronounced and undisputed. Filial obligations and responsibilities to their parents were required of all children, especially sons. The parent/child relationship worked against gender parity in the small family and reinforced the principles of seniority and hierarchy. This was reflected in the prevalent practice of patrilocality during the early years of marriage and in the preference for sons over daughters and male inheritance of family property, to be discussed in the next chapter. All these practices were anchored in ancestor worship, which reinforced patrilineality, if not patrilocality.

Paternal power was particularly on display during family commemorative occasions, where gender segregation and the division of roles was most apparent. Women married to the eldest male of the first branch of his lineage were obliged to assume the major responsibility for organizing as many as four to five *giỗ* (death anniversary) banquets a year, to which dozens of relatives were invited. Mrs. Lê Thị Thuý, the head of the Women’s Association in the *xã*, assumed this task for her husband’s lineage and invited me to a *giỗ* for her husband’s grandfather, held in a large shrine next to her house. Mrs. Thuý spent two days buying and preparing the food, communicated with female relatives as to what they would bring, and then supervised the whole production. When the guests arrived, they were segregated by gender and age during the banquet. Although I was not privy to this information, one of the women cadres in the *xã* told me Mrs. Thuý’s husband usually decided who would be invited and what food would be served. When the guests arrived, the middle-aged men, younger men, and adolescent boys all sat together at one end of the hall playing cards and were served food by the women. All the elders, men and women included, sat at the other end, where they were also served by the younger women. The men’s table started

to resemble a smoke-filled saloon, filled with boisterous male camaraderie, jokes flying, women darting in and out. When the party was over, the men all departed and the women cleaned up, using metal basins in the courtyard. These ceremonial and ritual duties were considered normal by most women, and they did not complain about them because prestige accrues to those who host such affairs, including the women.

Family Patterns Over Time

I found no evidence that the actual structure of the household in Quang *xã* had substantially changed over the past 70 years. Moreover, other of the family patterns I observed in Quang *xã* also appeared similar to those identified earlier in the twentieth century. For instance, the generational structure of the household in the *xã* has apparently remained unchanged since the 1920s. Based on Quang *xã* census data for 1921 and 1926 in the colonial archives in Hanoi, I calculated that during the 1920s, 58 percent of the *xã*'s households were composed of one and two generations, while 42 percent were three or more generations. Average household size was 5.1 persons.⁴⁷ This can be compared to my 1996 findings of 52 percent neo-local households, with an average household size of 4.9 persons. A fluctuation of 6 percent over 70 years seems inconsequential. Therefore, although the French colonial administration relied on the clans (*dòng họ*) to rule northern Vietnam and thereby presumably strengthened the power and wealth of certain lineages, it does not appear that the phenomenon of small family residence I observed in the 1990s is a new development, nor one that resulted from the momentous post-1945 political changes.

Considering gender and generational authority in the family, the colonial regime in 1930 commissioned a distinguished panel of Vietnamese specialists to study the features and customs of Việt families residing in the Red River delta with regard to "family law" and inheritance. Their lengthy report concluded that customs in the north had evolved differently than in the south. Women, they asserted, had many rights in the family, including the right to divorce, with an equal division of family property, and always took their young children with them. Daughters and sons shared inheritance, and women had economic independence and made commercial decisions without consulting their husbands. In the case of husbands' deaths, widows replaced them as head of the household.⁴⁸

In a follow-up study (1935), Pierre Lustéguy concluded that women in the north retained considerable authority in their families. They had the right to own property, to divorce, and always took precedence over their sons. Both sons and daughters could inherit property from their parents. Lustéguy argued that women in actuality had more status and authority in the family than according to the Nguyễn dynasty code and that the "small family" of husband and wife was quite distinct from the broader family of the clan. An elder daughter could take over the worship rites at the ancestors' altar in

the absence of sons. Wives officiated at their own natal families' ceremonies, while married women performed rites at their husbands' altars. Lustéguy noted that women performed important economic functions in their small families, kept the money, managed property, and made expenditure decisions. In sum, he concluded, daughters were inferior to their fathers, wives were equal to their husbands, sisters were occasionally superior to their brothers (if older), and mothers were always superior to their sons.⁴⁹ Marital endogamy may also have been a feature of northern villages during the colonial era, based on limited evidence.⁵⁰

If these observations applied to Quang *xã*, and there is no reason to assume they did not, we can probably conclude that certain features of the family in the Red River delta have remained stable despite the Communist revolution: household structure, marital endogamy, linguistic and gender hierarchies, parental authority, women's economic and commercial roles (to be discussed further in the next chapter), and women's kinship roles. What had changed during the intervening years was the decline of clan economic and political power that the Communist revolution had suppressed as a vestige of the feudal past. Ancestor worship, clan temples, lineage genealogies, and clan politics were all central features of colonial Vietnamese village life. The land regime that formed the basis of clan economic power had been destroyed by the land reform in 1956 and subsequent collectivization. Yet it was precisely these economic and political features of lineage activities that were staging a comeback in Quang *xã* in the 1990s. The only difference was that the *Đôì Móri* state's current revival of the family was being undertaken in the interest of advancing a state-led market economy which no longer served a colonial power.

Conclusion

Official efforts in the 1990s to stem the "crisis in the family," the influence of "social evils," and to ensure social stability, resulted in shifting state discourses regarding gender equality and gender relations in the family. Yet in Quang *xã*, my examination of kinship practices and discourses indicated that family relations were decidedly hierarchical in nature. As this chapter has shown, kinship in Quang *xã* was based on patrilineal rules of descent and favored strong intergenerational bonds while it also encouraged patrilocal residence for newly-married couples. Despite official alarms about the decline of the family, I found that kin-based hierarchies were strengthened as family patriarchs asserted their authority in a political environment that favored these kin-based forms of male power. As shown in the previous chapter, male authority was strengthened in village politics and ritual activities, along with the revival of state-supported cultural traditions.

This study has not found evidence for state gender managers' alarms about the Vietnamese family nor a trend towards nuclearization, revealing instead that the state's conservative cultural policies and emphasis on family values

reinforced patriarchy and hierarchy in the family. These concerns were reflected in campaigns to promote the “cultured family” and efforts to “strengthen” family relations. Women’s emancipation and the achievement of equality were addressed in terms of “the crisis in the family” and the promotion of a new family model that combined both traditional features and modern attributes needed for the market economy. Accompanying the renewed focus on women’s emancipation was a shift in equality discourses from social equality to equality within the family. Thus the state’s conservative and pro-family cultural policies, as well as the patriarchal practices of kinship and local politics, worked against the state’s stated goal of gender equality.

At the same time, however, the economic policies of the *Đổi Mới* state exercised a countervailing tendency by elevating the household and women producers as equal partners with their husbands in the task of economic development. The conjugal relationship between husband and wife in their small family in neo-local residences, marriage endogamy, the state’s incursions into the household, and women’s economic roles served to counterbalance unbridled male patriarchal authority, underscoring the complexity of family dynamics in Quang xã. Although men were predominately the heads of households in the xã, a large minority of women also assumed that function in the household’s dealings with the government.

Curiously, this countervailing weight of the *Đổi Mới* state as an economic force against the conservative forces of the family can be seen as a legacy of the socialist revolutionary past. But women’s roles as producers and reproducers were now tied to discourses of building “cultured families,” “happy families,” and “equality families.” By thus redefining women’s equality, the *Đổi Mới* state signaled a new interest women’s personal relations in the family, which were now subject to the scrutiny and intervention of state officials. The next chapter takes a closer look at the dynamics of the conjugal relationship in the family.

Notes

- 1 National Government Resolution No. 04-NQ/TW, “Renovating and Strengthening the Women’s Movement in the New Situation” (1993), which defined women’s equality under *Đổi Mới* in family and development terms. Text in author’s possession and Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*. Program 1 addressed one of four areas to be strengthened. The Quang xã’s Women’s Association was in the process of implementing this resolution when I was there in 1995–1996.
- 2 These goals were outlined in the Women’s Union Five-Year Plan (1992–1997) presented at its 7th Congress in 1992. See Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Vấn đề*. In this document, family planning is considered to be primarily women’s responsibility and is defined as having one or two children, with the target of reducing the population growth rate by 0.6 percent a year. Other sections of this plan advise women to “fulfill their functions as wives and mothers.”
- 3 The Social Evils campaign was launched in the spring 1996 in the run-up to the 8th Party Congress. Politburo decree 87/CP banned illegal drugs and pornographic videos, said to be mostly of foreign origin, and cracked down on prostitution, karaoke bars, and other “unethical” practices.

- 4 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*, 42. Resolution O4/TW of the Communist Party of Vietnam – which provides the quotation at the beginning of this chapter – also highlighted the important contribution mothers play in the transmission of national culture (ibid.). *Hai mươi năm một chặng đường phát triển* adds, “One can say that the important role, and in some cases, the decisive role of women in the family has contributed to the emergence of a new way of life and culture among the Vietnamese people [under renovation].”
- 5 Ibid. The Central Steering Committee on a Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family was established at the time of the Mid-Term Conference of the 7th Party Conference, January 1994, to supervise the Cultured Family campaign. Both the 7th and 8th (1996) Party Congresses, as well as the 1992 Constitution, emphasized the role of the family as “the basic cell of society” that nurtured all generations while promoting “progressive” and “happy” families. See also Communist Party of Vietnam, *Eighth National*; Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Constitutions*.
- 6 Lê Khả Phiêu, *Vietnam*, 110–111. This is from an address given to the 3rd Congress of the Vietnam Peasants’ Union, November 19, 1998 titled “The Vietnamese Peasantry with a Comprehensive, Modern and Sustainable Agriculture.”
- 7 For a good discussion, see Robert.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 It should be noted that cultural movements have been a feature of Vietnamese politics since 1945. Hồ Chí Minh stressed building “new life” movements, providing the inspiration for subsequent cultural improvement campaigns. In 1962 the first cultured family campaign was launched in Hưng Yên province and subsequently spread to the rest of northern Vietnam. In 1973 in Hải Hưng province, the Committee on a Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family established five criteria for a cultured family: good in production work, following thrift and sanitary practices, following state and party policies, practicing family planning, maintaining ties of solidarity with neighbors, and practicing family harmony. Under *Đổi Mới*, family harmony and family planning were moved to the top of the list and the language of happy and progressive families was added. See Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*. The 4th Plenum of the Party’s Central Committee (March 1998) ratified these new criteria and goals of the cultured family.
- 10 Lê Khả Phiêu, “To Build,” 66.
- 11 Lê Thị, *Role*, 64. Lê Thị cites statistics demonstrating that although the population growth rate was 2.4 percent a year from 1979 to 1989, the number of households increased during that time period at a rate of 3.4 percent per year. Average household size during the same period declined from 5.2 persons per household to 4.8.
- 12 Trương Mỹ Hoa, “Vấn đề gia đình,” 21–32. Trương Mỹ Hoa also claimed that unstable and poor families were more tempted by “social evils” and claimed that *Đổi Mới* was leading to greater discord in families and wife abuse.
- 13 Marr, “Politics.”
- 14 *Luật Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình*.
- 15 Lê Thị, *Role*. Lê Thị was the founder and director of the Women’s Center in Hanoi for many years.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.; Lê Thị, *Vietnamese Women*.
- 18 Relations between wives and husbands became a new topic of state-supported research starting in the late 1950s, in line with the state’s new focus on the family. Officials in charge of women’s work focused on conjugal relations, gathering data on decision-making, family planning, time-budget surveys, the problems of single women, marriage, women and poverty, and women’s health.
- 19 Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Hai mươi*.

- 20 The term “equality family” (*gia đình bình đẳng*) may have first appeared in an official document during the 7th National Conference of the Vietnamese Women’s Union, June 1992. Hội Liên Hiệp Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, *Văn kiện*.
- 21 Trương Mỹ Hoa, “Phụ nữ”, 47. Trương Mỹ Hoa went on to explain that equality families were based on “new conceptions” (*quan niệm mới*) and were units in which the conjugal couple occupied the core position (*vị trí trung tâm*), and where all family members helped one another overcome difficulties in life and had harmonious relations.
- 22 See Trương Sĩ Anh et al.
- 23 In Lê Lưu’s novel *A Time Far Past*, the protagonist, Sai, knows that his marriage to the sophisticated Châu is ending when they no longer eat together.
- 24 Vietnamese kinship has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives, virtually all of which reflect the two main aspects of the system. One approach is to characterize Vietnamese kinship as patrilineal, with aspects of bilaterality (Hy Văn Lương, “Vietnamese”). Another approach claims that Vietnamese kinship comprises principles of “seniority, lineality and equality” (Haines). “Confucian family system” has also been suggested, but this is vague and misses the specific Vietnamese features of the Chinese family system (Hirschman and Vũ Mạnh Lợi). “Patrilineality with bilateral aspects” is more precise, but does not clarify what is bilateral about the Vietnamese system, which is not descent, but residence patterns. “Seniority, lineality, and equality” is accurate but lacks specificity. “Patrilineality with small family residence,” referring to the two main principles I found in the Quang xã kinship system, captures the essence of the system and includes the two main principles, descent and residence. Vietnamese kinship is thus characterized by a fundamental duality, patrilineality combined with a principle of gender complementarity, which serves to mitigate strict patrilineal rules. While some ascribe the latter principle to bilaterality, I prefer not to use this term because descent in Vietnamese kinship is patrilineal. Instead, if one focuses on household structure, the other pole in the duality of the kinship/household system becomes clear: the preference for neo-local or “nuclear” (a term I use provisionally) residence.
- 25 The handling of a daughter-in-law was seen in the context of “educating” her, as in the well-known saying, “Teach your child from the time she is young; teach your wife from the time she arrives in your family” (*Đạy con từ thủa còn thơ; dạy vợ từ thủa bơ vơ mới về*).
- 26 In the Red River delta, 70 percent of women give birth to their first child within the first year of marriage, and most children are born within the first 10 years of marriage, according to Trần Đức 160.
- 27 Polygamy was rare and illegal but tolerated in the xã. A justification for polygamy was producing a son. Two wives rarely lived together; in one case, a polygamous husband kept two wives in separate places, one in Hanoi and the other in the xã. There were three cases of polygamy known to the author at the time of field research, including the local doctor.
- 28 Also see Bélanger, “Modes,” and Trương Sĩ Anh et al. The latter source found a high incidence of patrilineal residence among the elderly in the Red River delta living with a married son. Patrilineal ratios were three times higher in the Red River delta than in the Mekong delta. Elderly parents in the north were more likely to reside with younger sons than with the eldest son, who would move out upon marriage.
- 29 Per capita residential land in 1995–1996 in the xã was only 111 sq. meters.
- 30 Not all these compounds were strictly patrilocal. For instance, Mrs. Hồ Thị Diệu built a house next door for her son and his wife and then gave her daughter and her husband 160 sq. meters across the courtyard to build their house. One daughter had left home already; a younger daughter was still living at home. In writing about China, Elisabeth Croll uses the term “aggregate family” to describe

separate households of the same family that had strong economic ties with one another and lived in the same compound as a result of the economic reforms. She argues that market socialism provided an incentive for post-division kin to reconnect because they could mobilize resources, practice economies of scale, and even pool capital to start family enterprises. See Croll. Aggregation in Quang *xã*, however, was as much a function of kinship and inheritance as it was of economic factors. The aggregate family or compound had not yet moved to the stage of starting businesses, but the compound family had proved useful to some post-division families for pooling agricultural labor and child care.

- 31 According to the security chief. The reasons he gave for the 30 women never marrying were that they had passed the marriageable age, did not wish to be married, or had had boyfriends whom they did not marry.
- 32 There were two cases of divorce, both due to domestic violence, in Quang *xã* in 1995. The Women's Association tried to persuade the couples to reconcile and was successful in one case, but not in the other. In the second case, the mother took custody of one child and the father took custody of the second child. In cases of divorce, children under 3 usually stayed with their mother, unless the two parties decided otherwise. For children up to 9 years of age, if the husband and wife were unable to agree about custody, and the case went to court, the court would assign the children to one of the parents based on the children's interests. If the children were older than 9, their opinions would be solicited. The parent who did not raise the children would be obliged to contribute financially. But young women with children were often reluctant to seek divorce either because they believed their husband's family would gain custody of their children or that if they gained custody, they would be unable to remarry.
- 33 Three- and four-generation households registered as such in the Civil Register turned out upon closer inspection to actually be separate households. Mr. Hoàng Văn Tài's extended family was an example. This household was registered as one household but my visit to the family revealed that there were three separate households living in a compound. There were three different kitchens and three separate living quarters. Father lived with his eldest son and Mother with her unmarried daughter and granddaughter, so Father and Mother no longer actually constituted a household. These inconsistencies between official registration and the actual situation were common.
- 34 The term *small family* is a vague one. But it usually refers to a two-generational nuclear unit, as I am using it here to distinguish it from multi-generational units of three generations or more. Some definitions, however, include grandparents and unmarried siblings in addition to parents and their children. See Nguyễn Từ Chi.
- 35 Civil Register database, 1995. In order to calculate marital endogamy, I assumed average age at marriage to be 25 for men and 23 for women (figures given to me by the Sociology Institute), and that all men and women were married at and above these ages. The total number of married men age 25 and above was 1,310, with 1,159 men born in the *xã*, yielding the figure of 88 percent. The total number of married women at age 23 and above was 1,713, with 1,386 women born in the *xã*, yielding 81 percent. These figures should be adjusted slightly to account for a small number of single adults in the *xã*.
- 36 See Nguyễn Tùng.
- 37 Women usually used *Thị* as their middle name, but lineages were often distinguished by a patrinoim and a middle term (*tên lót* or *tên đệm*). Male members of the lineage carried this intermediary name, but female members did not. For instance, not all Nguyễn patrinoims were from the same lineage, but were distinguished from one another by the addition of the intermediary term. *Nguyễn Duy* was one lineage, while *Nguyễn Đăng* was another. Therefore, a woman's name alone did not indicate which lineage she belonged to.

- 38 Father's older siblings were referred to as *bác* (uncle/aunt; gender neutral) or *cô* (aunt), his younger brother and wife as *chú/thím* (uncle/aunt), and his younger sister and husband as *cô/chú*. Patrilineal cousins were called *anh/chị/em bên nội*. Matrilineal cousins were addressed as outer cousins, *anh/chị/em bên ngoại*. Scholarship about the origins of Vietnamese kinship terms in the Red River delta has shed light on the diverse cultural and historical forces influencing the kinship structure. French ethnographers working in other villages in the area suggest that the terms used for the relationships above *ego* may be of Chinese origin, whereas the terms for *ego*'s generation and below are probably of Austroasiatic (Mon-Khmer and Thai) origin. See Krowolski. The main principles in Vietnamese kinship were identified in the 1940s. See Benedict and Spencer.
- 39 For a discussion of son preference, see also Bélanger, "Indispensable."
- 40 See also Phạm Văn Bích.
- 41 See Rydstrom.
- 42 Speakers usually used the third person to refer to themselves, such as "father," "mother," "older sibling," "younger sibling," "child," etc. Some of these terms are gender-specific, others are not. "I" (*tôi*) was used outside the family, usually between people who did not know each other very well. Thus there were many different "I"s, depending on to whom one was talking. *Tôi* is gender-neutral and does not imply a hierarchical relationship. Its current usage is a modern formulation, having adapted to ideas about individuality introduced in Vietnam during the French colonial period.
- 43 *Mày/tao* were used between servants and masters. See Hy Văn Lương and Nguyễn Đắc Bằng 191, and Malarney 34.
- 44 A range of household types were selected for these interviews to obtain as wide a sampling as possible. In addition to the data collected about men's and women's conceptions about the sexual division of labor, worksheets detailing daily activities by gender were compiled for each household.
- 45 Men were heads of household in 627 out of 1,054 households in the 1994 Civil Register. Women were heads of households in 427 cases. Only 165 women-headed households had husbands present. Of the 627 male heads of households, 575 had wives present. Of the 165 women heads of households with spouses present, only 80 listed husbands as active workers.
- 46 Mr. Vinh's courtyard and house were typical of most of the households I visited. Families typically used their front rooms to eat, congregate, watch television, perform farming chores, receive guests, and perform worship ceremonies to the ancestors.
- 47 Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia, 1921 and 1926. Quang's population in 1921 was 1,650 and 2,091 in 1926, with 345 and 385 households, respectively. In 1921, 110 households listed women as household heads (32 percent), 95 percent of them identifiable as widows over the age of 50 who mostly lived in three-generation households.
- 48 Résident Supérieur du Tonkin. One of the authors of this study was Phạm Quỳnh, the noted publicist.
- 49 Lustéguy and Résident Supérieur du Tonkin. Confucian scholar Phan Kế Bính, considered an authority on northern Vietnamese culture and social customs in the early twentieth century and born and raised in Hà Đông, noted that rural women were "very hard working, assiduous in their affairs, whether they were engaged in commerce or worked in the fields. They take charge of matters (*đảm đàng*) concerning their husbands, with intelligence. We usually consider families with clever wives to be prosperous families." However, women's behavior, he claimed, was pegged to "virtuous" conduct, including modesty or submission, skill in domestic work, a soft manner in speech, and good conduct (gentleness and refinement). "Harmony" was prized in the family, which meant the observance

of filial piety, adherence to rules, and the lack of complaints or gloomy behavior. An honorable woman was faithful, respectful, hard-working, thrifty, flexible, and truthful, and raised her children well. Women were expected to be devoted to their husbands and parents-in-law and cater to them. Male behavior distinguished itself by filial piety, generosity, courage, integrity, and scholarly attainment. As long as men practiced filial piety and women were loyal to their husbands, they were judged to be respectable people. The cult of the ancestors focused on young couples' duties (*nhĩa*) to the family. Filial piety (*trung hiếu*) required that couples produce a male heir to continue the family line. Parents often married their children at a young age to produce an heir as well as to form alliances with other families. While women deferred to men and men considered women inferior to them, men could be abusive, irresponsible, spendthrift, and even adulterous, and be forgiven. Transgressions by women were rarely forgiven, and wives could be divorced for infirmity or for being a gossip. Adultery brought shame to a woman's family and could be severely punished. Women's virtue was part of families' social standing; it was important to keep up appearances.

- 50 According to the only known study of marital endogamy/exogamy in the north during the colonial period, 69 percent of married women living in Chợ xóm (population 672) in Thanh Hóa province in 1938 were born there (130 out of 189 women). Twenty-one women born in the xóm left when they married, and 38 women from neighboring xóm married into Chợ xóm. In Ô thôn (population 675) in Sơn Tây province, of 216 married women and widows, only 5 women had left to marry men from other communities (Nguyễn Xuân Nguyễn). This study and Krowolski's research in the 1990s are based on endogamy in the thôn, whereas my figures are based on xã endogamy. Quang xã's Civil Register did not list place of birth by thôn; hence I was unable to ascertain marital endogamy by thôn.

4 Married Couples and Equality Families in Quang Xã

The cultured family enjoys welfare, equality, progress, and happiness.

Politburo Resolution, 1994¹

Although *Đổi Mới*'s new emphasis on the household in the early 1990s led the state to promote equality within the family within the rubric of "cultured" and "equality" families, the family in Quang xã remained hierarchical, both in gender and generational terms. As I had discovered, this inequality was expressed in the return of religious and kinship practices to xã households, gendered work patterns, and linguistic terms of address. These findings suggested that men's authority stemmed from the family system, broadly speaking; however, as we have seen, the *Đổi Mới* state was heavily implicated in this system. At the same time, the changing economy unleashed new factors influencing gender relations, which I had also come to Quang xã to explore. To get a fuller picture of gender relations within the family, I realized, I would need to investigate the impact of the new *Đổi Mới* economy on the relative position of women vis-à-vis men in the household.

This promised to be an especially timely and fruitful area of inquiry, as most families had recently improved their standard of living and were willing to provide information about their economic situation. With the return of land and the means of production to the xã's households, families had gained new economic resources. With these new assets, they were making decisions about agricultural production, work opportunities, home improvements and material acquisitions, educational and medical needs, and inheritance. Families were also making decisions about saving, lending, and long-term allocation of resources. In the past, many of these decisions had been either less important or taken care of by others. I therefore found that issues involving monetary and financial matters had assumed added importance and provided a new arena for household interactional and interpersonal strategies.

The family of Mrs. Dương Thị Lan and Mr. Ngô Đức Bình is an example of the many changes families in the xã experienced as a result of the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms. In 1991, both Mrs. Lan and her husband were laid off from their jobs as state workers and both joined the market economy.

Mrs. Lan (age 41) farmed the 2 sào 4 thước of land allocated to them in 1994, and Mr. Bình (age 45) worked on construction jobs in Hanoi, which brought in most of the family income. He paid for their major expenses and their two children's school fees. Mrs. Lan's income from vegetable farming and her five pigs covered daily expenditures. Her pigs also served as a form of family savings. Mrs. Lan weeded her landholding herself, rented a buffalo from a neighbor for plowing, and exchanged labor (*làm đổi công*) with her brother and his wife for all other agricultural work. Lan made most of the farming decisions and had recently rented another plot of land from neighbors. Her family consumed the rice and half of the vegetables they harvested. Lan handled the family finances and paid the taxes. It had taken them six years to save enough money to build their two-room, one-story house. In 1995 their financial decisions, which they made jointly, were mostly about paying for food, agricultural inputs, and education expenses out of an income of \$1,300. They had no major debts and had acquired a black-and-white television, bicycle, and electric fan. Lan and her husband were pinning their hopes on their son, Ngô Đức Hùng, age 17, a good student whom they wished to attend college to study English. Their daughter, Ngô Bảo Ngọc, 15, was less studious and would probably leave school early. Thinking ahead, Lan said she would give her daughter part of their land and property as an inheritance if she continued to live with them. When her son married, however, she assumed that he and his bride would live at home, unless they wished otherwise.²

Because access to economic resources and control over their dispensation are factors in gender hierarchies in the household, I decided to explore this issue in greater depth. To examine gender status, a number of gender theorists working in third-world countries have turned to what has come to be called resource theory.³ This approach is based on the assumption that individuals attempt to satisfy certain goals and needs, and that the individual who has the greatest command over economic resources to meet those goals and needs has the greatest power. A married woman's relative power in the household is thus assumed to be primarily a function of her ability to bring in and to control such resources; in other words, the more resources she obtains in relation to those of her husband, the greater her input into household domestic decisions. Thus, the greater a woman's net control of income, the greater her leverage and her overall "voice and vote" in the marital relationship.⁴

Because resource theory is primarily concerned with the effect of economic factors and changing economic environments on gender hierarchies, I believed it could illuminate the impact of the new *Đổi Mới* economy on conjugal couples' relationships and shed light on the *Đổi Mới* state's efforts to promote "equality families." Therefore I decided to gather data on married couples' income contributions to the household, different types of income and the value placed on them, money management, household budgeting, and control over the economic resources of household. Economic resources in Quang xã in the mid-1990s were still fairly simple: income, home-grown

food products, and ownership of family property, which included the house, residential land, adjacent courtyard or garden, and official use rights to rice land. By the time of my field research, in the mid-1990s, households had secured sufficient resources and some cash to acquire new goods. Almost all families had engaged in consumer goods expenditures. The first wave of expenditures had been for house construction or repairs, which were largely completed by 1996. The second wave of acquisitions had begun around 1994, when households began purchasing rice cookers, fans, radios, and televisions. Then they had acquired more bicycles or upgraded them to a motorbike. A shiny Dream motorbike was highly coveted, but at \$3,000, still beyond the reach of most families. Or they had turned their attention to buying a new or bigger *étagère* for the front room in which to stash clothes, papers, and the cash box or to display chinaware, photos, and military or service awards.

I did not expect that data on decision-making and who controlled the economic resources of the household would be able to explain all the dimensions of marital power under *Đôi Mói*. While this investigation would yield valuable results, it would not reveal many other features and nuances in the exercise of power and its dynamic within families. In interviews, villagers identified a power dynamic that can be called a respect/forbearance paradigm. This paradigm is captured in the oft-quoted saying, “Inferiors show respect; superiors show patience” (*Trên kính, dưới nhường*). Culturally speaking, inferiors are obliged to show respect to their superiors, while superiors are meant to show kindness and solicitude towards inferiors. Families in Quang *xã* tended to discourage overt demonstrations of power, instead favoring a display of benevolence and generosity on the part of powerful and high-status individuals, especially senior males. Lower-status individuals were meant to show respect to those higher up in the hierarchy – younger to older, women to men, junior kin to senior kin, and so on. Lower-status individuals sometimes tried to compensate for their position by actively seeking to make decisions or accept responsibility for decisions. As I had observed, women, especially younger women, sometimes sought to compensate for their relative lack of power in the family by taking the stance of the active decision maker to engage and draw their relatives closer to them. This strategy of making the family dependent upon them in some way is quite common among young married women in Vietnam, who often come to their husbands’ households bereft of social capital.⁵

I anticipated that the data on decision-making and economic resources would, however, help identify patterns of gender hierarchies in the household which then could be probed more deeply in interviews with *xã* residents. In so doing, I planned to investigate the kinds of normative and cultural processes that underlay gender inequalities in the family. Thus I decided to interview a number of married couples at some length in an attempt to uncover the conceptions and shared discourses that maintained these hierarchies.⁶

In what follows, I first discuss the design and findings of the data I collected on household economic contributions, decision-making, and who controlled

the economic resources of the household. Then I turn to the results of my interviews with married couples in an attempt to uncover the gender discourses associated with gender hierarchies in the family. As both the survey and interview data uncovered, gender inequalities were more layered and complex than suggested by kinship models, state family discourses, or resource theory.

Couples Survey

In the spring of 1996, I conducted a survey of individual household members along with the household survey discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.⁷ From the sample of 682 respondents to the survey, I selected a sub-sample of 220 married couples to complete a more detailed survey, hereafter called the couples' survey, the purpose of which was to uncover who in each surveyed family was responsible for economic contributions to the household and various types of domestic decisions.⁸

Household Income Contributions and Money Management

The couples' survey asked 440 individual wives and husbands to estimate the relative amount of economic resources (including food products) they contributed to the household. As shown in Table 4.1, 43 percent of the men but only 24 percent of women said they contributed more than half of the family's total economic resources. Seventy-five percent of women and 56 percent of men reported contributing less than half of the family resources.⁹

The survey revealed that women drew their income mainly from farming, domestic livestock, and trading, while men obtained relatively more income from trade and service jobs (*dich vu*). Men's work was tied to state-sector work and the private sector; they derived most of their earnings from full-time rather than part-time work. Women made at most half as much as men in trading (\$500 as opposed to \$1,000 on average), perhaps because of the differences in commodities traded and the shorter distances they were able to travel.¹⁰ Women's work generally brought in less income than men's because it was primarily based on farming. (Farming was the principal occupation for 65 percent of the women in the *xã*, compared to 46 percent for the men.) Agricultural work was less valued than other types of work because it returned so little in terms of financial remuneration. On average, farming brought

Table 4.1 Percentage of Economic Contribution

| Percentage | Husband % | Wife % |
|----------------------------|-----------|--------|
| More than half | 43.2 | 24.5 |
| Between a third and a half | 36.4 | 46.4 |
| A third or less | 20.0 | 29.1 |
| None | 0.4 | 0.0 |

in little income for either men or women: \$138 for women compared to \$135 for men.¹¹

On average, men brought in twice as much non-agricultural income (in cash and in kind) into the household than women: \$612 compared to \$376. Men brought in cash through salaries, odd jobs, and running small businesses. Women who still worked in the state sector received a regular salary, but this tended to be insufficient and was supplemented with extra jobs, a situation true in Vietnam as a whole.¹² In the few households that had no land, women brought in as much or more income than to men. Women who worked as teachers and in other state occupations had to moonlight to secure an adequate income. State employment was the principal occupation of 13 percent of the women in the survey, compared to 14 percent of the men. Some women who were laid off as state workers had gone into private trading and made more money in the informal sector than they had working for the state.¹³

To understand more fully gendered control of access to income, gender theorists have also examined issues of money management and found that whether income is held in separate purses or is pooled makes a difference in gender status. If income is pooled, women can lose control of income or food they produce, since it goes into a common pot. If separate purses are the rule, women have a separate and predictable source of income that they can spend as they wish. In this regard, some researchers have also found that women with money of their own will spend their income on their children before they spend it on themselves.¹⁴

Women were the household cashiers in Quang xã, ostensibly controlling the entire household's cash income. This meant keeping track of the daily ebb and flow of receipts and debits into the cash box and doling out pocket money to other members of the household. Most family members turned over their earnings directly to the female designated to keep the family purse. Some men told me they kept a small amount for beer and cigarettes, which they may or may not have disclosed to the central banker. Women also managed the household budget. In some households, men and women kept separate purses, but the majority of households pooled their cash, according to the villagers with whom I spoke. Husbands and wives were asked who kept the money in the household, and Table 4.2 shows that women generally held that responsibility. Fifty-two percent of wives reported they kept the money, and 51 percent of husbands concurred.

The management of the cash box of the household gave some wives the opportunity to hide cash from wayward husbands. A popular saying went “*Đàn ông là cái giỏ; đàn bà là cái hom*”: “Men are the open end of the fish trap, but women are the compartment that traps the fish,” meaning that cash easily flows in and out with men, but women keep it safe. By and large, it also meant that women controlled their own earnings from the sale of their own produce or trade. Women tended to control their earnings from trade and the pocket money they obtained from selling vegetables and chickens in the market. (This was more so in nuclear families than for young wives

Table 4.2 Who Holds Family Cash

| <i>Me</i> | | <i>My spouse</i> | | <i>Both</i> | |
|------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % | <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % | <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % |
| 51.8 | 12.3 | 11.4 | 50.9 | 24.5 | 23.6 |

| <i>My mother</i> | | <i>My spouse's mother</i> | | <i>Others</i> | |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % | <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % | <i>Wife</i> % | <i>Husband</i> % |
| 0.0 | 5.9 | 4.5 | 0.0 | 5.1 | 4.1 |

in extended families.) The household survey revealed that women's earnings from domestic livestock came to around \$100 a year, which was usually spent on essential expenses such as food, clothes, or medicine.

Survey Classifications

By conducting the couples' survey, I also hoped to determine who controlled any surplus or discretionary income after basic household needs were met. Resource theory postulates two categories of income, the first for basic needs and the second for discretionary expenses, and that control of income comes down to who controls the surplus. It defines control over income as bringing income into the household, managing the income, and making decisions regarding the use of income, thereby directly relating marital power to control over income. Because economic contributions in many third-world households may not be based solely on income (salaries or wage labor), the concept of income is expanded to comprise economic resources that include in-kind, non-cash commodities such as food production. Resource theory posits that women's leverage in the household's resource allocation increases when they bring in valued income – that is, income other than subsistence income. Surplus income in most societies is valued more highly than income for basic needs and is usually generated from salaried employment, marketing, or entrepreneurial activities.¹⁵

I found in my pre-testing, however, that the notion of surplus was problematical in Quang *xã*, so I had to define it another way in the survey. I found that most households viewed basic necessities as including food, education, clothing, medicine, and house repairs. The economy in the *xã* was still largely a subsistence one centered on ensuring self-sufficiency in food. Although the economic context in Quang *xã* in the 1990s was not yet consumerist, neither was it characterized by conditions of widespread economic

scarcity. Concerned about producing sufficient food to live on and/or earning enough cash to supplement their mostly inadequate supplies of rice, Quang *xã* households relied on farming as their economic base and used the market and outside jobs for extras. Most households raised secondary crops such as vegetables or fruit as well as domestic livestock for sale in the market to meet their need for cash. Although they were engaged in spending, the concept of extra income did not seem to enter the thinking of most residents. But *xã* residents did think in terms of “big expenses,” a concept that I adopted in place of surplus. Such expenditures included housing, land, large pieces of furniture, household conveniences such as televisions and motorbikes, elaborate family commemorations (*giỗ/Tết*, as well as weddings and funerals), investment opportunities, children’s education, and trips to famous pagodas or to Hanoi for reasons other than subsistence or the essentials of life. Therefore, I classified these items as *major household matters* in the survey.¹⁶

Based in my earlier findings, I designed the questionnaire to address three clusters of issues. The questionnaire asked married couples to identify who made the decisions for each of the following categories of decisions: children, economic activities, and major household matters. According to my conversations with villagers, big expenses included major house renovations and repairs (\$3,000 to \$10,000), upgrading the family’s means of transportation from bicycles to motorbikes (\$1,000 for a used bike to \$3,000 for a new Honda), and purchasing wooden furniture (\$50 to \$500). Expenses for family ceremonial occasions such as weddings and *giỗ/Tết* ran between \$200 and \$1,000. Sometimes families sold rice they had harvested for daily expenses, and a decision had to be made on how much to sell. Medicine and clothes constituted small expenditures, although they were highly variable from family to family. Big expenses exceeded what was needed for basic sustenance and mostly required cash, thus implying surplus income in that they were not strictly necessary for survival.

The second broad area of decisions that most households dealt with in the mid-1990s comprised agricultural production, paid work outside agriculture, and family business activities, all of which I identified in the questionnaire as *economic activities*. Most households grew one or two crops of rice each year, requiring start-up costs (capital, *vốn*) of about \$100 for seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and/or renting the services of a buffalo or a plowman. Only about one in four or five families owned their own buffalo. Crops grown for trade (*buôn bán*) required about the same start-up cost. Start-up costs for raising domestic livestock were less. Rice seeds were purchased for the spring crop in January and sown in flats near the house. The cooperative gave advice on seeds and when to plant. When the seedlings were large enough, women transferred them to the rice paddies for transplanting. The cooperative provided pesticide services for a fee. Tending (*chăm sóc*) the crop required active supervision and attention to the weather.

As most households engaged in farming and had just been allotted their own land, these new income-related decisions included when to plant their rice

crops and whether to grow a winter crop of vegetables. This depended on how well the spring and autumn rice crops had done and whether there was sufficient income from other sources to justify letting the land go fallow for the winter crop or leasing it to someone else at an agreed-upon price. Although it was against the law to transfer agricultural land to non-agricultural use or to sell it, families could give or lease land to relatives. Families also made investment decisions, which included the use of capital for agricultural purposes such as buying a buffalo, a thresher (*tuốt lúa*), or a new plow.

Another form of financial activity identified by my earlier household survey was that money changed hands frequently between families. Villagers lent and borrowed funds freely, depending on the time of year and their needs. Poor families approached rich families for rice or cash when their larders were empty. Lenders outside the family charged interest, so there was an incentive to go to one's family for funds. Illness and ceremonial or educational expenses prompted needy households to borrow from friends or family. These transactions depended on networks and trust. Taking out a loan required decisions on when and how to repay it.

The third cluster of decisions was in regard to children: how many children to have, and about their education, occupations, place of occupation, future spouses, and inheritance. New decisions in this sphere that required financial disbursements included such items as the purchase of school supplies and clothes. Poorer parents were reluctant to keep children in school past *Cấp II* (middle school.) Parents were often very busy working and did not appear to devote much time to supervising children's schoolwork.

Survey Results: Control of Economic Resources

The survey results revealed that husbands were the chief decision-makers in major household matters. Men made most of the decisions regarding major household expenditures, repairing or building the house, buying furniture, and buying other expensive consumer items. They also had a significant influence on the dispensation of other household economic resources, such as land and property. Men made more decisions, although not exclusively so, about sons' inheritance of the family house, land, and property (which were almost always left to sons). Men and women shared decisions concerning commemorative expenses and lending major property. Women made most of the household decisions concerning household medical expenses and clothing, which were not considered big expenses by rural families and thus seen as less important. Men predominantly represented the family in *thôn* or *xã* affairs, but this was not exclusively a male preserve. (See the Appendix, Table A-1: "Who Makes Decisions about Major Household Matters.")

When it came to economic and production matters, however, wives made many of the decisions themselves or shared decision-making with their husbands. Women predominantly made decisions regarding the use of capital and most matters pertaining to farm and business management. Women were

more likely to make decisions about the use of household capital for production matters and buying farm animals. Not all of these were big expenses and many could be paid for directly from women's own short-term earnings. Women and men shared decisions regarding expenditures for agricultural equipment, land use, business investments, loans, and selling paddy for immediate cash needs. When it came to spending larger sums of money for such items as farm equipment, lending or borrowing money, and scheduling loan repayments, the women of Quang *xã* generally shared these decisions with their husbands. Such decisions also included selling paddy or other items to meet daily expenses, but in 1996 few families had been forced to sell their newly acquired goods as they might have had to do if facing an economic downturn. Although men claimed they made most decisions regarding the work and duties of family members, wives disagreed that this was exclusively a male prerogative, assigning equal responsibility to themselves or to the two of them together. As for control of other economic resources, such as agricultural land, women in Quang *xã* made more decisions than did men. (See the Appendix, Table A-2: "Who Makes Decisions about Economic/Production Matters.")

Women's primary role in rice production thus gave them responsibility for economic and production matters, and they shared decisions with their husbands as to whether harvested rice was sold or not. As discussed earlier, women handled money in the family and therefore were important players in lending and borrowing household funds. As to planning the division of labor, women claimed shared decision-making, as mentioned above. Decisions regarding education, inheritance, and marriage were usually shared by husbands and wives. Thus while women's economic contributions and management of family income gave them responsibility in financial matters and a voice in other important family matters, it did not grant them control over big expenditures.

When decision-making within neo-local households and extended households was compared, men still retained their decision-making responsibility, although decision-making shifted to the older generation. In investigating possible generational or household differences in these responses, I broke down the results by nuclear households, multi-generational households, and age group.¹⁷ By so doing, I discovered several patterns. In most cases, men's decision making was maintained across the two generations of adults studied. The men in the older generation shared decision-making with their co-residential married son for building or repairing the house and took the major role in representing the family in neighborhood or communal affairs. In production matters, decisions were shared across generation and gender. As women aged, they took on more decision-making responsibility within the family. Young couples who lived with their parents shared decision-making with their parents with regard to the couple's children. When living alone in their own small families, however, wives made more decisions. Wives in such families more commonly took responsibility for representing the family in

outside affairs and shared more of the decision-making, but still played less of a role in expenditure decisions than their husbands.

In Mrs. Lan's case, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Mrs. Lan made most of the production decisions as chief agricultural worker, although she shared investment and buying livestock decisions with Mr. Binh. Selling rice and borrowing and lending money was her domain (Mr. Binh agreed). Mr. Binh took the leading role in deciding on major household expenditures and family members' work responsibilities and changes (Mrs. Lan agreed). They both shared in planning inheritance decisions. According to their completed questionnaires, they mostly agreed with one another, although Mr. Binh claimed slightly more decision-making responsibility in domestic matters than his wife.

The survey data show that when all the decisions pertaining to financial and economic matters – expenditures, money transfers, inheritance, and production – from the three clusters of decisions are combined, men tended to be the primary decision-makers. Men made most of the expenditure decisions themselves, except for selling paddy, other major property and family ceremonial expenses (*hiếu hỷ*). In production matters, however, wives handled many of the decisions, while also sharing responsibility with their husbands. In decisions pertaining to production, autonomous decision-making by women was reported in about half the decisions, while the other half were reported as either jointly made or disputed between spouses. With regard to children, husbands tended to make the most important decisions, although here many decisions were shared as well. (See the Appendix, Table A-3: "Who Makes Decisions about Children.")

Men made most decisions pertaining to the house, household goods, and sons' inheritance, as Table 4.3 shows. This important finding underscores my earlier observations about the return of religious and kinship practices to the household. These practices took on added significance in light of the preference for sons, as noted by villagers, as well as sons' favored inheritance. With more economic resources at their disposal, Quang *xã* households planned to pass their assets down to their sons rather than to their daughters, although in some cases, daughters would share in inheritance. Sons' importance in ancestor worship and continuing the line of descent were given as the reasons for these economic preferences. Fathers were exerting control over major household goods because these goods were seen, in part, as assets to be passed down through the male line.

Nonetheless, women played a role in sons' inheritance of major property other than the house and land. Regarding sons' inheritance, husbands made decisions more often than wives, but there was shared input there as well. Women played an important role in production but shared decisions with their husbands regarding land use, production expenses, and money transfers. Most couples discussed domestic issues other than major household expenditures before arriving at a decision. By this measure, these couples enjoyed "equality" in the family, as state discourses would have it. Yet women

Table 4.3 Who Makes Decisions about Economic Resources

| Decision | Me | | My spouse | | Both | | My parents (husband)/My spouse's parents (wife) | | |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--|
| | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % | |
| | | | I. Major expenditures | | | | | | |
| Buying major household conveniences | 53.2 | 9.1 | 6.4 | 46.8 | 22.3 | 24.1 | 4.5 | 8.6 | |
| Building or repairing the house | 51.8 | 6.8 | 3.6 | 44.5 | 22.7 | 22.3 | 12.3 | 16.5 | |
| Buying furniture | 47.7 | 8.2 | 7.7 | 46.4 | 21.4 | 22.7 | 5.0 | 8.6 | |
| Selling paddy or other major property | 25.0 | 27.3 | 20.9 | 16.4 | 25.9 | 27.7 | 11.4 | 9.9 | |
| Family ceremonial expenses (<i>thieu hy</i>) | 24.5 | 38.2 | 29.5 | 16.4 | 26.8 | 29.1 | 14.9 | 12.8 | |
| | | | II. Sons' inheritance | | | | | | |
| Sons' inheritance (house & land) | 32.7 | 3.9 | 2.4 | 25.4 | 33.2 | 35.1 | 8.3 | 8.3 | |
| Sons' inheritance (other major property) | 22.9 | 4.4 | 2.9 | 12.7 | 40.0 | 46.3 | 6.4 | 7.3 | |
| | | | III. Agricultural expenditures | | | | | | |
| Land use | 23.6 | 36.8 | 34.1 | 21.4 | 15.9 | 16.8 | 15.9 | 12.3 | |
| Use of capital for production or business | 20.9 | 38.2 | 35.5 | 13.6 | 19.5 | 21.8 | 11.8 | 9.5 | |
| Purchasing pigs, cattle, or buffalo | 14.1 | 37.3 | 32.3 | 12.3 | 24.5 | 23.6 | 12.3 | 9.5 | |
| | | | IV. Lending/borrowing | | | | | | |
| Borrowing money or major property | 29.1 | 29.5 | 23.6 | 17.3 | 29.5 | 34.5 | 11.3 | 11.4 | |
| Loan payments | 24.5 | 33.2 | 25.9 | 15.5 | 30.0 | 30.9 | 11.0 | 11.4 | |
| Lending major sums of money or major property | 22.7 | 25.5 | 24.5 | 14.5 | 28.6 | 36.4 | 10.5 | 10.9 | |
| | | | V. Minor expenditures | | | | | | |
| Medical expenses | 23.6 | 47.7 | 38.6 | 15.9 | 19.5 | 20.0 | 8.2 | 8.1 | |
| Buying clothes | 7.7 | 60.5 | 55.5 | 5.9 | 10.5 | 11.4 | | | |
| | | | VI. Everyone else in the household who made their own decisions | | | | | | |
| Buying clothes | | | | | | | Male 26.3 | Female 22.2 | |

Note

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives. This table is based on Tables A-1, A-2, and A-3 in the Appendix.

acknowledged they did not share responsibility with their husbands in all decisions. In terms of overall control of economic resources, they acknowledged, men had more control than women.

I also wished to see if the relationship between income and decision-making held when women who reported they contributed more than half of their households' income – that is, to learn whether they had more input into household decision-making. The data in Table 4.4 show they did not. Even in households where women brought in more income than their husbands, men still made the big decisions, mostly by themselves, regarding major household matters.

As for representing the family in the *thôn* and the *xã*, the data in Table 4.4 also show that major economic contributions to the household by women did not change their under-representation. The decisions reflected in that table were made by either men or women exclusively, with little shared decision-making. This pattern changed when it came to economic and production decisions, where there was a stronger relationship between wives' primary economic contribution and decisions regarding production matters, as demonstrated in Table 4.5.

Thus the overall results showed that men brought in more income than women and tended to control the economic resources of the household. Men's control over decision-making was stronger than women's decision-making, particularly when decisions were weighed in terms of importance. Women shared decisions with their husbands in agricultural and some economic and financial matters and in some matters relating to children, but on the most important household matters, men made more decisions than women did. In providing most of the income to the household and in its most valued form, cash, and by making the "big decisions" and controlling the economic resources of the household, men therefore controlled the "surplus." Women surely brought in economic resources, managed the money, and controlled some economic assets, giving them some decision-making responsibility, yet even in households where wives contributed more income than husbands, men still made the most important decisions. Thus while women may have used bringing income into the family as a bargaining chip for a more active voice in decision making, an increase in their income-earning capacity appears not to have significantly altered the balance of decision-making in their relations with their husbands or his family as a whole. Therefore high income-earning capacity and money management on the part of women did not, in themselves, guarantee parity in decision-making between spouses.¹⁸

Couples Interviews

To explore married couples' values and attitudes about men's and women's economic responsibilities and financial management and to probe more deeply into the gender conceptions and discourses that lay behind the patterns uncovered in the survey and thus gender hierarchies in the household,

Table 4.4 Who Makes Major Household Decisions When Wives Contribute Half or More of Household Income

| Decision | Husband | | | | Wife | | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------|------|-------------|--------|-------------|------|-------------|--------|
| | Me | Both | My spouse | Others | Me | Both | My spouse | Others |
| Building/repairing the house | 59.4 | 24.0 | 3.1 | 12.5 | 9.4 | 24.5 | 43.4 | 18.9 |
| Buying furniture | 56.3 | 25.0 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 11.3 | 20.8 | 54.7 | 9.4 |
| Buying major conveniences | 64.6 | 22.9 | 4.2 | 7.3 | 13.2 | 24.5 | 52.8 | 9.4 |
| Family representative in <i>thôn/xã</i> | 43.8 | 14.6 | 9.4 | 32.3 | 18.9 | 26.4 | 34.0 | 20.8 |
| Family representative in cooperative | 59.4 | 7.3 | 9.4 | 24.0 | 20.8 | 13.2 | 45.3 | 20.8 |
| Selling paddy or other major property | 29.2 | 29.2 | 20.8 | 11.5 | 49.1 | 17.0 | 13.2 | 7.5 |
| Ceremonial expenses | 28.1 | 28.1 | 27.1 | 15.6 | 52.8 | 26.4 | 13.2 | 7.5 |
| Medical expenses | 29.2 | 18.8 | 42.7 | 8.3 | 66.0 | 15.1 | 13.2 | 5.7 |
| Buying clothes | 8.3 | 10.4 | 64.6 | 15.6 | 71.7 | 9.4 | 1.9 | 13.2 |

Note

53 husbands and 53 wives were surveyed.

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives

Table 4.5 Who Makes Production/Economic Decisions When Wives Contribute Half or More of Household Income

| Decision | Wife | | | Husband | | | | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|------|-----------|---------|------|------|-------------|--------|
| | Me | Both | My Spouse | Others | Me | Both | My Spouse | Others |
| Use of capital for production and/or business | 58.5 | 15.1 | 13.2 | 5.7 | 27.1 | 17.7 | 31.3 | 12.5 |
| Purchasing pigs, cattle, or buffalo | 56.6 | 17.0 | 7.5 | 5.7 | 18.8 | 26.0 | 30.2 | 11.5 |
| Use of insecticides or pesticides | 75.5 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 13.5 | 11.5 | 50.0 | 12.5 |
| When to plant | 77.4 | 3.8 | 7.5 | 3.8 | 11.5 | 13.5 | 51.0 | 13.5 |
| What to plant | 77.4 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 3.8 | 11.5 | 14.6 | 50.0 | 13.5 |
| Which seeds to use | 77.4 | 5.7 | 5.7 | 3.8 | 11.5 | 11.5 | 53.1 | 13.5 |
| Land use | 56.6 | 15.1 | 17.0 | 5.7 | 27.1 | 12.5 | 35.4 | 16.7 |
| Borrowing money or major property | 52.8 | 26.4 | 17.0 | 7.5 | 34.4 | 36.5 | 15.6 | 9.4 |
| Loan payments | 52.8 | 26.4 | 11.3 | 5.7 | 31.3 | 34.4 | 18.8 | 9.4 |
| Lending major sums of money or major property | 39.6 | 30.2 | 17.0 | 5.7 | 29.2 | 33.3 | 17.7 | 8.3 |
| Selection of or changes in one's own or family members' jobs | 32.1 | 26.4 | 11.3 | 11.3 | 47.9 | 16.7 | 4.2 | 21.0 |

Note

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives.

I used data from detailed interviews with 20 households that had participated in the surveys. In these interviews, I also sought to clarify the normative standards of what made someone a “good wife” or a “good husband,” how wives and husbands viewed “proper” gender behavior, ideal family relationships and responsibilities, and *xã* residents’ conceptions of “gender equality.” I interviewed both husbands and wives, together and alone, and tried to assess the differences and commonalities in their discourses.¹⁹

In my interviews, almost all *xã* couples spoke of men as being “the most important member of the family.” Both men and women almost universally expressed the view that men were the “pillars of the family” (*trụ cột trong gia đình*). This was repeated so often as to seem almost a cliché. When asked to explain why men were the “pillars,” both men and women invariably answered that men do “the heavy work” in the family, shoulder the major responsibilities (*có trách nhiệm chính*), and take care of the family’s internal and external relations (*quan hệ đối nội, đối ngoại*). For instance, Mrs. Lan, mentioned earlier, said that men should do all the heavy and “big” work in the family. Even if all that a man took care of was plowing and building or repairing the house this should still give him a high position in the household, like “the roof of the house,” (*như nóc nhà*). Women’s work, in contrast, was “lighter” and “smaller” (*những việc nhẹ nhàng và nhỏ hơn*).

Both men and women villagers said women “only” did domestic work (*việc gia đình*): house labor (*nội trợ*), going to market, and taking care of children. Women’s work also included tending the animals and garden and agricultural labor (*đồng áng*). Although work in the fields could be quite physically taxing, it was nonetheless considered lighter because it was women’s work. Men I talked to reported that they would perform domestic work if their health was poor or were at home on pension, but otherwise considered it beneath them. Some women believed men should help out at home, and their spouses may have concurred, especially if women had jobs outside the home. But as one *xã* resident said, helping out at home could put some men at risk socially: other people could accuse them of giving too much power to their wives (*trao quyền cho vợ*).²⁰

Mr. Lê Sỹ Vinh, age 55, the farmer and plowman with four sons mentioned in the previous chapter, provided an example:

Q: Do you think men are more important in the family than women?

A: I think the man is more important to some extent. But women make many important decisions in the family. That is the reality. There are matters I decide. But in running the household and doing the housework, women make the decisions. Men have the reputation as the decision makers, but it’s the women who make most of the decisions. In generations past, people used to say “the strength of a boat lies in its rudder, a lucky girl has a good husband”. That is correct in theory only.

Q: If a wife has to travel far from home to go to work and her husband has to look after house and home, will there be trouble between them?

- A: In this case, I think that it is hard to say because every family has its own circumstances. We don't have such a situation in my household. The children [my sons and daughters-in-law] work at home, so there aren't any conflicts like that. But many families experience this type of situation.
- Q: If a wife earns substantial income, will her husband feel inferior [*mặc cảm*]?
- A: I think there are cases like that. There are also families where the husband and the children do not earn much but the wife does.
- Q: Would the husband be happy under those circumstances?
- A: The husband would not be very happy.
- Q: In your view, when a woman lives with her husband's family and earns more money than he does, should her views carry substantial weight in the family?
- A: Of course.
- Q: Why?
- A: Because she is the boss [*chủ quyền*] in the family, because whatever happens, you still have to have money. The person who earns high income is bound to have an important voice. Definitely so. If the husband makes less money than his wife, and she makes more money [than he does], the wife carries more weight than the husband.

Another respondent who believed there would be conflicts if women earned more money than their husbands was Mr. Lê Hải Quang, the ambitious 36-year-old military veteran and budding entrepreneur with a young wife. Mr. Quang believed men should assume the major responsibilities in the household and be "role models" (*gwong mẫu*) for their wives and that wives should not work outside the home. He was asked what he would do if his shop failed financially:

- Q: . . . if you really want to make money but you can't, what would your feelings be about this?
- A: In that case I will look for other ways to make money . . . and I would want my wife to make money so that we [would] have enough to eat and to live on, and in this case I would have a different perspective on it. But the main thing is when the husband makes the most money in the family, the wife should be more concerned with family matters than with supporting the family. Especially the wife should take care of the inner family and make sure the outer family is also kept in mind. The second thing is that in the work at home, the wife has to devote her attention to raising the children. It is not only me who thinks like this. They don't say so, but there are women who feel that they work very hard but don't have [commensurate] authority. A man should pay attention to his work when he is 36 to 40 years of age when his children are growing up and his family is stable; this is the time he needs to succeed in his work. This is the way business people think. But for some other

people, they think the best solution is to let their wives make a lot of money. But when wives make a lot of money, this is not suitable for the [Vietnamese] family. If husband and wife both want to engage business endeavors, some conflicts will occur. The main thing is that women who make [a lot of] money is inappropriate in the family setting. With two people earning a living, there will inevitably be a problem.

Mr. Vũ Văn Nguyên, a farmer, said if the husband “doesn’t know how to behave and does not value the income his wife brings in,” there could be a problem in their relationship. If the husband insisted on maintaining his position as head of the household and his wife “expressed contempt” for him because he earned less money, there would be a problem. But if the wife continued to defer to her husband, Mr. Nguyên clarified, the husband “would not have a problem” if his wife earned more money than he did.

Mrs. Lan, however, voiced a different view, one shared by most of the women interviewed:

In general, whoever makes money in the family is appreciated. Then we can have normal relations [*bình thường hóa*, i.e., equal relations between husband and wife] in the family. The most important thing is to pay mutual respect [*tôn trọng nhau*] to each other; then there won’t be any difficulties.

Mrs. Lan believed that husbands and wives should show “respect” (*tôn trọng*) to one another, by which she meant that husbands should not impose their views unilaterally on their wives.

Generally speaking, *xã* residents saw men as being responsible for bringing in more money (*kiếm nhiều tiền hơn*) than women. If women made more money than men, the respondents reported, there could be conflicts (*mâu thuẫn*) in the family, even the absence of *tình cảm* (love and emotional attachment). Villagers, especially men, noted that this could lead to a superior attitude and a lack of respect for their husbands (*coi thường chồng*). A man who was dependent (*phụ thuộc*) on his wife financially, they reported, would feel shame (*mặc cảm*). If he was totally dependent on her, she could tell him that she fed him and that he did not know how to do anything.²¹

Other villagers I talked to evaluated both men and women in terms of their prestige (*uy tín*) or standing in the family. Some women achieved influence (*tiếng nói*) in their husbands’ families by virtue of their personal qualities or wealth, but rarely due to their social position or rank outside the family. Thus women who brought in income did so for the benefit and betterment of their families, not for their own personal enhancement.

One woman said that women who made more money would have more prestige and their voice in family affairs would carry more weight; husbands would respect them more. If a woman earned a lot of money, she might deservedly achieve a higher position (*uy tín*) in the family. But at the same

time, she claimed, a wife should not act “like a husband” or think she is superior just because she had an important job. Another resident, however, noted the problems that this increased status could cause for a woman:

In general, when a girl is engaged in social activities (*làm công tác xã hội*) and proves she is more adept than a man, she may have difficulty in getting married. If a wife makes a lot of money, then her position is higher than the man's. But the man will feel inferior because men think that they should do the big things and women the small things.

Almost universally, however, villagers held that women were just as responsible for the economic sustenance of the family as were the men. Mr. Nguyễn Bá Hiệp said that equality for women also meant “the responsibility to earn money should be shared by everybody. Women have to make money and take care of their husband just like men do.”

But some men expressed a deep ambivalence about women's being exposed to society by working outside the home. When asked whether it was beneficial if women made more money than their husbands, Mr. Nguyễn displayed these mixed feelings:

A: Women who make more money than their husbands is good, but they are exposed more in society [*va chạm xã hội nhiều*].

Q: Will men feel shame?

A: Of course they will.

Q: Women who make more money than their husbands, are these abnormal cases?

A: The husband has to inquire with her about the kind of work she does, if her income comes from legal sources or not; if her work is illegal [prostitution or smuggling], then she has to change. If the wife earns good and honest income, then no one can feel contempt for her.

In these exchanges, the issue was not about income as such, but about acting on the power that income conferred on its provider. Men could exercise this power, but not women. Not all men were inspired by the ideal of the “good provider,” it seemed, but women were. They wished to be seen as serving the family and providing for its sustenance. Men did not appear to fear women who took over the family responsibilities; virtually all residents, men and women, praised capable and efficient women, with no hint of belittling women's accomplishments, resourcefulness, and their ability to work hard. In fact, describing women as “being able to do everything” (*đảm đàng*) was not to damn them with faint praise but, on the contrary, reflected genuine admiration on men's part. It was even socially acceptable for women, under certain circumstances, to “switch roles” (*hoán vị*) with men and still be admired. In times of economic hardship or war, any way in which either men or women could earn money was considered desirable. Sometimes women had to switch roles to bring in more income, and they may even be obliged

to do “big” jobs. The basic norm was that men and women must both work and contribute to the economic livelihood of the household. It was better not to switch roles, but tough times allowed for some flexibility.²²

At the same time, *xã* residents, particularly men, considered women less capable than men. A frequently cited reason for women’s inferiority was that they were less educated (*trình độ thấp hơn*) and hence less intelligent than men, although it should be noted that the average level of schooling in Quang *xã* was virtually the same for both men and women – around seven years of school.²³ Many women shared these attitudes with men, or at least said they did, voicing the view that men were more educated and capable at doing “men’s work.” Women could do this work if need be, but they preferred not to. Men’s work required strength and could be dangerous. If men were not active (*năng động*) and strong or were lazy (*lười*), they deserved less esteem, according to the women interviewed. Nor did most women see themselves as capable of making the most important decisions in the household. It was the role of men to make big decisions about important financial matters and of women to make “little decisions.” As Mrs. Lan told me, women needed the protection of men.²⁴

Men could pull rank and tended to command a wide berth, although they might be criticized for doing so. Unilateral decision-making and acting in a high-handed manner (*tính gia trưởng*) were seen as bossy and throwing one’s weight around. Although men were often quick to anger (*nóng tính*), *xã* residents voiced the view that this anger was “natural,” often blaming it on women, who should bend (*nhịn đi*) or get out of the way. Male pride (*tự ái*) was seen as easily wounded, and as a consequence women, especially younger women, tended to adopt an attitude of diffidence and non-assertiveness, at least on the surface. While they might not actually have been that shy or passive, the tactic often worked, informants reported.

The double standard regarding the exercise of power was thus largely unquestioned. Gender roles were clearly defined and delineated. Women were mostly confined to the family and did most of the highly intensive labor, while men did considerably less at home and often spent their at-home or leisure time with friends. Women were judged on the basis of their skillfulness (*khéo léo*) in domestic duties and behavior in the family. They were expected to focus their main energies on their family, be respectful and solicitous towards their husband’s parents, be hospitable to guests (*hiếu khách*), and refrain from being talkative.²⁵

In my interviews, both men and women indicated they viewed ideal family relationships in terms of harmony and family happiness (*gia đình hạnh phúc*). Mr. Hiệp, a retired state worker who had worked in Hanoi, defined family happiness in terms of respect for hierarchy: “When harmony reigns in a household, people listen to one another. It is bad when the father speaks and the children talk back.” When asked to define family happiness, many villagers said it consisted of loyalty (*chung thủy*) between husband and wife, mutual respect (*tôn trọng nhau*), shared decision-making, having children, and family

solidarity. Villagers also reported that husbands and wives were considered bound together by both affection and duty (*bằng tình bằng nghĩa*). Both men and women valued warmth, harmony (*hoà thuận*), and close emotional bonding (*tình cảm*).²⁶ They said a “good man” was loyal to his wife, good-natured, and took responsibility for the family’s economic livelihood.²⁷ A bad man did not take care of his wife and kids, drank, gambled, played around, hit his wife and children. The worse kind of man was a thief. A “good woman” was faithful to her husband and managed the household well (*thu vén tốt*), they said. A bad woman committed adultery; the worst kind of woman was a prostitute. Interviewees praised the model wife as mother and caregiver and as kind, loyal, solicitous. Chastity for women was fully expected, although “playing around” by unmarried males was tolerated. Loyalty between spouses was *de rigueur* for women, but men’s transgressions were tolerated, I found.

Reverse gender stereotypes were cause for amusement. Mrs. Nga said that men should not “wear a skirt” (*mặc váy*), just as women should not “act like a husband” (*làm chồng*). She advised that “thrift is a woman’s trait” and that accusing a man of being stingy was voicing a criticism: men should be noble and liberal in character, not close-fisted. Accusing a man of “wearing a skirt” did not imply being prissy in the Western sense but that a man counted every penny, like his wife, and was niggardly. Villagers held that men should be generous (*rộng rãi*) in money matters and general disposition. They should not be concerned with small change and petty matters.²⁸

As for intergenerational relations, interviewees in extended households used many of these same expressions, but the authority shifted to the older generation. Father and Mother (*bố mẹ*) were responsible for the big decisions, were the “pillar” (*trụ cột*) of the family, represented the larger family for “external” (*đối ngoại*) occasions, and made the most important financial decisions. The small family yielded to the big family.

Villagers said that daughters-in-law should be well behaved (*ngoan*) and show respect to their husbands’ parents.²⁹ They evaluated a good daughter-in-law by how well she treated her husband’s family (*đối xử với gia đình chồng*) and her ability to contribute economically to the household. I found that mothers-in-law tried to exert their authority and hesitated to share all the domestic duties with their daughters-in-law. Their relationship was characterized by difficulties and a certain amount of tension, placing the son/husband in a difficult position between them. The stance of mothers-in-law and their attitudes toward their daughters-in-law were obviously factors in the achievement of equality within the family. The interests of the mother-in-law often worked against equality among the younger generation. As long as the mother had power in the family, she could hinder efforts on the part of the younger generation to achieve an equitable balance in their relationship. The attitudes and behavior of daughters-in-law also played a role in intergenerational relationships. They often needed to make a substantial effort to get along with their parents-in-law.

Interviewees unanimously expressed the view, however, that relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law had undergone significant change since the previous generation and had become “easier.” The relationship was no longer a one-way street in which mothers-in-law could just point and have a job done; they had to discuss it with the daughter-in-law or take her counsel first. If they did not show some respect for their daughters-in-law, the work might not get done. Strict rules (*quy tắc*) governing the conduct of daughters-in-law had relaxed; daughters-in-law had more freedom to express their opinions, and if they were not given the chance to voice their views, the mother-in-law might be seen as the source of conflict in the family. Hence, mother-in-law behavior was evaluated and open for discussion, just as was that of daughters-in-laws. Indeed, during my interviews, a few daughters-in-law expressed the view that some mothers-in-law were hard to get along with (*khó tính*) within earshot of their own mother-in-law.

Many of those interviewed observed that daughters-in-law could improve their position in the family and increase their voice in family affairs by demonstrating their care of family members and attention to family needs. By that standard, they could also improve their standing (*uy tín*) in the household by bringing in substantial income into the family. However, those who did walked a fine line: in order to prove their good intentions, many daughters-in-law worked very hard at home even while working on the outside to bring in more income. If daughters working outside let their housework lapse, they could be criticized. Some husbands told me that if their wives were to have an important job on the outside, they would help out at home, but that there might be conflicts, as a daughter-in-law’s first responsibility was “taking care of the family.”

Ms. Đỗ Thị Yến, who lived with her parents-in-law, put the matter succinctly when asked whether contributing to the financial resources of the household would improve a daughter-in-law’s standing:

This will not improve her standing. In her husband’s family, a wife [daughter-in-law] who makes a lot of money will not improve her standing because of that; if she wants to improve her standing, that depends on the way she treats everyone in the family.

Another resident, a retired *xã* cadre, pointed out that if a daughter-in-law earned a lot of money, she could improve her standing in the eyes of her husband’s parents, but only if she had low status in the first place. But if relations were good and “Father and Mother treated all the children equally,” the daughter-in-law’s contributing more or substantial economic resources would not greatly affect the equation.

Yet yielding to the ideal of serving the family could place a daughter-in-law in a precarious position. Not a few daughters-in-law moved into their husbands’ families and assiduously “took care of the family” only to find that their husbands had more or less permanently left home. With

money-making opportunities in the south or abroad, some husbands left home for extended periods of time, delegating the responsibility of looking after the children and his parents to their wives. Daughters-in-law could be trapped working like maids (*ngư ời gi úp vi ệc*) in their husbands' families with no way to get out. In one family I interviewed, the wife, Mrs. Nguyễn Thu Oanh, had been effectively abandoned by her husband, who had left for Germany ten years earlier, leaving Mrs. Oanh to take care of their three children and his parents. Although he sent money back and the family was one of the richest in the *xã*, his wife was exceedingly unhappy (*bu ồm*).³⁰

Despite their stated agreement with the goal of gender equality, almost all those interviewed in Quang *xã* defined equality in the family differently than as equal or joint decision-making. First of all, *xã* residents highly valued consensus and agreement (*th ồng nh ất*) among family members. Dissension and disagreement, especially vocal disagreement, were seen as indicative of a "lack of harmony" in the household. At the same time, almost all women said that husbands and wives should discuss any important issues before a decision was made, and that not to do so implied disrespect. If wives disagreed about a particular matter, it was expected that husbands should try to honor their objections. If husbands took their wives' views into consideration, they could go ahead and make the decision. For their part, wives were obligated to show respect and kindness to their husbands and parents.

Like most interviewees, Ms. Đặng Thị Tám, 26 years old, the wife of Mr. Quang, defined equality mainly in terms of "family happiness," which was premised on agreement (shared decision-making) and harmony:

Q: How would you define happiness?

A: Family happiness is when husband and wife are in agreement and harmony with each other [*cùng hòa hợp*] and both of them discuss and contribute their ideas to reach a common resolution; each one is concerned about the other person.

Q: What is equality between husband and wife? Should there be equality?

A: Yes, only when husband and wife have equality do they have family happiness.

That such agreement did not translate into joint decision-making, however, was clear from the questionnaire she completed with her husband, which indicated that her husband made virtually all the decisions.

Another interviewee who defined equality in terms of consensus and harmony in sharing the work of the family, 38-year-old Ms. Mỹ Duyên, put it this way:

Equality [*bình đ ẳng nam nữ*] is [when] both husband and wife join hands in raising children to behave well and in doing work [together]. Husband and wife live in harmony, discuss things with each other about work and their livelihood. As such, they will be happier.

But Ms. Mĩ Duyên considered her husband the pillar of the family and men more important than women in the family, and she did all the work in her household. At the same time, she said she made most of the decisions.

No one interviewed in the *xã* claimed equality consisted of an equal amount of power between spouses or commensurate authority in the household or sharing housework. Instead, women repeatedly said they wished that their desires and opinions would be taken into account by their husbands and were satisfied if their husbands showed concern for their feelings and helped them out at home. No one defined equality as a problem of women's rights. Hence equality in the family was not seen as granting women an equal voice in decisions but only respect for their opinions. If there were a difference in opinion between spouses, they strongly implied, the husband's view would prevail. As demonstrated in the next chapter, women's discourses frequently included statements that wives needed to be "deferential" to their husbands. This type of behavior was rarely expected from husbands.

Often villagers praised gender equality and in the same breath claimed men were the most important persons in the family. Mr. Phạm Văn Tùng, age 30, single, and living with his parents, voiced support for gender equality, mutual discussions between spouses, and common decisions, but also viewed the man as the pillar of the family and believed that daughters-in-law owed their parents-in-law filial piety: "A good woman has to take perfect care [*chu đáo*] in doing the housework and respect [*hiếu thảo*] her [husband's] parents."

Ms. Trần Thị Xuân, age 20, the newly married granddaughter-in-law of Mr. Hiệp and the daughter of the president of the Women's Association, voiced support for gender equality but said that sons, not daughters, should inherit the family property. When subsequently queried, "So this isn't really equality, is it?" she responded, "[No], but this is normal [*bình thường*]."

Some interviewees challenged the state's discourse of equality. Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Giao, 69 years old, a widow and mother of six children, said there was no equality in the family, and indeed there should not be: "I think the wife must be under the authority of her husband, and they are not equal at all." Mr. Quang claimed "a wife should not exceed the authority of her husband": "If women gain too much authority in the family, men will not put up with it; if a wife is better educated and has a better job, then her husband will be afraid of her." His young wife, Tám, was clearly a subordinate partner and dependent on her husband. Mr. Quang also cited a conflict "in some people's eyes" between the state's promotion of social equality for women and women's happiness in the family. Perhaps for this reason, Mr. Quang, a party member, was at first reluctant to give his real views about proper gender roles and his strong views about men's authority in the family.

Fellow party member Mrs. Phạm Thị Mến, age 58, voiced a different view. Mrs. Mến had served as a cadre in women's work (*công tác phụ nữ*) in

a textile factory for many years, and just before *Đổi Mới* was officially announced had opened a shop renting wedding apparel on the main road. According to Mrs. Mến,

In our family, it is not like this. But in general, when a girl participates in social activities [*làm công tác xã hội*] and proves she is more adept than men, she may have difficulties getting married. If a wife makes a lot of money, then her position is higher than the man's. Then the man will feel inferior because men always think they should do the big things and women small things.³¹

Hence, although family discourses by and large stressed men's dominant status, the higher value of men's work, and harmony in the family, there were some notable fault lines among villagers' discourses and household gender practices. In Mrs. Dương Thị Lan's case, she managed the household finances and made the farming decisions. Her husband, Mr. Bình gave her all his income, and she made most of the spending decisions, except for large expenditures. Mrs. Lan was the head of the household, and she and Mr. Bình believed that gender equality had been achieved. As in other such cases, women heads exercised this function with ease and with no apparent diffidence or defensiveness; no one seemed to believe this was abnormal, and their husbands usually accepted this state of affairs. Wives in these households were usually the chief decision-makers in production matters, managed the household purse, and shared other household decisions. These decisions sometimes involved considerable expenditures and cash transfers. Like some of the other couples I interviewed, Mrs. Lan and Mr. Bình both freely mentioned to me the many decisions that they discussed and shared together. They therefore exemplified some of the more modern attitudes associated with what state discourses were promoting as "equality families," even though they accepted gender hierarchy, and as in Mrs. Lan's case, considered "men more important than women in the family."³²

The majority of Quang *xã* households, however, exemplified another pattern. In Mr. Quang, Mr. Vinh, and Mr. Nguyễn's households, these husbands were heads of their households, managed the budget, made most of the decisions, and controlled the economic resources of the household. In these families, men provided the chief financial support and their wives were junior partners. Here, men's discourses about their own roles and those of their wives pointed to the existence of a conflict between women's work in the family and earning money outside the home. These men did not wish to be seen as dependent on their wives' income, as it would bring them shame. Yet, on the whole, Quang *xã* villagers generally believed women's income-earning capacity was important and indeed essential to family welfare. Thus discourses in the *xã* about gender roles and equality were inconsistent across households and seemed to reflect tensions about changing women's roles and their public and private duties.

Conclusion

In general, men in Quang *xã* families made most of the decisions in Quang *xã* despite the fact that women made significant and sometimes greater economic contributions than their husbands to the household. Power in the family, most people agreed, was mainly a paternal affair. As Mrs. Phạm Thị Hai put it, “In this *xã*, people give prominence [*đề cao*] to men.” This prominence was reflected in men’s being given responsibility for major expenditures and some production decisions. It was also reflected in men’s decision-making regarding children’s occupations and inheritance of family property. In interviews I found that families preferred the birth of sons over that of daughters, and the survey showed a marked preference for inheritance for sons only, despite national laws to the contrary. As discussed in Chapter 3, leadership in the family was linked to the head of the household. *Xã* residents said men were the “real” heads of the household because they decided major matters and took the major responsibility in the family.

Wives did not overtly contest their husbands’ status and discourses, claiming to be content to let men make the “big decisions.” Thus women did not seem to place a high value on equality in the family in terms of demanding an equal voice in family decisions. Rather their priorities included harmony or consensus between themselves and their husbands, respect for their opinions, and a desire to be treated well. It was also clearly difficult for women to act on the power that high income might confer on them. Although *xã* residents valued women’s economic contributions, they stated that women’s earnings would not increase their prestige in the family.³³ Discourses about male dominance and women’s lower status not only undermined women’s economic initiatives but were at variance with the state’s promotion of gender equality. Yet women’s economic responsibilities in Quang *xã* had increased as a result of *Đổi Mới*, and they believed in sharing control over the household’s economic resources. The survey data showed that wives expected, at the very least, that the dispensation of the household’s resources would be shared, that is, based on discussion and common resolution with their husbands. Yet when women controlled budgetary, production, and spending decisions, this discretion was rarely reflected in their family’s discourses.

The model of the equality family (*gia đình bình đẳng*) promoted by the state seemed to mean, above all, shared decision-making between wives and husbands. By this standard, Mrs. Lan and Mr. Binh were an equality family. But equality families were not the majority in Quang *xã*. Quang *xã* families seem to have begun to exemplify greater gender equality because husbands and wives were jointly making decisions about the economic resources in their households. Yet shared decision-making could just as easily be interpreted as a cultural preference for consensus and harmony in the family, thus revealing the fundamental contradiction at the heart of building cultured and equality families. Behind all the talk about shared

decision-making and equality families lay the continuing reality of unequal power relations between husbands and wives.

Đổi Mới had created new potential for household-based economic accumulation, and men were exerting control over these new assets. This was clearly the case in Mrs. Lan's and Mr. Binh's household, where Mr. Binh was able to take advantage of the economic opportunities created by *Đổi Mới* and increase his income-earning capacity. Mrs. Lan's former status as a state worker had declined as she was thrown back into less remunerative agriculture work. Yet economic forces had encouraged them to work jointly as a conjugal unit and plan their financial affairs and future together. All in all, Mrs. Lan and Mr. Binh's attitude toward the economic reforms was positive. They felt that although everyone had to work to get money and the future was very uncertain, Mr. Binh could now earn more money than he had as a state worker. Mrs. Lan even believed that *Đổi Mới* had created more favorable conditions for husbands and wives to participate in social activities (*công tác xã hội*), such as social gatherings in the neighborhood and political meetings, even though her own employment prospects had declined.

Although most families in Quang xã did not fit the state's definition of equality families, women's deference to men in the family and family harmony discourses were by and large, in line with the state's new emphasis on the household as the site of production and reproduction. The state had turned to the family as a social anchor through its promotion of traditional Vietnamese values and of cultured families. Discourses about family consensus and harmony were central to the state's post-Confucian cultural initiatives. Women's relative lack of power in the family in proportion to their economic contribution thus reflected these reconstructed patriarchal values.

Notes

- 1 Resolution 04-BCT, 1994, issued following the establishment of the Central Steering Committee on a Civilized Way of Life and Cultured Family.
- 2 The visits with Mrs. Dương Thị Lan and Mr. Ngô Đức Bình took place in April 1996. Mrs. Lan had formerly worked for a branch of the May 19 Textile Mill located in the xã, and Mr. Binh for a state construction company. Their economic level was average for the xã, but well-off compared to the rest of the Red River delta. Lan had completed seventh grade (out of ten), while Binh had left school after fourth grade.
- 3 Chief among these theorists is Rae Lesser Blumberg. See Blumberg, *Gender*; Blumberg et al., *Engendering*.
- 4 Blumberg, "Income."
- 5 Decision-making cannot capture all the aspects of how power is exercised in Vietnamese households. First, not all decisions may be made at a conscious, rational level by independent actors nor lend themselves to the kind of zero-sum or win/lose contest implied in a decision-making approach. Although family members in Quang xã strategized to maximize their goals and outcomes and

relished “playing the game,” they often did so on different levels. For instance, women more often than men may have tried to maximize outcomes for others beside themselves. Second, men in Quang *xã* did not always directly exercise their power, and part of their power lay in others’ anticipation of their exercising power. Thus power in Quang *xã* had both active and passive characteristics, silent and overt qualities. “Authority” was often routine, its exercise requiring virtually no overt discussion, although matters that involved discussion, debate, or provoked disagreement would trigger the mechanism of someone’s stepping in and making the final decision. “Silent” power-holders often wished to stay out of routine decision-making so as to hide or protect their power, saving it for more important battles. This type of non-activated power-holding, which is quite common among senior males in Vietnamese families, is not well captured by a decision-making model. In Quang *xã*, Mr. Nguyễn Bá Hiệp’s family was a good example. When he retired from the Ministry of Culture in Hanoi, Mr. Hiệp returned to the family compound in Quang *xã* to live with his large extended family. His days were occupied with writing *số* (propitious characters) in Chinese calligraphy on sheets of paper that he sold to neighbors as votive objects to burn as offerings to the god Trần Quốc Tuấn in the temple at the end of his courtyard. Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Liên, his daughter-in-law, age 55, ran the household and attended to all his daily needs. Mrs. Liên assumed responsibility for the household and made most of the decisions in the absence of her husband, who was often away on business in Hồ Chí Minh City. But Mr. Hiệp, as the senior male present at home, was accorded the highest status in the household and expected deference and respect from his female relatives. Mrs. Liên would not have made any important decisions without consulting her father-in-law.

- 6 The writings of state gender officials often assume that gender equality is based on shared decision-making between wives and husbands. This shared decision-making model implies that women need to acquire sufficient education to become more confident in their household responsibilities and in dealing with their husbands, the burden remaining on women to improve themselves. See Trương Mỹ Hoa and Lê Thị’s writings (cited in Chapter 3). These official works, however, tended to eschew questions of power and women’s subordination in the family and the gender discourses that maintain them.
- 7 Both surveys were carried out by the Sociology Institute based in Hanoi.
- 8 Most of the couples (52 percent) resided in neo-local households, the rest in three- or multi-generational households. A third of the sample practiced agriculture exclusively, 12 percent were non-agricultural, and 56 percent were mixed-economy households. About a fourth of the married couples were under 30 years of age, a third between 30 and 40, slightly more than a quarter between 40 and 50, and 15 percent over 50.
- 9 Men brought in more income in all age groups. But after age 60, income for both men and women declined precipitously.
- 10 In 1995, women earned, on average, \$436 for trade and services, compared to \$1,040 for men.
- 11 However, livestock raising was slightly more remunerative for women than men (\$103 compared to \$93).
- 12 One of the major effects of the economic reforms in Vietnam was the reduction of the state sector. State-operated enterprises, the main employers in the public industrial sector, declined from an estimated 12,000 SOEs in 1989 to 6,000 in 1993 (Trần Thị Quế). According to many sources, there was relatively more equal opportunity for women in the state sector. See, for instance, Trần Thị Quế again. More women were laid off from state-sector jobs than men, and women were thrown back on the household economy for their economic livelihood. Trần Thị Vân Anh and Lê Ngọc Hùng note (p. 103) that women’s labor in the

state-owned sector comprised 46 percent of female employment in 1985, but this had fallen to 8 percent in 1994, according to the Research Center for Labor Research in Hanoi.

- 13 By the end of the 1990s, the private sector in Quang *xã*, as well as Vietnam as a whole, had not absorbed all the displaced state employment, nor had the expansion of the household economy fully compensated for its loss. The overall impact of the decline of the state sector under economic reform has yet to be fully assessed, however. Incomes from the informal sector as a whole appeared to be higher than many state sector jobs, except for export industries.
- 14 Blumberg, "Income"; Treas; Rakowski.
- 15 Blumberg, "Introduction" and "Income." Valued income stems from trading and market activities in some societies; in others, from office, service, and factory employment.
- 16 Spending decisions reflected the post-war mentality in the *xã* and the early *Đôì Mới* economic milieu in which households operated. Decision-making needs to be contextualized in time and space, and the distinctions that individuals use in conceptualizing and labeling certain kinds of decisions and their range and importance need to be identified.
- 17 Respondents were divided into age groups corresponding to the general life cycle of the family. Married couples under the age of 30 with one or two small children often resided with the husband's parents. From the ages of 30 to 45, most couples were raising children in nuclear families. From age 45 to 60, married couples generally lived in their own homes with the youngest child in his or her teens to early twenties, or, if all the children had reached adulthood, with one of their sons and his family. After the age of 60, most married couples lived with one of their sons.
- 18 My findings support sociologist Vũ Mạnh Lợi's argument that men make the most important decisions about how large sums of money are spent. But his claim that women's control of the family budget is purely formalistic seems too extreme. Trần Đình Hươu's claim that Confucian norms had so penetrated the Red River delta family that women never acted as the head of the family and parity between spouses never existed is also not supported by the evidence from Quang *xã*. As we have seen, husbands and wives shared many important decisions, women exercised autonomous decision-making in some production and economic matters, and women controlled many spending and budgeting decisions. Also, women were heads of some households, although a minority. Nguyễn Từ Chi's argument that women's control of the family cash box meant they ultimately decided how cash was spent, in effect giving them financial autonomy, also seems overstated in light of the data from Quang *xã*. Nguyễn Từ Chi's claim that peasant women helped plan the division of labor and contributed their opinions to the education and marriage of their children (although major decisions were announced as the husband's in public) is reflected in the data from Quang *xã*. François Houtart and Geneviève Lemerçinier have similarly argued that women's control of the family finances enabled them to control consumption in the family.
- 19 Twenty households were chosen from a broad range of family types (nuclear, multi-generational, divorced, single living with children), economic types (solely agricultural, mixed, and solely non-agricultural), and economic circumstances. Some interviewees were widows or widowers. Interviews ranged from two to four hours, and some families were interviewed twice. *Thôn* chiefs provided additional information about all the households.
- 20 Husbands may be especially reluctant to share household tasks in co-residing households. See Ngô Thị Ngân Bình for a detailed discussion of this issue in southern urban households.
- 21 Some interviewees also pointed to economic reasons (*lý do kinh tế*) for the presence of conflicts in the family, by which they meant that not enough money was

- coming into the household from male members. Mrs. Lan, for instance, said that women whose husbands did not contribute sufficiently to the household often became verbally abusive because they felt they were assuming too big a burden.
- 22 One of the hamlet chiefs related the story of the former *chủ tịch* of the *xã* whose wife made the money in the family, and who was a serial adulterer. The cadre evidently married an older woman, and when he returned home from military service, his wife's economic endeavors supported all the family, including several children. When the man became *chủ tịch*, "many scandals erupted," and he continued to flirt with other women. His wife, whom he was obliged to respect because she was "the main person in the family," was very jealous because "she knew the character of her husband."
- 23 Mr. Lê Hải Quang claimed husbands' minds were superior to those of their wives, and that men were reluctant to share power with their wives because of this reasoning and their egos.
- 24 This is consistent with findings in other rural areas of the north that women seek husbands to provide them with a stable life, which is why many women wish to marry men employed by the state. See Phạm Văn Bích.
- 25 Some men used the words *hiếu thảo*, which means filial piety, to describe wives' responsibility toward the husband's parents.
- 26 Mrs. Bùi Thị Ngân, 46 the state irrigation worker, said, "Even poor families can be harmonious if the husband and wife love each other, the children are well behaved and well educated, and they listen to their parents and distinguish between right and wrong."
- 27 According to Mrs. Phạm Thị Hai, the retired midwife who ran her household during her military husband's long absences, "In my view, a good husband should be capable of doing many things: earn enough money, love his wife and children, have a stable job, keep his household financially in good shape."
- 28 In Mrs. Đỗ Thị Nga's words, "'A man who wears a skirt' is a criticism, because wearing a skirt describes a woman. Thrift is a woman's trait, and if you say that a man is stingy, this is a criticism. A man must be noble, liberal, and not close-fisted."
- 29 The opposite of *ngoan* is arguing with Father and Mother.
- 30 *Buồn* also has the connotation of being extremely sad or depressed.
- 31 Mrs. Mến, 58, stressed that the work and responsibilities she had borne during the war put her at variance with this attitude. She did not believe women were inferior to men and did not raise her son to expect others to wait on them (*ỷ lại*). Moreover, she felt that women could be just as responsible for representing the family in its "external" relations, contrary to the Vietnamese custom that men look after external affairs while women serve as the "generals of the interior."
- 32 Mrs. Lan's in-laws did not reside in Quang *xã*, an atypical situation, so I was unable to assess her role as a daughter-in-law.
- 33 Diane Wolf's comparative research on factory daughters in Indonesia and Hong Kong suggests that differences in family systems have an impact on how women's factory income affects their status in the household in newly industrializing economies. In Java, as she shows, the kinship system gave women relatively good control over economic resources, so that when they earned valued income outside the home, women retained control of its dispensation. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, women's lower status in the family gave them little leverage in how their earnings were used in the household. Since Vietnam reflects aspects of both Southeast Asian and East Asian family systems, future research on gender and the industrializing economy is likely to yield important insights on the relationship between family status and control of income and vice versa.

5 Womanhoods and State Subject-making in Quang Xã

Thuận: Throughout your life, you have only lived for the sake of your children, now your grandchildren.

Mrs. Hòa: Your turn will come, daughter. That is how things work. They will not change. Women bear many hardships, but also much happiness. Eventually you will replace me, and my grandson will replace you and your husband. This will go on, contributing to the strength of this country. For this, one has to nurture and enrich human attachments and affection, doesn't one?

From the film *Mẹ chồng tôi* (My Husband's Mother)

Just as relations between husbands and wives assumed new importance with the advent of economic reform, so too did intergenerational relations between women in the household. As noted in earlier chapters, *Đổi Mới* discourses on women's emancipation regarding economic development and the cultured family focused on women's responsibility for sustaining the household and maintaining harmony among its members, thereby holding women chiefly accountable for family progress and behavior. The relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law was seen as particularly important in managing tensions that could threaten the order and stability of families and was a major component of the state's initiatives to build "cultured families." Family tensions could be acute in co-residing households, where mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law handled most of the work in the family. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the state's new focus on the family specifically targeted this often fractious relationship. Starting in the early 1990s, the state-controlled media started to portray conflicts (*mâu thuẫn*) between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law as one of the prime reasons for the lack of harmony in the family.¹

As we have seen, the state's attempt to strengthen and promote harmony in the family was driven by the household's important role in *Đổi Mới*'s economic goals and in ensuring social and political stability. State and media discourses in the 1990s portrayed women both as feminine, modern consumers and as embodying Confucian family values in their devotion to their husbands, children, and in-laws.² This was undoubtedly prompted in large part by the

state's desire for the household to assume a greater share of social and economic responsibility than before. But official gender discourses were also related to the strengthening of state controls over cultural production and the media, which included the Social Evils campaign. While state discourses mostly portrayed women in exemplary roles, the Social Evils campaign featured negative portrayals of women in its crackdown on prostitution and its attacks on the media, censoring lurid crime stories and the sex-driven commercialization of the press.³

In Quang *xã*, harmony in the family was perceived mainly as a function of husband/wife and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations. Quang *xã* residents talked about mother- and daughter-in-law relations frequently, and generational hierarchies appeared to be undergoing new stresses and strains under *Đổi Mới*. Conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were noticeable in three of the households I interviewed. One comprised a multi-family compound where elderly parents living with their two unmarried daughters in their thirties shared a courtyard with their youngest son and his wife and children. Immediately adjacent but in a separate courtyard lived the middle son and his wife and their children. This latter household was on bad terms with the rest of the family and ate separately. Although the wife complained about her controlling mother-in-law and her mother-in-law's preference for her own daughters, the burning issue seemed to be the inheritance of land. Many older couples in the *xã* had given their adult children their land inheritance and helped them establish a separate household, but not this family. When asked about land inheritance and this case in particular, the *thôn* chief remarked that land issues had become a source of bitter dispute in some families, exacerbating intergenerational relations.

Another case was that of a disabled single mother. The father of her child, a son, was a soldier stationed in the *xã* during the American war who had subsequently left the village, after which she had married an older man from another *xã* and moved to live with him and his mother. Because of her disability, she was not an active income earner, which put new stress on the family under *Đổi Mới*. According to this woman, her mother-in-law had resented her inability to contribute economically to the household, and these tensions eventually became so marked that she was forced to leave. Returning to Quang *xã* with a young daughter (she had given up her son for adoption), her own mother refused to take her in because she herself had too many mouths to feed. At the time of the interview, she was living on a piece of land granted by the Land Council because, despite her failed marriage, she had maintained her registration in the *xã*.

The third case was of an impoverished and distressed family in which all of the principal family members were present for the interview: a husband, his wife, and his mother. The older woman, who was 85, complained bitterly about her treatment by her daughter-in-law. She said that she was sick and cried all day, but that her daughter-in-law ignored her. Although she had three sons, they and their wives all forced her to eat alone. "Daughters-in-law

act like mothers-in-law these days,” she said. Yet when the daughter-in-law tried to speak, her husband continually interrupted the proceedings. When asked what a “good wife” was, the daughter-in-law responded, “A good wife is one who doesn’t argue when her husband speaks to her.” Her husband kept the money in the household, suggesting that although the mother-in-law blamed the daughter-in-law, the husband clearly was in charge of what happened in the family. I later learned that this family lacked rice three months of the year, and their economic difficulties presumably had exacerbated their other problems.

When interviewed, the rest of the families in the *xã* claimed that relations between mothers-in-laws and daughters-in-law in their households were good, possibly due to the cultural and state emphasis on family harmony. Older women said that their children and their spouses were “well behaved.” Yet when asked whether conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law existed in other households in their *thôn*, virtually all of them said yes. These informants claimed that the women in those households fought with one another and were verbally abusive, which they attributed to economic difficulties, argumentative daughters-in-law, strict mothers-in-laws, and bad habits like gambling resulting from the effects of *Đổi Mới*. As a result, I suspected that problems between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were more frequent in my informants’ own households than they were willing to openly acknowledge. Although I never actually witnessed such fighting, as I walked down the brick lanes into the back alleys of the *thôn* I would often hear sudden eruptions of women loudly and coarsely arguing with one another.

Given the new stresses on the household and women’s family lives under *Đổi Mới* and because conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were a subject of concern in the state media, I chose these womanhoods and their relationship to one another to explore state subject-making through gendered discourses. As shown in previous chapters, the *Đổi Mới* state actively regulated the nexus between the public and private spheres in terms of economic policy and cultured family campaigns. The visibility of the womanhoods of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law suggested that these subjectivities would lend themselves to an investigation of whether and to what extent state discourses regarding women’s roles and behavior in the household actually influenced women’s subjectivities and the way women thought about their gendered practices in Quang *xã*.⁴

I thus planned to focus on the subjectivities of *mẹ chồng* (husband’s mother) and *con dâu* (daughter-in-law) in order to explore state discourses of womanhoods and the ways women reacted to these discourses. I chose these two salient womanhoods because womanhoods in Quang *xã* were, first and foremost, family-defined and formed a dyadic relationship in which mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law were perceived in relation to each other. By examining the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, I also would be able to investigate how two successive generations of women responded to official messages about the appropriate roles for their subject positions. To accomplish

these purposes, I decided to assemble a group of mothers-in-law and another of daughters-in-law and elicit their responses to a film that addressed relations between the two womanhoods. I hoped thereby to uncover not only the effectiveness of state discourses regarding the respondents' gendered practices but also how their subject positions may have been shaped by the varying historical circumstances and political and economic conditions experienced by each cohort.

By determining the extent to which their gendered subject positions accounted for the complexities and subtleties of the ways in which women related to the subject positions and categories constructed by the state, I hoped to be able to understand more fully the processes of state subject-making and intervention into the domestic sphere in Quang *xã*. Theorists concerned with the deployment of state power agree that social subjectification is characteristic of modern modes of governance, although they differ about the formation of subjecthood. Althusser, for instance, has argued that subject positions are formed by state ideological apparatuses that include the church, family, legal and educational systems, mass media, and popular culture. In what Althusser terms *interpellation*, subjects respond to the hailing or call of these socially constructed positions through the performance of concrete, institutionalized rituals and practices that prompt them to imagine who they are in relation to others.⁵ Other theorists examining the means by which state institutions shape subjectivities to serve state interests, such as Foucault and Butler, have argued that subjects play a more active role in the process, negotiating their subject categories (such as gender) through an ongoing process of contestation, subversion, or even parodies of performance.⁶

I believed that the gendered subject positions of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would provide a useful means of examining interpellation and subject-making in Quang *xã* for several reasons. First, as described in Chapter 1, womanhoods have historically been an essential element in defining the nation and a key component of state governance in Vietnam. In addition, feminine exemplary models have historically been used to hail subjects and thus can be seen as a marker of the party and state's disciplinary power. Further, the discourse of gender equality (*bình đẳng nam nữ*) in Quang *xã* can be viewed as operating as sign, relaying a message about subjects' recognition and acceptance of the moral imperative of the state's right to govern. Gender inscriptions can thus help reveal the operations of the state's various deployments of power.

Furthermore, the gendered identities of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law went to the core of both individual and collective subjectivities in Quang *xã*, spanning both the public and private spheres. Virtually all women in the village became daughters-in-law at the time of their marriage and referred to themselves as such, even if they did not reside with their husband's parents. When a woman's son married and brought home a daughter-in-law, his mother assumed the identity of a mother-in-law. Only then did she truly become a wife (*vợ*), a position that accorded her a kind of social parity with her husband.

In addition, the gendered subjectivities of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Quang *xã* neatly fell into two generational cohorts with quite different experiences. The present generation of mothers-in-law had come of age during the struggle for national liberation from 1945 to 1960, a period of socialist revolution and state campaigns for gender equality. They had been the first group of young women to be “emancipated” or liberated (*được giải phóng*), and their adult years coincided with the American war, 1960–1975. In contrast, the current generation of daughters-in-law had come of age under a completely different set of social and political experiences: reunification, the return to peacetime, and the drive for national economic development under *Đổi Mới*. Having reached maturity since the American war, their lives were oriented mainly toward achieving economic stability for their families.

For these reasons as well as the *Đổi Mới* state’s desire to maintain harmony in the family, state efforts to manage womanhoods in the domestic sphere offered a compelling opportunity to examine how state interpellation functioned in *Đổi Mới* Vietnam. I decided to compare women’s reactions to state discourses about mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law by assembling two groups of women in the *xã*, each from a different age group. Methodologically, I felt that juxtaposing the responses of two successive generational cohorts would provide a useful way to examine the ways in which subjects respond to public norms and state-hailing functions and whether the interpellation function of the state differed in the cases of two identifiably discrete but successive generations and what might account for this difference. For these purposes, I chose a popular state-produced film, *Mẹ chồng tôi* (My Husband’s Mother) (1994), to use as a foil to elicit respondents’ views about mothers- and daughters-in-law. *Mẹ chồng tôi* had been made by a state film company and was frequently shown on state-run television, including such women’s holidays as International Women’s Day, and thus was clearly approved by the state and mass organizations such as the Women’s Union.⁷ The popularity of the film also suggested viewers’ acceptance of and compliance with the state-promoted modern family model depicted within it.⁸

Mẹ chồng tôi is a war drama set during the American war. It depicts the story of two women, a widowed mother-in-law, Mrs. Hòa, and her daughter-in-law, Thuận, living together in a rural commune in the north. The film concerns women’s behavior in the family and draws attention to the need to resolve conflicts and tensions in the family. *Mẹ chồng tôi* was immensely popular when it came out and won second prize at the 1994 Vietnam Film Festival. It prompted debate in families, the media, and the Women’s Union, and, as noted, continued to air on national television in the 1990s. Part of its appeal was that it included performances by well-known actors, including Thu An (Mrs. Hòa), Chiêu Xuân (Thuận), and Trần Lực (Lực). It was filmed in Đông Anh district and Cổ Loa *xã*. The film is based on the short story of the same name by Nguyễn Minh Chính, first published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine on January 1, 1994 and later included in the anthology *Truyện Ngắn Hay 1993*.⁹ The film differs in significant respects from the short story, which is told in

the narrative voice of the daughter-in-law, Thuận. The film deals with the relations between the two women in light of the heavy burdens borne by women in the rear areas. Thuận and her mother-in-law are shown as having a close relationship and intimate affection for one another (*rất tình cảm*), although the events of the film lead to a potential rupture of that bond.¹⁰

Mẹ chồng tôi concerns an older woman, Bà Hòa (Mrs. Hòa), who as the film opens has recently married her only son, Hòa, to Thuận at the beginning of the American war. The opening scenes of the film show the two women working together. Mrs. Hòa's son had recently paid one last visit home before leaving for the front, and her greatest hope, we learn, is that Thuận is pregnant. Mrs. Hòa's own husband had been killed during the French war and she had to raise her son as a widow. But her hopes for a grandchild are soon dashed when she sees Thuận's menstrual cloths on the clothesline. As the two women work together to bring in the harvest, Thuận's crystalline singing animates the fields. Mrs. Hòa's younger brother, a party cadre, stops by and suggests that Thuận be sent to the nearby district office to help on a public works project. Mother (as Thuận calls Bà Hòa) agrees, although it means that she will have to do all the work at home herself.

Thuận is put in charge of the broadcasts on the loudspeaker system at the work site and sings over the public address system to motivate the workers. She performs her job well, but dearly misses and worries about her mother-in-law. She lives in a room with Hương, who has a crush on Lực, the radio technician in the office. Lực has ambitions to be a mathematician, but he is also dreamy and artistic. Hương catches him drawing a female portrait, hoping it is of her. But Lực has his sights on Thuận.

One night there are technical difficulties with the radio, and Thuận returns to the office. Heading towards the back room that she shares with Hương, who has left for the weekend, she discovers Lực in the office, and his drawing, which is of her. As the music soars, a strong attraction overpowers them and they spend the stormy night together. Several weeks later, Thuận returns home. Mother then discovers that Thuận is pregnant and collapses in front of her husband's altar, anguished by Thuận's betrayal but also torn by her love for her. Thuận beseeches her to try to understand and to forgive her. Mother advises Thuận that she will keep her mistake a secret, including from her son, but Thuận must agree to cut off all ties with Lực.

When Thuận returns to the district, she avoids Lực, which throws him into emotional turmoil. To forget Thuận, he leaves to attend university in the city. Thuận returns home to give birth. Mother cares for the child as though it were her own. The women receive no word of Hòa and have no way of knowing if he is still alive; a common predicament of the time. Years pass, and when the child reaches five years of age, Lực returns to the district, having graduated first in his class. Thuận, meanwhile, has been promoted to deputy *chủ tịch* of the district, a position of responsibility and prestige, which almost certainly stems from the state's policy of gender equality as well as her own abilities. Her post is higher than Lực's, who is now a district cadre

in charge of military labor. She is warm and friendly with Lực but does not tell him he is the father of her son. Mother, who has moved to the district to raise the child, suspects that Lực is the father and that he is still in love with Thuận. One day Thuận receives a letter from her husband at the front and learns he is still alive. Meanwhile, Lực prepares to leave for the front, although he is the only living son left in his family (two older brothers have already died in the war).

Lực makes one last visit to Thuận at her home. As he bends over to kiss the sleeping child, Thuận tries to control herself but is deeply perturbed. Although she has told Lực that she loves her husband and that a “husband is a husband, and a friend is a friend,” in reality she loves both men. But she cannot sever her relationship with her husband, and she cannot reveal the secret of who is the father of her child. Not long thereafter, the district receives word that Lực has been killed on the way to the front. The authorities organize a public funeral proclaiming his heroism. Thuận does not want to attend, but Mother advises her that as deputy *chủ tịch*, it would look very odd if she did not attend and make a speech. As the ceremony ends, Mother takes her grandchild up to the flower-decked dais and tells the child to offer incense to the fallen hero.

Mẹ chồng tôi focuses on the plight of lonely women who endure hardship at the expense of their own emotional fulfillment. Mrs. Hòa has sacrificed her whole life to raise her only son. She had chosen not to remarry and honored her dead husband’s memory by worshipping his ancestors and dutifully finding a wife for their son. Now that she is elderly, her heartfelt desire is to have a grandchild to continue her husband’s line. Thuận is embarking on the same life course. She is young and pretty, just as Mrs. Hòa had been in her youth. Thuận longs to have a child, both for herself and for her beloved Mother. Given her emotional state, she is vulnerable to the attentions of another man while working away from home. Mrs. Hòa sympathizes with Thuận because their situations are so similar.

The central dilemma in the film, however, is whether Mrs. Hòa can live with a daughter-in-law who has betrayed her son. Her son is a soldier away at war, and Thuận’s behavior is not only a betrayal of her husband’s family but of the revolution. But Mrs. Hòa has become deeply attached to Thuận, projecting her own loss and all her hopes onto her. Thuận’s own loneliness and emotional turmoil mirror Mrs. Hòa’s, but it is Mrs. Hòa’s heartbreaking dilemma that most moves Vietnamese viewers. Mrs. Hòa has every right to reject Thuận. Thuận has betrayed her and her son and has compromised the fulfillment of her duty to the ancestors. But if Mrs. Hòa throws Thuận out, she will not only lose another child (Thuận) but her only possibility of emotional and spiritual fulfillment through a grandchild, although not of her husband’s line. She is thus caught between her formal duty (*nghĩa*) and emotion or love (*tình cảm*).¹¹

The film elicited strong feelings from viewers because the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship still seemed to be a site of ongoing tension for

many families, as noted earlier. Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in co-residential households often had difficulty achieving a warm and mutually supportive relationship, and it was very easy for small, petty matters to escalate into major conflicts. Both parties usually desired a mutually sympathetic and affectionate relationship, but they had to work at it. In the film, Mrs. Hòa is portrayed as the pure embodiment of virtue and as a model for emulation by both mothers- and daughters-in-law. She teaches Thuận how to behave correctly and how to deal properly with her transgression. Thuận comes to the realization, under her mother-in-law's wise counsel, that the death of her lover, Lực, has more meaning than her personal agony and that she needs to honor his sacrifice to the country. At the end of the film, Thuận does the right thing by agreeing to pay her respects to him at a public ceremony commemorating his death. The main message conveyed in the film is the need to heed parental authority and the wisdom of the older generation and a recognition that family relationships are bound by duties and obligations that all women in the family need to observe, for practical as well as filial reasons.

The film also reinforces the stereotypical virtues of Vietnamese womanhood: their valour, endurance, and indomitable spirit. The story of Mrs. Hòa's endless sacrifice, her unyielding love even in the face of unbearable loss, and her devotion to her family is a paean to motherly love, family values, and all that is noble in the Vietnamese tradition. But Mrs. Hòa's actions also function to strengthen and redefine the family and its relationship to the state being promulgated during the era of *Đổi Mới*. It is through Mrs. Hòa's mediation that her daughter-in-law, Thuận, resolves her inner dilemma and her subjecthood as a full citizen in both public and personal terms. The state appears as the source of redemption in the film, and it and the family become the foundation and vessel of private emotions. Wayward emotions and acts can be understood, redeemed, and transcended through a regulated flow between the public and private spheres. Both Thuận and Lực's redemption comes through their service to the state; by fulfilling their duty to the family, they also serve the state. The state thus deploys its intervention into the private lives and structures of feelings in the family, claiming the emotional nexus between the private and the public.

Besides projecting idealized constructions of femininity, *Mẹ chồng tôi's* treatment of male characters also touches upon masculine ideals of virtue. It is through men's absence and presence that Thuận and Mrs. Hòa react and respond within the film narrative. Ideal male behavior is depicted in terms of virility, national duty, and military heroism. Thuận's husband and Mrs. Hòa's son never appears, yet he hovers over the entire film. Lực, Thuận's lover, is represented as an erotic, though enfeebled, character who is unable to assert his masculine authority.¹²

In order to elicit views about the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, I assembled two groups of women in the *xã* – one of mothers-in-law and another of daughters-in-law – to watch the film and to respond in a group discussion to a set of structured questions. The two groups watched the film

separately and on different days. The participants were chosen by the *xã* authorities according to my criteria to reflect a range of age, number of children, marital status, and residential circumstances. All respondents were paid, as is normally the case when they attend a meeting in the *xã* (rural women attending Women's Association or Fatherland Front activities are usually given a small sum of money). The group discussions were held on May 24 and 25, 1996 in a second-floor room in the administrative offices of the *xã*. We sat around a rectangular table, with myself at one end and my assistant at the other. The two of us had watched the film and prepared our questions ahead of time. We both rewatched the film with each group. Both groups of respondents were asked to contribute their personal opinions (*ý kiến cá nhân*), which they did.¹³ Some of the respondents knew each other, others did not; the discussions were spontaneous and animated. No one person dominated either of the proceedings; none of the respondents were timid. If someone did not speak voluntarily, she was asked to do so. Each session lasted about two hours. The tapes from the sessions were transcribed in Hanoi and then translated by myself.¹⁴

Conditions for selection also included a primary- or middle-school education (*trình độ văn hóa*), a range of family residential types and occupations, and ordinary villager status. The first group of ten mothers-in-law ranged in age from 50 to 68 (b. 1928–1946). Most of these women still lived with their children, although the majority of them (seven out of ten) ate separately. Half of the women were widows. Five of the women identified themselves as native residents of the *xã*. One was born in the former province of Hà Nam Ninh and married a man from the *xã*. Their number of children ranged from one to seven. Most of the women had some elementary school education, with two having finished Cấp I (elementary school). Only one had finished Cấp II (middle school).

The group of nine daughters-in-law ranged from 21 to 34 (b. 1962–1975). As a group, they had more education than the mothers-in-law. Almost all had finished Cấp II, and one had finished Cấp III (high school). Almost all worked as farmers and had been born and married in the *xã*. All but one identified themselves as natives of the *xã*; the other was from Nam Định. Four of the women in this group were related to the mothers-in-law in the first group. Eight daughters-in-law lived with their husband's parents, but five of them ate separately. Four had two children, one had three children, one had one child, and two were childless.

Mẹ chồng tôi resonated powerfully for women in Quang *xã*, the group participants told me, because it touched upon their deep-felt needs, the extent to which women are willing to sacrifice themselves to achieve their most heartfelt desires, and their sometimes difficult relations with their mother- or daughter-in-law. Some of the older women said they had cried when they first watched the film. Ms. Phạm Thu Trúc, one of the daughter-in-law respondents said, "I think that the mother-in-law in the film exemplifies an affection (*tình cảm*) that is highly worthy and is characteristic of Vietnamese women. They are

capable of great sacrifice so that their children can carry out well their work for society [*công tác xã hội*].”¹⁵ This strong engagement with the film appeared to confirm Rey Chow’s view that film spectatorship is a “mode of performative, not merely passive, practice.”¹⁶

After the respondents watched the film, in some cases for the second or third time (their previous viewings had been on home televisions), both the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law said that the film “very much dealt with the feelings and aspirations of women” (*nói lên rất nhiều tâm tư nguyện vọng của người phụ nữ*). Both groups were asked about the degree to which Mrs. Hòa’s treatment of Thuận, her daughter-in-law, conformed to real life as they knew it. Mothers-in-law admired the way Mrs. Hòa taught her daughter-in-law, admonished her, loved her, and forgave her despite her extramarital affair. Daughters-in-law, who might be expected to be most sympathetic to Thuận, also liked Mrs. Hòa the best of the characters and were moved by the way she refused to stand on ceremony and keep herself aloof and by her unusual solicitousness and eagerness to please Thuận. Both groups were drawn to the scenes of Mrs. Hòa’s sorrowful plight of loneliness and hard work and those in which she treated Thuận with love and affection. Both groups proffered that the women in the film, particularly Mrs. Hòa, embodied the “values and traditions of Vietnamese women.” Both groups explored whether Thuận or Lực, the male lead, was to blame for their illicit relationship. They also both responded to the issue of the conflicting demands of women’s work in the family and work outside the family.¹⁷

Three sets of questions guided the discussions. The first concerned the nature of the relationship between Thuận and her mother-in-law in terms of whether mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations could be similar to those between a mother and her own daughter, including whether the ideal behavior of the mother-in-law depicted in the film reflected their own experience. The second set of questions focused on how absolute the values of loyalty, faithfulness, and adultery were, and when and where they might be suspended. The third set explored views of women’s work in and outside the home, which also compared times of war and peace.

Despite some similar reactions by both groups of women, there were significant differences between their general responses to the film. The mothers-in-law were far more positive than the daughters-in-law about Mrs. Hòa’s unusually solicitous and gentle behavior. In addition, when asked whether the film reflected their own reality, almost all of the mothers-in-law said yes, indeed it did; they would have acted like Mrs. Hòa if faced with a similar situation. The daughters-in-law were less convinced that Mrs. Hòa was a realistic representation, most saying that actual mothers-in-law treated their daughters-in-law only “nearly as well” as Mrs. Hòa in the film. Others said bluntly that the film did not reflect reality – no mother-in-law would act as Mrs. Hòa did. It soon became apparent that when comparing their behavior to the model behavior presented in the movie, the responses of the mothers-in-law paralleled the official position in the film. That is, they couched their

opinions in terms of the normative state discourses presented in the film, which therefore might be called the normative response. Yet when asked directly whether their own reality matched that of the film, the mother-in-law respondents continually sidestepped the question and shifted to an exposition of what constitutes exemplary behavior. Chief among their comments was that today's relations cannot and should not be "backward" (*lạc hậu*).

This question was explored more deeply when the mother-in-law respondents compared their relationships with their daughters-in-law to those with their own daughters. At first, the mother-in-law respondents claimed that mothers-in-law should treat daughters-in-law like their own daughters. This again was a normative response, since state discourses held that progressive mothers-in-law were supposed to engage in such enlightened behavior. But on further questioning, the mothers-in-law acknowledged that in fact, whereas a mother/daughter relationship is one of spontaneity and give and take, the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is a conditional relationship. Only if the daughter-in-law shows deference and respect will the mother-in-law treat her as she might a daughter. A good mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship therefore requires initiative on the part of the daughter-in-law, and only after that, they strongly implied, reciprocity. Reciprocity, they stated, needs to be continually cultivated and maintained on the part of the daughter-in-law. As Mrs. Chu Thị Sáu described it,

Because the daughter-in-law treated her mother-in-law very well, the mother-in-law treats her daughter-in-law like her own daughter. But now she is the person who is closest to the mother-in-law, so she has to treat her well. My own daughter, although I gave birth to her, became someone else's daughter-in-law and lives further from us than my current daughter-in-law. In the film, the mother-in-law and daughter in law are very close to one another, like a mother and her own daughter.

According to Mrs. Tạ Thị Nghiêm, "Mrs. [Hòa] respects and loves her and she [Thuận] loves and regards her like her birth mother," describing Thuận as a well-behaved person (*ngoan*) toward her mother-in-law. When asked whether exemplary cases like this happened in real life, Mrs. Trần Thị Diên claimed, "They exist. There are daughters-in-law who are very attached to their mothers-in-law. . . . They respect and love [*quý*, a term that implies a hierarchical relationship] the other [i.e., their mother-in-law], who returns the respect."

According to Mrs. Lê Thị Nhung, it is the responsibility of the mother-in-law to educate a new daughter-in-law "from the beginning" (from the first day she joins one's family):

Society today does not allow the children to treat their parents or their husbands badly. You have to tell the children so they know. Husband talks, wife listens. Father and Mother talk, daughter-in-law listens, and

we never shout at each other. Otherwise everyone in the neighborhood hears it and laughs at us and thinks there are a lot of conflicts and confusion in our family.

Mother-in-law respondents characterized the relationship between Thuận and Lực as adultery, but most claimed that it was only fleeting and could not be true love. On the question of who was the instigator of the relationship, virtually all the mother-in-law respondents said that Thuận was to blame. Thuận was seen as responsible for letting the situation with Lực get out of hand and not stopping it at the critical juncture. Lực was seen as the victim in the relationship, possibly because as mothers of sons they were less willing to attach blame to their sons than to their daughters-in-law. Although their comments deflected criticism of Lực's behavior, their criticism of Thuận was also veiled. Rather than condemn her outright, the mothers-in-law attributed blame by suggesting "it was because of Thuận that. . . ."

On the question of loyalty (*chung thủy*) to one's husband, mother-in-law respondents said that friendships with other men and loyalty to one's husband were not compatible. However, if a temporary error was made and marital fidelity breached, mothers-in-law said, they would agree to forgive their daughter-in-law. But that forgiveness, they stressed, would be conditional upon their daughter-in-law's behavior. If the daughter-in-law treated her husband's family well, she would be forgiven just once. If a transgression occurred a second time, she would not be forgiven. For instance, Mrs. Võ Thị Thuởng said that

Nowadays, if the daughter-in-law treats her husband or her husband's family well, then the family has to take this into account and forgive her, but if she does not treat her husband's family well, then it amounts to adultery, and in that case, no one would forgive her.

When then asked whether Thuận was a "good" person or not, Mrs. Thuởng said,

In the film, Thuận is mostly a good person and not a bad person, which is why she treats Mother (*mẹ chồng*) well and is very diligent at work. This was a momentary mistake; she was still a good person and not a bad person.

As to Thuận's leaving her domestic responsibilities to work outside the home, both the mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law approved of this behavior. In the film, work outside the family was justified in terms of fulfilling a duty and contributing to a noble cause. In this view, Mrs. Hòa let Thuận go to the district because her social work (*công việc xã hội*), or working for the state, constitutes an honor for the household – Thuận is "working on a mission" (*đi công tác*), which gave families social prestige during the war.

Mrs. Hòa agrees that Thuận can abandon her domestic responsibilities only because duty calls. Her work is not presented as fulfilling any personal aspirations on Thuận's part, and once the public works project was finished, she would be expected to return home. Mother-in-law respondents approved of daughters-in-law working outside the home for this type of work, saying it brings the family social prestige. Mrs. Nguyễn Thị Bốn said, for example,

In my view, I think the mother-in-law acted very correctly. She took care of all the work at home and did all the work in the fields so that her daughter could perform official duties [*tham gia công tác*], and this was very good.

According to the mothers-in-law, however, if outside work conflicts with work at home, women's principal responsibility lies at home. Some of this depends on the husband's attitude. If the husband resents his wife's working outside the home, the mother-in-law respondents agreed, there would be problems. It is hard for women to do two jobs well. For a woman to perform social work well, her husband has to be willing to share domestic duties. If the family is not "harmonious," it is the woman's fault. If this is a result of her working outside the home, then she should cut back her outside work and return to her family duties. According to Mrs. Sáu, for example,

This is my view. If a woman participates in social work [*tham gia công tác xã hội*], then she has to manage the work at home well so that her husband is satisfied and happy. She should assign specific tasks to each of her children so that when they come home from school they can help their mother with work in the house, thus making it possible for their mother to perform well in her work in the *xã*. She has to be very deferential to her husband. In this way, both household work and social work can be done satisfactorily.

The discussion of *Mẹ chồng tôi* among the mothers-in-law thus revealed an acceptance of hierarchy within the family and the ambiguous position of the daughter-in-law in her husband's family. The mothers-in-law expressed the view that it is the duty of daughters-in-law to serve and be deferential to their husbands and their husbands' parents. If there is a conflict between the mother and daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law has to defer to her parent. Mothers-in-law must (*phải*) educate their daughters-in-law, advise them (*khuyến*), and correct their mistakes. The daughter-in-law's principal responsibilities are taking care of her children and her husband's parents. Working outside the family (*đi công tác*) was discussed in moral terms and was seen as serving the wider community, a reflection of duty to society and nation. In contrast, working to further one's career ambitions, personal development, or private income were not justifiable, in their eyes, especially when outside work conflicted with their domestic responsibilities.

As noted, the mother-in-law respondents expressed strong approval for the model behavior of the mother-in-law in the film, Mrs. Hòa, claiming that Mrs. Hòa was a noble model that mothers-in-law could learn from. The mother-in-law respondents had no difficulty in accepting this powerful message and the representations of the legitimacy of state intervention in the film. Of course, it was not difficult for them to identify with a paragon of virtue, possibly because their generation was habituated to the educational/ethical functions of the state. These women had lived through two major wars and numerous mobilization campaigns, emulation contests, and state exhortations, all of which involved state-driven normative models of behavior. The mother-in-law respondents did not seem to question this type of state intervention and appeared eager to absorb the lessons entailed.

Turning to the intended lesson of the film, that daughters-in-law need to learn from their mothers-in-law, the mothers-in-law were asked why Mrs. Hòa decided to hide the truth about Thuận's pregnancy from her son. Most seemed to agree with Mrs. Nhung:

I think that the mother-in-law decided to hide it from her son because she had only one daughter-in-law and had given her all her love and affection [*dồn tình cảm cho chị ấy*], so she forgave her daughter-in-law in order to teach her how to become a better person, so that the two could depend on one another [*để cho đôi bên cùng dựa nhờ lẫn nhau*].

The conventional expectation of most viewers of the film would be that no mother-in-law would forgive such a betrayal as Thuận's from a daughter-in-law. If she did, they believed, the daughter-in-law would be so touched by this act of kindness that she would have striven to the utmost to be a better person. The lesson of the film, they responded, is that daughters-in-law need to acknowledge and heed the wisdom of the older generation, accepting their subordinate status in the family and the hierarchical relationship between the older and younger generation. For daughters-in-law, therefore, hierarchy in the family takes precedence over gender equality. The daughter-in-law respondents in Quang xã took the same point from the film, although they did not frame it in terms of mothers-in-law teaching their daughters-in-law. Rather, what they liked most about Mrs. Hòa was that she treated her daughter-in-law just like she would have treated a daughter of her own, loving her unconditionally, treating her decently, and helping her at home.

Many mother-in-law respondents said that the backward, pre-revolutionary behavior of the stereotypical narrow-minded, bossy, and accusatory mother-in-law had to change, as the state instructed. They also said that mothers-in-law needed to listen to their daughters-in-law rather than just issue instructions and expect automatic compliance. One mother-in-law respondent noted that daughters-in-law had to be given some leeway and be able to make some of their own decisions. It was acceptable for daughters-in-law to work outside the home. Mothers-in-law should not act in a mean-spirited way as in the past,

they claimed, suggesting this was the way they were once treated themselves. In stating their reactions to the film in this fashion, mother-in-law respondents were voicing their compliance with and acceptance of state discourses about what constitutes proper (i.e., enlightened) mother-in-law behavior.

At the same time, the mother-in-law respondents seemed to still cling to certain aspects of the old ways. They tended to stand on formality and conventional standards for the way things should be done. A mother-in-law might be modern and show solicitous behavior toward her daughter-in-law, they reported, but she would not lower herself by yielding too much; she would not allow herself to be seen in the position of serving her daughter-in-law rather than the other way around. Mrs. Ngô Thị Viên stated that “harmony” in her family meant a daughter-in-law who listened to her:

There have been times when [my daughter-in-law] has done something wrong, but I spoke to her and told her what it was [about] and said don't do it next time. All you have to do is speak softly. My son doesn't dare intervene because he sees that I speak softly to her alone and if she does something wrong I tell her, and thus there is no reason for him to take sides. Our family is very harmonious.

Nonetheless, mother-in-law interviewees claimed that current mothers-in-law were less strict and imperious than they had been when they were daughters-in-law and that today's mothers-in-law treated their daughters-in-law with respect (*quý*). Today's mothers-in-law, they stated, should try to discuss issues with their daughters-in-law and “advise” them in a maternal way. The mother-in-law interviewees did not seem to bemoan this shift in the relationship, but rather took it more or less for granted.

The mother-in-law respondents thus appeared somewhat pulled between the “old” and “new” standards of behavior during the discussion. They tried not to talk directly about their own actual behavior and may have been hesitant to express any possible feelings that conflicted with the socially normative view. This response may have derived from a reluctance to admit that their own behavior deviated from that of Mrs. Hòa, the ideal mother-in-law, or they may have been reacting to the presence of outsiders in the room.¹⁸ Whatever the case, they appeared to react instinctively to model behavior, to changing one's consciousness through official exhortations and political/moral awakening (*giác ngộ*), and this seemed to explain their approval of Mrs. Hòa's behavior in the film. Mrs. Viên described how women of her era willingly adapted their behavior to statist prescriptions, or responded to state hailing:

Q: If you were in Mrs. Hòa's place, would you forgive Thuận?
Mrs. Viên: You are asking this at a time when in general all of Vietnam was like that, all our women had consciousness [*giác ngộ*], and in such a situation, any one would have forgiven her without exception. That is the truth.¹⁹

The mothers'-in-law ready alignment with the ideal behavior displayed by Mrs. Hòa was probably linked to the unique circumstances of their generation. Many of the *xã*'s mothers-in-law had come of age while their fathers, brothers, and husbands were away at war and they were left to shoulder the household work and farm labor alone. Their memories of this time were framed in terms of the hardships they had to endure, which seemed almost superhuman in retrospect. They were the first generation of women to be mobilized into public service, on either the local level or beyond. They recalled how they had to sacrifice taking care of their families in order to contribute to the war effort and national cause. Having assumed many weighty responsibilities and managed them well, this group of women displayed an outward sense of self-confidence. Many of them had become heads of their households, unthinkable 30 years earlier. In some cases, their husbands had been absent for 15 or 20 years and returned home to changed patterns of domestic life. Some husbands, of course, never returned. The comments of this generation of women made clear that they viewed their accomplishments and hard-won self-sufficiency with pride.

Mrs. Sáu: The following is my view. We were young, and now we have gotten old. During wartime in the wars against France and the US, we served in the rear and we were very proud if we were called to do social work [*công tác xã hội*]. . . . Our *xã* has had two women as *chủ tịch* – that's a fact. It is only recently that men have been *chủ tịch*. The women who participated in social work [*tham gia công tác xã hội*] were very good. They were able to perform well their tasks for society and in the household.²⁰

Nonetheless, these women also believed in behaving more generously toward their daughters-in-law than they themselves had been treated in the past. They saw their own life course as resembling that of Mrs. Hòa in the film. They had soldiered on alone for a very long time. Many of them were widows. They understood “the deepest feelings of Vietnamese women,” as they phrased it, with regard to family life and what it is like to work from dawn to night with little help and small recompense. When their son married and brought home a daughter-in-law, they found themselves in the position of a mother-in-law. Their responses indicated they might have been more tempted to be critical of their daughters-in-law if Father was still present. If they alone represented the older generation, however, they might have had to take a more active role in managing the tension between themselves and their daughters-in-law so as to not offend their children – their son and their son's wife.

In identifying with the ideal behavior represented in the film, therefore, the mother-in-law respondents demonstrated that they readily responded to the call of the state. They accepted the state's power to speak to and for them. For them, the power of the idealizations presented in *Mẹ chồng tôi* was their

ability to connect them to their past lives, remembered through their pain, suffering, and memories of self-sacrifice during the war. The film effectively employed its depicted womanhoods and sentimentality as tools in making these connections.²¹ *Mẹ chồng tôi* not only idealized women as social subjects, but also validated their suffering and pain, thereby exemplifying Berlant's claim that subaltern gendered subjectivities are often constructed upon structures of feeling and sentiment that involve stories of suffering on the part of women.²² By touching on the deepest feelings of women, the film achieved a sense of shared suffering among its viewers as common national subjects. As Berlant further argues, this kind of subaltern pain is intelligible to all national subjects regardless of their gender or personal circumstances and thereby becomes part of a national narrative that roots citizens in a political collectivity. In this way, *Mẹ chồng tôi* helps women gain legitimacy as social subjects even as it promotes a sense of national cohesion that is conducive to state governance.²³

The film also connects viewers to the state by subliminally reaffirming the moral guiding mission of the party. By submitting to and identifying with the call in the film, the mother-in-law respondents implicitly accepted the function of the party to defend the nation on behalf of all its citizens, including themselves. The wartime past was revalidated by an outpouring of emotion and personal sorrow. The power of the film for these women lay in its ability to re-make this connection and hail the subjectivity of the receptive viewer. The mother-in-law viewers were emotionally pulled to acknowledge the authenticity of the idealized behavior in the film and to respond to the exhortation to follow the model. To reject the message would have constituted a refusal to sympathize with the deep emotion (*tình cảm*) displayed in the film. In viewing the film and accepting the call, the mothers-in-law in effect incorporated themselves into the collective family of the nation. To turn away from the call would have been to exclude themselves from the collectivity, putting themselves into what Berlant describes as a psychic position of extreme moral, social, and political ambiguity.²⁴

The alignment of the mothers-in-law with the ideal behavior depicted in the film suggests an almost automatic response to the hailing function of the state, which raises the question of how much choice they may have had in negotiating their subjectivity and whether the public face of the social subject masks the true dimensions of the inner self. The responses of the mothers-in-law undoubtedly reflect the impact of public discourses and political indoctrination over decades of socialist campaigns. It is also possible they gave normative responses because they believed they were expected to do so. Whether normative responses translate into behavior and practice is, of course, a crucial question. It is possible that state hailing of ideal behavior has its limits and that the respondents may have been simply paying lip service to those ideals. Yet the public norm of the ideal mother-in-law appeared to be a desirable part of these women's subjectivities, aspects of their subjectivity they wished to embrace. That is, the mothers-in-law may

have readily chosen to align themselves with the ideal behavior depicted in the film because turning toward the call of the state validated and completed their subjecthood. Having internalized public norms into their identities and self-perceptions, their responses may not have reflected obfuscation but rather an ineluctable attraction to the idealizations presented in the film.²⁵

For their part, the daughter-in-law respondents also responded to the state discourses and ideal behavior portrayed in the film; although of a different generation, they also accepted the normative and discursive functions of the state. Like the mothers-in-law, the daughters-in-law in the group discussion demonstrated that they were comfortable with the gendered discourses in the film. In addition to the normative standards of mother-in-law behavior, these discourses included a definition of gender equality as social equality and the dualistic notion that although women can perform “outside work” as well as men, there is a distinction between such work and household work. Both are “modern” and “public” ways of thinking about gendered subjectivity in concert with the state’s perspective. The film also allowed the group of daughters-in-law to contemplate emulation models and thereby reflect on their behavior as daughters-in-law. Unlike the mothers-in-law, however, they had no illusions about the differences between model behavior and real life. Many stated unequivocally and quite matter of factly that mothers-in-law like Mrs. Hòa did not exist. Ms. Vũ Thị Hồng was categorical in her opinion:

Q: Do good mothers-in-law like this [Mrs. Hòa] exist in real life?
Ms. Hồng: I have never seen a case with a good mother-in-law like this.

As noted earlier, when asked whether real mothers-in-law would forgive a daughter-in-law who committed adultery, most daughters-in-law responded that they would not. Daughter-in-law respondents consistently said that Thuận had made a mistake and that one such encounter did not make her adulterous. Mothers-in-law, as noted, said that one incident constituted adultery, although they could forgive one such breach in marital fidelity provided that it never happened again and the daughter-in-law treated her husband’s family well. Where the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law disagreed was about what constituted adultery (*ngoại tình*) and who was responsible for it. In general, the daughters-in-law were less likely than the mothers-in-law to assign the blame to Thuận for her relationship with Lực. In fact most of them saw Lực as the initiator rather than the victim and voiced the view that married women could have friendships with other men and remain loyal to their husbands, whereas the mothers-in-law were not as sanguine about this possibility.

In other words, daughters-in-law in *Đổi Mới* Quang xã had fewer illusions about the state’s prescriptions about model behavior than their mothers-in-law and were not as moved by emulation discourses. These daughters-in-law had come of age after 1975 and identified less with state appeals to raise their

consciousness (*giác ngộ*). They accepted that the major burden of work in the family fell squarely on their shoulders and that they could not expect their mothers-in-law to behave like Mrs. Hòa. Ms. Trần Thu Hà said that women's principal work should be in the family, and if they had to choose between outside or social work (*công việc xã hội*) and family work, they would choose family work. She did not seem to resent this, but stated it as just a fact of life.

Q: Where do you think women's main role lies? With the family or in society? Is women's principal affinity with the family or with society?

Ms. Hà: I think women lean toward the family. They are drawn to social work to a certain extent, but their main role is with the family.

Two others echoed her opinion. Ms. Hà said that it was difficult to do both jobs well:

Ms. Hà: If you want to perform well at home, then you have to drop social work [*công việc xã hội*]. But if you want to perform well on the job [*công tác giỏi*], you will have an important voice in the family.

Ms. Hồng said women could do both, but only if harmony existed in the family: "I think if there is harmony, then one can do social work, but if the family has conflicts, then I wouldn't go out to work."

The two groups of respondents thus gave different responses to the ideals represented in the film. The reactions of the daughters-in-law to these ideals were framed in terms of practical and utilitarian considerations rather than state discourses or normative principles. Daughters-in-law said Mrs. Hòa forgave Thuận because she wanted a grandchild, not because mothers-in-law should not act in a fashion similar to their forebears. The mothers-in-law, in contrast, used the discourse of progress and modernity in explaining the characters' behavior, repeatedly saying that it was no longer *right* to treat daughters-in-law as before. Compare the following:

Q: If you were in Mrs. Hòa's shoes, would you forgive your daughter-in-law?

Mrs. Bón: Yes, nowadays, I would forgive her, of course. In the past, it would have been hard to forgive her. She would have had her head shaved and had lime put on it. Now it is different.

Ms. Hồ Thị Tâm: The mother-in-law forgave her because, although she was very hurt, she wanted a grandchild to continue the line of descent.

Ms. Phan Hiền An: She agreed because she did not have any grandchildren.

Although the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law all agreed that women could do work outside the home in addition to domestic work, their reasoning differed and reflected the historical and economic realities of their times. For the mothers-in-law, work outside the home brought the family social prestige, while for the daughters-in-law, work outside the home brought more money into the household. Both groups agreed that if a daughter-in-law worked outside the home, then her mother-in-law should help out with the housework – cooking, babysitting, and washing the clothes.

Working outside the home, however, did not appear to be a primary goal of this generation of daughters-in-law. The image of the socialist woman who combined both private and public roles during the wars, as promoted by the state, was unappealing to them. They did not seem to set their sights on public service and did not want to be “superwomen.” However, they were not unmoved by Mrs. Hòa’s behavior. As a modern mother-in-law, she was the very quintessence of kindness, since she did not expect her daughter-in-law to do everything. But daughters-in-law claimed that such kindness was rare. The daughters-in-law said forthrightly that the burden of work in the family fell directly on their shoulders, even as they accepted their lack of equality in the family. They were not cynical about it nor did they verbally rebel against it. Their understanding of their role is demonstrated in the following extended exchange about the sharing of housework in the family:²⁶

- Q:* Do you think if a woman takes a long-term job doing social work [*làm công tác xã hội*], her husband should have to take care of the work in the house so his wife can go to work? Will it be peaceful at home?
- Ms. Hà:* If a woman goes to work out in society [*làm công tác ở ngoài xã hội*], then, in the family, her husband has to support his wife so she can do a good job.
- Q:* So if he takes care of the kids and cooks all the time, will he do this willingly?
- Ms. Hà:* Both of them have to share this type of work between themselves. When his wife is busy, he has to help, and when she has time, she will help her husband.
- Q:* But if you have to work in the *xã* or the district and don’t have time to do the work at home anymore and he has to do all of it, housework, cook, go shopping, which is “women’s work” that a man now has to do, and has to do for a long time? Can families like this really be happy?
- Ms. Hà:* The wife has to persuade her husband to try to help her.
- Q:* But if he does not help?
- Ms. Hà:* If not, then the family will disintegrate.
- Q:* Right. You all said that work at home and work in society are connected – that if a wife goes out to do social/public work for an extended period of time and only

comes back home to eat and really does not have the time to do household work, then there will be problems at home. How can her husband [keep] helping her for months and years?

Ms. Đỗ Hà Linh: I think that men would not accept [to live with] a woman like that. Women can accept doing social/public work for a long period of time, but men will not allow women to do so.

Q: Which means that men will not agree to cook on a daily basis for their wives, right?

Ms. Linh: Yes.

Q: And that such a family will of course have inner turmoil, is that right?

Ms. Linh: Yes.

Ms. Hồng: I think that if a man lets his wife do social/public work, he must be very caring towards her. He has to make a big effort, with a great deal of understanding and sympathy for his wife.

Q: Would the majority of men do this?

Ms. Hồng: The majority of men would not [agree to live like this].

Ms. Hà, Ms. Linh and Ms. Hồng thus distanced themselves from the state's idealizations and the negotiation of their subjectivities in the film. Compared to the mothers-in-law, these daughters-in-law were not as convinced by the state's "consciousness-raising" efforts and official discourses on womanhoods. They recognized that there was a conflict between work in the family and work outside the home for women. Work outside the home and any further education that it required were permissible if money could be earned, they said; individual needs and self-expression by themselves were not seen as legitimate reasons to work outside the family. Politely yet firmly they suggested that model behavior was irrelevant to their own lives. Daughters-in-law, however, concurred with the mothers-in-law that young mothers' principal duties were at home taking care of the family.

The daughters-in-law therefore differentiated the normative from what they could realistically expect from their mothers-in-law. Thus, while state discourses clearly had an impact on the way both groups of women thought about themselves, daughters-in-law may have compartmentalized more aspects of their subjectivity than the mothers-in-law. On the other hand, mothers-in-law found it difficult to separate parts of their subjectivity. Mothers-in-law appeared to conflate the normative with the actual aspects of their behavior, possibly because there had been little scope for them to differentiate the normative from the actual before *Đổi Mới*.

In effect, the daughters-in-law suggested, the heroic womanhoods and wartime suffering of the previous generation were experiences that they had not shared and with which they could not compete. The mothers-in-law

had framed their interpretations of the harsh wartime conditions in terms of suffering, endurance, and abnegation, possibly with Buddhist overtones but certainly with culturally validating discourses of Vietnamese womanhood. The daughters-in-law had not had experienced such suffering, nor had their consciousness been similarly awakened. Tensions in intergenerational relations between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law in the *xã* may thus have also stemmed from difficulties in mutual comprehension and communication between a wartime and a peacetime generation.

Yet the daughters-in-law did not show a tendency to subvert in a cynical way the subject categories represented in the film. Even when they described the ideal behavior of Mrs. Hòa in the film as not reflective of real life, they did so in utilitarian, temporal terms. They said that such behavior may have occurred during the war, but no longer existed. Therefore, the daughters-in-law bracketed the state discourses in the film, using their own non-state rationales for interpreting the characters' behavior and motivations in the film. They did not explain Mrs. Hòa's motivations in terms of modernity or progress, nor did they refer to past generations of mothers-in-law as exemplifying "backward behavior." They merely interpreted Mrs. Hòa's treatment of Thuận in utilitarian terms: Mrs. Hòa wanted to have a grandchild, which was why she was so solicitous and kind. In this sense, the daughters-in-law did not appear to reject state subject-making as such, but used other discourses to interpret the actions and motivations of the characters in the film.

The daughters-in-law thus seemed to be grappling with the experiences, models, and values of the previous generation within the changing environment of *Đổi Mới*. In doing so, they may have been more conscious of the contradictions in their own situation. Their responses suggest that a space existed between state hailing and social subjectivity that *Đổi Mới* subjects were normalizing in terms of their own conceptions and reactions to official messages. That the mothers-in-law and the daughters-in-law used different discourses to explain the film and their own lives thus not only elucidates state subject-making but also reveals the workings of *Đổi Mới* state power in the 1990s. While some subjects in Quang *xã* appeared to be interpellated completely into a subjectivity, others were not.²⁷ This difference depended on the time and circumstances of their life experiences, which provided the context for their subject-making.²⁸

As this chapter shows, however, the state clearly had not relinquished its efforts to influence womanhoods in the family, which the film, *Mẹ chồng tôi*, narrated through heroic representations of wartime. Gendered discourses communicated in this fashion appeared to have had an impact on women's subjectivities in Quang *xã*, at least in the case of the mothers-in-law. These Quang *xã* residents recognized themselves in official narratives of heroic struggle; their own experiences of suffering seemed congruent with state representations.²⁹ The subjectivities of the mothers-in-law were inscribed on their bodies in terms of the political construction of their womanhoods, occurring through

their receptivity to the depictions of idealized behavior that they could recognize as relevant to their own behavior and could emulate or not. In other words, both the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law could respond to the call of the model or could turn away from it. The mothers-in-law demonstrated an unabashed receptivity to state discourses regarding mother-in-law behavior in the film. For them, the Communist revolution and socialist state had put a public face on their relationships and womanhoods in the household. As for the daughters-in-law, their responses indicated that the state had greater difficulty in making interpellated connections with the generation that came of age under *Đổi Mới*. The “hook” of the state was not nearly as effective with the daughters-in-law, suggesting that the daughters’-in-law subjectivities may have been evolving outside state intervention, with new sources coming from the media, film, or greater exposure to urban and commercial amenities.

Two women cadres hinted at changes that may have been occurring among the generation of the daughters-in-law in the *xã*. Mrs. Lê Minh Châu, the former women’s leader, offered this view: “Television and global culture have had a big impact on the younger generation [in this *xã*]. [Younger women] want to dress up and are more individualistic [than the older generation] and the aspirations (*nguyện vọng*) of Quang *xã* women are beginning to change.” Mrs. Lê Thị Thuý, the president of the Women’s Association, said that younger women no longer wished to become farmers like their mothers, and much preferred to get a job that paid a salary.

The state’s use of gendered discourses for the political construction of subjectivities in Quang *xã* thus illustrates another dimension of the *Đổi Mới* state’s use of gender to intervene into the domestic sphere. The use of family-defined womanhoods to interpellate subjects was undoubtedly a continuation of the way women had been used to mark the nation, but may also have responded to anxieties stemming from the market. The state may have relied on feminized and sentimentalized images to relay messages because such images conveyed a universal symbol for all its subject-citizens. At the same time, state managers may have been worried about losing affective connections with citizens who could have been tempted to stray from the path and embrace non-statist ways of perceiving and responding to change. In the 1990s, the genre of family and personal dramas grew immensely in state-controlled television and other mass media. Womanhoods, as constructed by these state discourses, leaned more toward kin-defined representations. As in the case of older viewers in Quang *xã*, family-defined womanhoods portrayed in films such as *Mẹ chồng tôi* appeared to be useful vehicles for the *Đổi Mới* state to project post-Confucian and family values by making intimate and emotional connections with citizens’ deeply held feelings and post-war memories.

Notes

- 1 Women's publications, the party paper *Nhân Dân*, and state television all publicized problems between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in the early 1990s, suggesting they were sources of family conflict that threatened to "destabilize" the family. See Ngô Thị Ngân Bình.
- 2 See Drummond.
- 3 In the early 1990s, the government tightened controls over the media and cultural production, believing that the press was implicated in the collapse of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe after 1989. See Marr, *Mass Media*. The Minister of Culture and Information declared that the media was an ideological instrument subject to state control and that village security bureaus would be given the power to maintain local cultural order. Party branches at the village level were urged to be on the lookout for manifestations of cultural poisons and outsiders meddling in Vietnam's internal affairs. These concerns were discussed in Quang *xã* while I conducted research there, and indeed, the *xã* was required to monitor and report on any developments in this area to the district authorities. Both the police and the Women's Association were obliged to report on prostitution, and in 1996 the Women's Association report indicated there were two prostitutes in the *xã*, one of whom had been persuaded to give up her trade. Neither the police nor the Association was successful in the second case, however, with the reason given that she liked "to have fun" (*đi chơi*).
- 4 The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship in Vietnam was already well enshrined in public discourse in other ways than those mentioned here. In contemporary Vietnamese literature, this relationship has been portrayed as the iconic struggle between the forces of tradition and modernity. In Nhật Linh's famous 1935 novel, *Breaking Off*, a "modern" daughter-in-law struggles to "live her own life" in the snares of a hidebound mother-in-law. Among 1930s urban literary circles, young radicals considered breaking away from the Confucian family a prerequisite to individual and social liberation. Nhật Linh's works were banned in socialist Vietnam until the advent of *Đổi Mới*, when many 1930s authors were rehabilitated. In addition, the most important novel of the early *Đổi Mới* period, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's "The General Retires" (1987, trans. 2003), features a daughter-in-law who represents the worst features of the reform era – greed, selfishness, and disrespect for her husband's father, who served the country during the American war. Thus womanhoods were already implicated in and seen as emblematic of broader cultural forces and tensions in the early years of *Đổi Mới*.
- 5 See Althusser.
- 6 Butler, *Gender and Psychic*; Dreyfus and Rabinow. This is not to imply that Butler and Foucault agree about the means or extent of how power shapes subjectivity. Butler, for instance, argues that the psychic imprint of power precedes the subject and that the internalization of norms is not simply a discursive function of a regulatory and disciplinary regime. See her discussion of Foucault in *Psychic*, 2, 83–106.
- 7 Produced and directed by Khải Hưng; running time, 150 minutes.
- 8 Television was the dominant mass medium during the 1990s in Vietnam. See Forrester. In the early to mid-1990s, Vietnamese films made for and shown on state-owned and state-directed Vietnam television were screened for ideological and political content. During this period, the Ministry of Culture also increased funding for films made for television on such topics as war stories, historical subjects, and family dramas. According to my observations, these films were watched avidly by television viewers. See also Ngô Phương Lan.
- 9 See Nguyễn Minh Chính.

- 10 The film does not take Thuận as its point of reference and is shot in a “neutral” fashion, without “much investment in identificatory processes,” according to film scholar Lan Dương. Personal communication.
- 11 The film acknowledges a conflict between the rules of proper behavior and one’s own feelings, which is a “modern” idea.
- 12 Thanks to Lan Dương for suggesting the defining presence and absence of men in the film. Personal communication.
- 13 We started the discussion by asking both groups to share their opinions of the film with us, saying that it did not matter if they agreed or disagreed with one another about the film, as our main goal was to listen to all of their individual views.
- 14 My assistant handled both the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law interviews, after my introduction to both groups. We both shared our own family circumstances with the two groups. That we were more educated than the country women undoubtedly had some effect on the tenor of the responses. Both groups of respondents, however, were polite and correct, and the discussions were quite warm and friendly. When our line of questioning pushed the interviewees beyond their initial responses, they did not appear to hesitate to tell us if they disagreed with us and were quite forthright in their responses.
- 15 Part of the film’s popularity results from the cultural appeal of its characterizations of Vietnamese womanhoods and femininity; Vietnamese living overseas who have watched the film have also been moved by *Mẹ chồng tôi*. Yet this does not belie the film’s political meanings, both on an interpretive level and as part of a project of state power.
- 16 See Chow 32.
- 17 According to my household survey, 80 percent of households had televisions at the time of the interviews. A 1995 Veterans’ Association report noted that 90 percent of its members had televisions; veterans constituted the village’s elite, which is probably why they had more televisions than other households (Hội Cựu Chiến Binh Xã Quang). Although I did not canvas *xã* residents’ viewing and reading habits, television was a novelty in the mid-1990s and villagers were eager to watch it when they had time. I did not see many newspapers and books in the reception rooms of the households I visited, but I observed that *xã* officials read newspapers assiduously. The loudspeaker system in the *xã* broadcast local and national news and party pronouncements.
- 18 How my presence as a foreigner affected the proceedings is difficult to ascertain, but both my assistant and I were “outsiders” to the country-women respondents.
- 19 *Giác ngộ* is a Buddhist term meaning enlightenment that twentieth-century revolutionaries such as Hồ Chí Minh used in their writings and speeches, giving it the connotation of political consciousness. Two other mothers-in-law used this term at the beginning of the discussion. Mrs. Tạ Thị Nghiệm said that Thuận’s serving as a district official was very *giác ngộ*. Mrs. Chu Thị Sáu said that Mrs. Hòa’s example of *giác ngộ* during the war was very rare today.
- 20 The terms “công tác xã hội,” “tham gia công việc xã hội,” and “làm công tác ở ngoài xã hội” generally referred to social work, public work, and community work, meaning work for the government (local and central). This included state factory work.
- 21 When I first presented this chapter’s findings to a workshop at the National University of Singapore in 2004, the head of a Women’s Research Institute in Hồ Chí Minh City again demonstrated the emotional pull of the film by telling me that she had wept when she first saw it.
- 22 See Berlant.
- 23 The popularity of films and fiction such as *Mẹ chồng tôi* in the early *Đổi Mới* period reflected a post-war national imaginary conveyed by gendered images of sacrifice and loss, as I argue in Werner, “Between.”

- 24 See Berlant.
- 25 Gal and Kligman argue that public norms and gendered subject-positions in post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe can be invoked in any interaction or instance of use, depending on the position and perspective of the subject. Thus people's actual behavior may be affected to some degree but remain resistant to further change. Subjectivity in effect becomes compartmentalized. (See Gal and Kligman, *Reproducing Gender*.)
- 26 This question was framed in terms of husbands' sharing housework because not all of the daughter-in-law respondents lived with their mothers-in-law.
- 27 Thus this chapter signals a need to reconsider how subjects become interpellated. With regard to Althusser's and Butler's perspectives on state subject-making, the mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law clearly responded to state hailing in different ways, and thus neither can universally explain all types of subject-making. In responding to the model of exemplary behavior in the film, the mother-in-law interviewees returned to the source – the party/state – for a reiteration of their political subjectification, as Althusser would say, reconstituting themselves as political subjects. The rapid alignment of the mothers-in-law with the ideal behavior depicted in the film suggests an almost automatic response to the hailing function of the state, more closely approximating Althusser's model, while the responses of the daughters-in-law responses more closely reflect Butler's work on gender performance and the subversion of subject categories. Yet *pace* Butler, neither the mothers-in-law nor the daughters-in-law showed any tendency to subvert the subject categories represented in the film, since their reactions to the normative models in the film displayed neither cynicism nor irony. Butler discusses Althusser at length in *The Psychic Life of Power* (5, 106–132), arguing that interpellation theory cannot account for how conscience operates “as the psychic operation of regulatory norms,” a process which needs to occur prior to the “turn” of the subject toward the call or interpellation. She suggests that subjectivity is formed before hailing occurs, that rituals do not produce subjects, and that subjects are predisposed to being hailed.
- 28 By historicizing and contextualizing viewers' responses as well as the political purposes for which the film was made, this chapter also tries to strike a balance between the ideological and resistant models within film theory. The ideological approach argues that the cinematic apparatus interpellates viewers into essentialist positions of subjecthoods, viewing pleasure as a form of cultural domination in which viewers are complicit with an oppressive sexual regime, dupes of a cultural industry. The resistant model, influenced by Gramsci, attributes power to the subject and recognizes his/her ability to negotiate with the dominant discourse and intervene in signification. In the ideological model, pleasure is part of a top-down cultural apparatus that is deceptive in nature and conceals its political purposes; in the resistant model, spectators construct their own meanings and produce a multiplicity of readings. The findings in this chapter suggest that neither model is universally applicable. (See Cook and Bernink 371.)
- 29 The *Đôi Mũi* state has continued to be heavily involved in the construction and narration of heroic histories and national commemorations of the wartime and revolutionary past. (See, for instance, Giebel.)

Conclusion

My purpose in undertaking this study was to examine gender hierarchies, gendered discourses, and the relationship between the public/private divide in Vietnam. I was particularly interested in exploring the paradox that while women exercised considerable formal power in Vietnam, they appeared to have considerably less power within the setting of the family. To conduct an empirical investigation of this seeming contradiction, I had traveled to Quang *xã*, a village in northern Vietnam, to examine gender relations in the family and the effects of state power on the household. The data I collected in this village, as discussed in the preceding chapters, revealed that “gender equality” in Vietnam is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon in both the private and public spheres. In this chapter, I explore the ramifications of these findings for Vietnamese women and for three areas of current scholarly inquiry: state discourses and gender discourses in the family, gender and *Đổi Mới* governance, and official state feminism and gender equality.

State Discourses and Gender Discourses in the Family

During the first decade of *Đổi Mới*, Quang *xã* officials used gender and family discourses to keep state agendas and programs such as economic development goals, family planning targets, and Happy Family campaigns visible to *xã* residents while promoting the state’s vision of the modern family. Gender equality discourses were aligned with the state’s promotion of economic progress and modernity, although “gender equality” (*bình đẳng nam nữ*) itself was subject to shifting definitions. Official government messages and discourses were relayed to villagers through party, *thôn*, and *xã* representatives in their personal relations with *xã* residents, public meetings, and the media, especially television. State discourses in the *xã* represented women as reflecting the essence of Vietnamese national identity through their revolutionary roles and as mothers of the nation, much as during the pre-*Đổi Mới* era, when women also had served as symbols of cultural authenticity and the moral values of the community. In the 1990s, the *xã* also undertook efforts to “strengthen the family” as part of a nationwide campaign to build “cultured families” so as to mitigate potential threats to the social order caused by the shift to

Đổi Mới. In fact, as discussed earlier, *Đổi Mới*'s new family model blended traditional and modern features intended to both facilitate the household's insertion into the market and safeguard Vietnam's cultural values as revolutionary discourses shifted to neo-traditional authoritarian discourses.

However, as my investigation found, gender discourses in the family constituted a distinct set of values that were sometimes at odds and sometimes aligned with the state's official discourses. Gender discourses in the family uncovered in my interviews with *xã* households included a clearly dominant role for men, who were universally seen as the pillars of the family, while women occupied a subordinate position stemming from the low value attached to their work and higher standards and expectations for their behavior. According to the survey data, men were three times more likely to be the head of household in Quang *xã*, and women did not contest their husbands' authority in major matters. These family discourses contradicted the facile pronouncements that Vietnam had achieved gender equality. By and large, I found through my interviews, Quang *xã* women reported being content with these images and with letting their husbands play the dominant role in the family. Nor did they view personal gender equality in the Western sense as a prime goal. Instead, women stated, their priorities were for a better life for themselves and for their families, as well as for "harmonious" relations between themselves and their husbands. Younger women, as evidenced by interviews with daughters-in-law, saw their main roles as in the family, not as performing "social work." Mothers-in-law concurred. At the same time, the majority of my respondents also believed that gender equality had been achieved. What I found was that Quang *xã* residents tended to define gender equality either in terms of statist definitions of social equality or their own values and perspectives rather than parity between wives and husbands.

This seemed consistent with my findings that the patrilineal kinship system in the *xã* favored such patriarchal practices as filial intergenerational relations and inheritance through the father's line, as well as the return of ancestor worship following the war. According to my survey and interview data, however, marital residence patterns in Quang *xã* were endogamous, and virtually all wives had very close ties to their nearby natal kin. Women's positive views toward "small family" residence were consistent with the widespread pattern of nuclear household residence in the *xã* uncovered by my household survey. At the same time, women's strong hand in financial and production was reflected in their desire to share decision making with their husbands, which they believed was necessary for a happy marriage.

My data, especially from the household and couples surveys, revealed that women in Quang *xã* made considerable economic contributions to the household, but that women's contributions did not translate directly into commensurate authority in their families. Thus this study counters the findings of other scholars that there is a positive relationship between economic contribution to the household and control over economic resources and marital power. In Quang *xã*, men exercised more authority in the household

than women regardless of their economic contributions. Even when women brought more economic resources into the household than men, they still deferred to their husbands in important family matters. At the same time, according to the survey data, wives did exercise authority in production matters and managing money and shared in decisions regarding children.

I also found that male authority in Quang *xã* politics had been strengthened by the return of military veterans after the American war and the gradual retirement of women political leaders. By 1994, the *xã* had returned to the more familiar pattern of men's leadership in the top three posts. As we have seen, the local state easily accommodated itself to new patriarchal kinship practices and the revival of Vietnamese "traditions" in the *xã*. In addition, men's discourses indicated a deep ambivalence about women's changing roles and their work outside the home. In contrast to these patriarchal attitudes were the state's new emphasis on the household and the newly launched market economy's dependency upon women's income-generating skills.

Patriarchal practices in the *xã* thus appeared to be sustained by both state and family discourses. However, while these two sets of discourses were often mutually reinforcing, at times they competed with each other. In the 1990s, state campaigns stressed family stability, Vietnamese cultural traditions, and conservative family values. Quang *xã* women's discourses of family harmony and improving their families' livelihoods were consistent with these themes. As for the discourses generated by forms of cultural production such as television films, the differing responses of two generations of women to *Mẹ chồng tôi* demonstrated both consistencies and inconsistencies with official state views. The older generation of women, which had lived through the French and American wars, strongly identified with the idealized and politicized gender images portrayed in state discourses, while the younger generation of newly married women distanced itself from state discourses. This suggested that either younger wives' life experiences under *Đổi Mới* were mitigating the discursive impact of the state or the presence of competing sources of gender norms outside the realm of the state. At the very least, the younger generation's responses indicated the state no longer held the hegemonic position it once presumably did. Other sources of discursive production were becoming available to Quang *xã* residents such as the growth of the market, increasing prosperity and mobility, and outside cultural influences. These changes may have offset the production of official gender discourses in the *xã*, causing the discourse field to be in flux.

As my survey and interview data indicated, state discourses reflected both conservative family values and "modern" values such as equal education and inheritance for girls and boys, love in marriage choices, and equal decision-making between spouses, while family discourses in the *xã* tended to reflect the more conservative and paternalistic end of the continuum. The traditional virtues of filial piety, women's primary duty to the family, and hierarchical intergenerational relations were aligned with both state and family discourses. Yet Quang *xã* women's responses to the film *Mẹ chồng tôi* revealed

that state-produced models of femininity had become deeply embedded in the *xã*. Women respondents had accepted the normative and discursive functions of the state regarding gendered subjectivity, the notion that women can perform work outside the family just as well as men, and the view that gender equality is a function of social equality.

As the data from Quang *xã* demonstrate, state-produced norms had become normalized in many of the ways women thought about themselves and their relations with men and their families. The group of mothers-in-law interviewed had strongly engaged with state discourses, suggesting that the state's norms of ideal womanhoods had become a part of their subjectivity, whether or not it reflected their actual behavior. How one distinguishes the "public face" of the social subject from "an inner self" is an issue that has been of interest to other scholars of state-socialist systems as well. Gal and Kligman's argument that public norms in state-socialist systems become "nested" in the domestic sphere suggests that these norms can be invoked in any interaction or instance of use, depending on the position and perspective of the subject, implying that state interpellation of ideal behavior has its limits – that it is easy to pay lip service to ideals but remain resistant to further change. Yet, as Anagnost notes for China, one of the ways in which the party/state in state-socialist systems exercises its authority over state subjects is through the power to name and confer moral prestige by the invocation of norms.¹ It is my view that the party/state made itself visible to the mothers-in-law who watched *Mẹ chồng tôi* by projecting exemplary models of behavior with which they deeply identified. By bodily identifying with the idealizations in the film, these mothers-in-law connected themselves to larger political and historical forces as the past was rematerialized through the narrative force of the film. In responding to the models of exemplary behavior, the mothers-in-law returned to the source – the party/state – of their formation for a reiteration of their political subjectification, as Althusser would say. They thereby reconstituted themselves as political subjects. Were the mothers-in-law conscious of their public face as gendered subjects? They certainly accepted state interpellations as legitimate and did not question the right of the state to intervene into family affairs when they aligned themselves with the ideal behavior in the film. Their reaction provides evidence for Anagnost's claim that state subjectification in state-socialist systems is not the impersonal, silent technology of Foucauldian power, but rather a disciplinary power with a human face, felicitous and visible, that embraces the subject with an outward display of warmth.² It also suggests that the gendered subjectivity of the mothers-in-law was not a performative response to the situational context of the interview space but an un-self-conscious, reflexive reaction to the deep emotions engendered by the film.

As we have seen, gendered discourses, the portrayal of prescribed womanhoods, and the promotion of family stability were integral to the politics of the early *Đổi Mới* period. The state's tightening of political and cultural control, including its regulation of the mass media, proceeded from the political

crisis of those years, in which the Communist Party confronted a serious political and ideological challenge to its power.³ In times of crisis, feminine piety has been a deep well from which Vietnamese political leaders have readily drawn. In Quang xã, the party branch and the People's Committee were directly charged with policing feminine propriety by reporting on manifestations of cultural poisons and "social evils" such as prostitution, pornographic videos, and juvenile delinquency. The security bureau (*công an*), which reported to the Ministry of Interior, diligently policed the xã for any disturbances in the cultural order.

As for the contours of the public/private divide, this study provides evidence that the division between these two spheres continues to be indistinct and blurred in *Đổi Mới* Vietnam. Where the "state" ends and the "family" begins is often quite permeable and indeterminate. In his study of a village in Thanh Tri district in the 1990s, Shawn Malarney argues that with the advent of *Đổi Mới*, the family captured some of the moral discourses claimed by the state, particularly in ritual functions such as weddings and funerals.⁴ This study suggests, however, that the line between the domestic sphere and the state was much less distinct in terms of gendered discourses, since, in this area, family discourses were not fundamentally in opposition nor in conflict with state discourses.

This is not to suggest that gendered practices and discourses in the family did not contest or resist hegemonic discourses, for there is evidence that women's complaints in rural northern Vietnam take a specific discursive form, as uncovered by my interviews with mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in their reactions to the film *Mẹ chồng tôi*. These discourses include the themes of women's endurance, suffering, and paeans to maternal forbearance.⁵ Nor is it to suggest that women do not take the initiative in resisting hegemonic discourses due to the decline in their status under *Đổi Mới* compared to the socialist past. Such resistance in fact may have had a bearing on new gender practices among younger women in Quang xã in terms of new dress codes, their rejection of farming in favor of salaried employment, and their different values and perspectives compared to their parents' generation. That these practices, such as new visions of femininity and more materialistic values, will evolve outside the sphere of the state, however, is not necessarily a foregone conclusion.⁶

Gender and *Đổi Mới* Governance

This study demonstrates that one of the ways in which *Đổi Mới* governance operates in Vietnam is through the effective use of gender politics. As discussed earlier, gender equality and the promotion of women's emancipation have always been prime discourses of the party, and the Communist revolution successfully used these slogans to mobilize women in the fight against the French and then the United States. Not surprisingly, therefore, gender has also become a tool in the political adjustments occurring as a result of

Đổi Mới. As the state has adjusted to economic reforms and the opening to outside capital, this study shows, its approach to governance has also started to change. While not entirely abandoning its Leninist mode of political operation, the state has sought both to create an opening for the market and to regulate it. At the same time, the reassertion of Vietnamese traditional values has been a calculated move on the part of the state to control the boundaries between the community and global capital. As such, the *Đổi Mới* state has reserved for itself the task of monitoring presumed threats to the cultural authenticity of the community while gaining legitimacy through new imaginings of the nation and the promise of modernity. The gendered notions of Vietnamese nationality that were so important during the wars for national liberation have simply been recast as cultural and traditional moral constructs.

As we have seen, in Quang *xã* gender and the household have become sites of state intervention and control. With a new economic policy, the activities of Quang *xã* officials focused on the household for purposes of production and reproduction and repositioned the household to serve as the basis for the market economy. With the creation of new *thôn* divisions to provide a direct link to the household following the decollectivization of agriculture, the People's Committee and other *xã* institutions such as the Women's Association moved in a new direction to support household-based economic activities. Under *xã* guidance, the household increased its economic interests and networks, thereby creating a new economic agenda for the family, which had already been reinvigorated by the reassertion of kinship ties. Although the means of production was back under household control and families were free to deal directly with the market, they did not operate as free agents in the Western sense, but under the aegis of *xã* officials.

Thus, I argue, Quang *xã* officials, and by extension the *Đổi Mới* state, used constructions of gender as a form of state power. By the time of my visit, Quang *xã* had successfully adapted its gender order to the needs of national development. By linking the political institutions of the *xã* to individual peasant households, the regime had reconfigured state institutions from their wartime mass mobilization duties to new development functions. The new *thôn* chiefs took the lead in monitoring the economic progress of households, while the Women's Association provided institutional support for household economic activities and organizing pro-family campaigns. The *xã*'s household-based programs included women's and children's health initiatives, anti-poverty programs, family campaigns, and family planning drives. As during the wartime past, the *xã*'s gender regime was based on sexual difference and continued to designate women as a "special" category distinct from men.

Comparing the role of the revolutionary wartime state with that of the *Đổi Mới* state, the Quang *xã* data reveal a number of continuities. Quang *xã*'s gender order remained firmly in place in the 1990s, although its goals and discourses had changed. As before, state discourses remained crucial to maintaining the gender order. In the first decade of reform, the local state

did little to relax its intervention into the “private sphere”; on the contrary, the local state apparatus tried to extend its reach into the domestic sphere. Officials in Quang *xã* sought to control the transition to the market economy in the *xã* and to administer its economy in compliance with the government’s economic development plans. After returning agricultural land to individual peasant plots, they had restructured the *xã*’s economy on the basis of the household, relying on household production for economic planning, increasing family incomes, diversifying economic activities, and stimulating entrepreneurial activity. As seen through the perspective of gender politics, therefore, *Đổi Mới* seemed to be strengthening the hand of the local state. Although agricultural production no longer was under the aegis of the all-powerful agricultural cooperative, household production and the gender regime were carefully monitored by *xã* state and party authorities. Indeed, if there had been any shift in the political system, it had been only to transfer authority from the agricultural cooperative to the reinvigorated *xã* and *thôn* institutions.

Most scholars studying gender and market reform in state-socialist systems have argued that the opening to the market leads to a reduced role for the state and a retreat by the household into a private realm outside the domain of the state.⁷ Marxist and liberal analyses alike have claimed that market-based economies broaden the influence of the private sphere at the expense of the state as the relations of production and reproduction fall primarily within the domain of the family. The data from Quang *xã*, however, dispute this characterization for *Đổi Mới* Vietnam, suggesting more continuities than discontinuities with the past in terms of the state’s role, at least during the first decade of reform. As we have seen, the goals and discourses of the gender order in Quang *xã* have shifted but the gender order itself has remained in place. This study finds that the *Đổi Mới* state has relied on gender and the household to tie its members to the market, to formulate new forms of governance and new subjects of rule, and to rearticulate new conceptions of the nation. In Quang *xã*, patriarchal practices continued to operate at the level of the household because they conformed to the needs of the state. By tying the household to the development goals of the state, this research posits, *Đổi Mới* has constructed the state subject in a profoundly gendered way. Under state socialism, the household had been conceptualized as part of a unified state/society. Now it is envisioned as part of a statist domestic sphere in which the Vietnamese state continues to intervene for a range of purposes.

In Quang *xã*, I found, gender served as a marker for the state’s disciplinary power. Gender designations or womanhoods operated as signs, relaying a message about subjects’ recognition and acceptance of the moral imperative of the party or state and its right to govern. As such, womanhoods affirmed the party’s self-referential authority. As Anagnost has argued about the Chinese case, such gender inscriptions can reveal state deployments of power in regimes that rely on idealized and exemplary models to hail subjects.⁸ Here I argue that the exemplary norms and educative models of Quang *xã*’s gender regime reflect

just this type of governance.⁹ Standards and behavioral models were conveyed variously by campaigns, revolutionary discourses, the media, and state and party officials. Gendered and family discourses gained their authority in part because they were post-colonial political constructions filtered through supposed national traditions steeped in moral and ethical pieties. Gender equality, likewise, is a post-colonial discourse, and as such is as much a symbol as it is a conception, signifying the defense of Vietnam's revolutionary past, the struggle for liberation from the feudal past, and cultural difference from the West. As noted earlier, the responses of those I surveyed and interviewed indicated that Quang *xã* residents' first reflex when thinking about gender equality was to define it in terms not of personal relations between men and women but of their connection to the Vietnamese state as a whole. As such, "gender equality" prompted them to reflect on their relations with the state and their involvement with past struggles.

The *Đôì Mói* state's strategic use of gender and its ties to the household, as evidenced by the data from Quang *xã*, thus demonstrate that the Western conceptualization of the family as a private realm in retreat from the public sphere does not hold in modernizing Asia. Historically, the state in Confucian countries has regularly intervened in the private world of the family and in recent years has used the family to support state and society against Western hegemonic economic and political competition; the achievement of modernity has entailed the transformation of the individual *through the family*. In China, the family has been seen not as a private unit or refuge from a harsh world, but rather as the moral center of society and the platform for nationalist struggle and state and socialist achievement.¹⁰ The same can be said for Vietnam. In fact, this linkage between the family and the state in Communist countries predates their revolutions, having been a central element of Confucian political tradition and culture. Therefore the public/private distinctions central to Western gender analysis are problematic when applied to Vietnam. As noted, scholars who have used the public/private construct to study gender within socialist and post-socialist settings have generally argued that the post-socialist transformation of the relationship between these two realms has led to a reduced role for the state and a retreat of the household into a private realm. But in Vietnam, as we have seen, the state claims much of the public realm and society is saturated with state power; the private sphere of the family is neither autonomous nor hermetically sealed from the state sphere but integrally related to it. While it is true that a new conception of a private sphere is emerging with regard to market activity in Vietnam, most observers agree that relations between this sphere and the state are blurred and indistinct.¹¹ The data from Quang *xã* reveal the complexities, contradictions, and nuances within the evolving relationship between the public and private spheres in Vietnam, demonstrating that market-based socialism produces new gender practices that perpetuate gender inequality.

The domestic sphere in Quang *xã*, the data show, is integrally related to the public sphere. In Quang *xã*, the local state supervised the household economy

and directed *xã* households to follow family planning programs and the prescriptions of “cultured families.” Discourses of womanhoods were still a state function, as they were in the pre-*Đổi Mới* era. Moreover, in Quang *xã*, the *Đổi Mới* state clearly had not relinquished its efforts to influence the way subjects think about themselves. State-produced norms were deeply imprinted among *xã* residents, as residents’ responses to my interview questions and *Mẹ chồng tôi* demonstrated. The evidence from Quang *xã* therefore again suggests that deployment of state power at the local level represents more of a continuity (albeit reconfigured) than a break with Vietnam’s socialist and wartime past.

These findings about the state in Quang *xã* at first glance would appear similar to Navaro-Yashin’s analysis of how Turkish officials employed popular activities such as military parades, sports events, and debates about the veil to normalize state power.¹² But the public enactments she describes have tended to be impersonal or abstract in nature; even gendered discourses about the veil in Turkey have taken the form of public and politicized rituals that are more about the symbol of the veil than the veil itself.¹³ In contrast, I discovered, gendered discourses in Quang *xã* achieved their power by making a more immediate and seemingly less politicized personal, intimate connection to subjects. As women’s responses to *Mẹ chồng tôi* suggest, what made the state a present reality for ordinary people was the state’s projection of a structure of intimacy through gendered discourses. State performativity filtered through these kinds of discourses conveyed the enactment of citizenship, in this case rooted in wartime representations of gendered suffering. As my analysis of the responses to the film demonstrate, intimacy through gendered discourses also conveyed a post-colonial construction of community by giving viewers a sense of participatory inclusion in the national collectivity, which in turn granted a sense of sovereignty and political legitimacy to the regime. Discursive gendered and intimate connections such as this one thus enabled the state to achieve a deeper connection to people’s lives, thereby presumably mitigating the need for direct representational political participation. Thus, this study suggests, the notion of state had become normalized in Vietnam through notions of intimacy and gendered discourses. The virtuous mother-in-law and other moral exemplars of self-sacrificing womanhoods, including models of revolutionary heroines, were all sites for the production of state power. Subjects subjugated themselves to the state at these sites, where governmentality was self-generating and ordinary people reproduced the idea of the state.¹⁴

This study has thus analyzed the household and gender practices as a site for reproducing state power. Although other scholars working on gender and the household in globalizing and increasingly affluent Asia have similarly characterized the domestic sphere as being reworked and redefined under rapidly changing economic conditions, they have viewed it primarily as a site for producing middle-class values.¹⁵ While this may also be the case in urbanizing Vietnam, this study argues instead that many of the gender practices

of subjects in rural Quang *xã* served to reproduce the state. This finding that normalizing state discourses through gender is one way in which subjects reproduce the state in their daily lives is supported by Taylor's observation that the gender and religious practices of women traders in southern Vietnam similarly reinforced the power of the Vietnamese patriarchal state.¹⁶

Official Feminist States and Gender Equality

Some feminist scholars have characterized official feminist states such as Vietnam, where gender equality is a function of public policy, as woman-friendly because they use public policy and bureaucratic institutions to promote women's interests and administer to their needs.¹⁷ And it is true that in Vietnam, official or public feminism seeks to redress unequal gender relations in society and in the family by guaranteeing certain basic rights for women. Relying on legal, economic, and social policies, Vietnamese officials use their administrative, economic, and judicial powers to provide equal educational opportunities for women, equal access to the labor market and the political process, and equal rights for women in the family and to guarantee women's reproductive rights. As such, Vietnam's official policy is to further gender equality and redress inequalities in society. Thus advocates for women's equality in Vietnam firmly believe that state intervention serves women's needs and argue that public feminism can play an important role in improving women's status in society, advancing their economic prosperity, and redressing inequalities in the family.¹⁸

Feminist activists and scholars have claimed that these are noteworthy accomplishments and that gender equality as a policy goal effectively uses state machinery to distribute public goods to which women deserve equal access. State policies, they hold, also empower women by giving them access to social power, which enables them to achieve their economic and social potential. According to this argument, women can gain greater political power themselves by securing access to politically important positions and by directly controlling policy. Pursuing gender equality in official feminist states can also lead to the "feminization" of the policy machinery of the state. If linked to active women's organizations from below, these scholars argue, official feminism can be a powerful force for the achievement of gender equality.¹⁹

In Vietnam, however, public feminism is primarily a function of legal and administrative action, state programs, and ideological campaigns – in short, a function of a political agenda. It is the Communist Party and government bureaucrats who define what gender equality is and what women's needs are. In the *Đổi Mới* era, these officials have focused on the productive and reproductive roles of women. State programs are channeled through government agencies or the Women's Union, which is affiliated with the Communist Party. The Woman's Union acts as a kind of welfare agency that monitors abuses against women, serving as an advocate for poor and indigent women and for women in general.²⁰ Further, the power behind public feminism in Vietnam

comes from above, not from women as individuals or in autonomous institutions, who do not have power on their own. The Women's Union, which nominally exists to advance the interests of women, is part of the power structure, and its real function is to serve the party and the state. It does not actively lobby to change the gender imbalance in national or local power, nor does it seek to empower women from below. Although women are well represented in the National Assembly at the national level, most of the other national and local officials are men.²¹

In essence, it can be argued, public feminist regimes such as that of Vietnam are driven by social welfare agendas; in redressing societal inequities, they create women's dependency on the state. They tend to be characterized by paternalistic and patriarchal features. While gender-based hierarchies may be reduced in some areas, organizational hierarchies emerge in others; private patriarchy is replaced by public patriarchy. Women become "clients" of the state, and the state uses its patronage to control their agenda. Some feminist scholars have noted that states with "welfare" agendas may in fact stymie grass-roots initiatives, in effect leading to the atrophy of societal forces.²²

In Vietnam, as this study shows, the implications of *Đổi Mới* for gender equality are therefore mixed. The reform state makes broad claims that gender equality for women has been achieved or is in the process of being achieved even as it relies on traditional gender relations to govern. Gender equality sits uneasily with development and nationalist discourses and the conservative family values of the *Đổi Mới* state. Gendered images and discourses help sustain the legitimacy of the regime; ideals of womanhoods are not driven solely by the market or by women's own sensibilities, but instead reproduce state-supported patriarchy and state-led commodity production. Gendered discourses also serve to reinforce the state's self-assumed cultural control. Therefore, I would argue, the disjuncture between the *Đổi Mới* state's discourse of gender equality and the reality of gender inequality is itself an impediment to the full achievement of gender equality.

At the same time, as the preceding chapters have shown, economic, social, and global forces that promise greater equality and freedom for women compete with other forces – social, political, and economic – that serve to increase men's individual and familial advantages. As we have seen in Quang *xã*, market forces appear to be strengthening patriarchal power even as women's economic skills and income-earning capability have improved. Although I found no evidence that the household was becoming more nuclear in composition, demographic pressure combined with increasing economic prosperity could facilitate household division at an earlier stage in young couples' lives, if they so desire. At present, however, gender equality as such is not a major concern for Quang *xã* women. Rather, given Vietnam's recent wartime history and its current desire to develop a market economy quickly, women's priorities in Quang *xã*, as we have seen, are oriented toward providing for and nurturing their families, which is undoubtedly why they are receptive to

the state's gender discourses. The paradox of equality is thus inextricably linked to the *Đôi Mỏi* state's overriding goal, which is maintaining order and hierarchy in the family rather than achieving gender equality.

Notes

- 1 Anagnost, "Politicized." Her analysis is in reference to a "Law-Abiding Household" plaque awarded to a former local diviner in China.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Party dissidents tried to introduce greater democracy and accountability, but in 1990 the Communist Party suppressed the pressures for change by renewing its commitment to one-party rule. Party ideologues subsequently tightened the party's grip on the media. Although the press and the publishing industry were state controlled and subject to censorship before 1986, the government had relaxed its control of cultural production soon after *Đôi Mỏi* was launched. In the early 1990s, however, the minister of culture announced that the media was an ideological instrument subject to state control; the 7th Party Congress (1992) subsequently declared that cultural production needed to reflect national values.
- 4 See Malarney.
- 5 See also Gammeltoft, who catalogues women's complaints with regard to their health and reproductive concerns.
- 6 In a different vein, Phạm Quỳnh Phương has argued that new gender and religious practices among women mediums have occurred in response to their difficult post-war family circumstances and the decline in their access to the public sphere as state employees and participants in national and emulation campaigns. In these new forms of mediumistic religious activity, women are incarnating the male Saint Trần, previously an exclusively male religious practice. In so doing, women mediums have improved their self-confidence and business skills and reconnected themselves to the public sphere.
- 7 See Einhorn; Einhorn and Yeo; Gal and Kligman, *Reproducing*.
- 8 As in China, the state in Vietnam always presumes to speak for the people. In so doing, the party/state constitutes itself as a "self-referential" reality – i.e., it creates reality in reference to itself. This is necessary to the party's own self-identification and is not just a manipulative stratagem. See Anagnost, "Politicized."
- 9 In China, as in Vietnam, modernity has been promoted and fostered in campaigns of human edification and improvement. Behavior and society are constantly evaluated in terms of whether they are "civilized" or "uncivilized." Governmentality consists in part in pronouncements or displays of moral and behavioral exhortations to achieve various "standards"; moral exemplarity is thus a state disciplinary instrument meant to provide normative standards for the population to follow. This type of disciplinary regime comes with conceptions of the past and visions for the future entailing a conscious transformation of society, with governance consisting of a prescribed and consciously willed idea of how society should be rather than a merely punitive order. Governmentality is thus a function of constant appraisal and prescribed behavior as well as penalization. Michel Foucault's conception of liberal governmentality is based on discursive regimes of specialized knowledge associated with hospitals, prisons, and the police, conceptualizations that have only partial applicability to the moral post-colonial dimensions of Vietnamese socialist governance. See Foucault, "Politics" and "Governmentality." See also Bakken, who argues that governmentality in China relies, in part, on moral improvement campaigns, exemplary behavior, and social theatricality. Moral improvement campaigns create a field of moral competition

and heroic accomplishment. Rather than a panoptic and remote disciplinary regime that is routinized and standardized, power in China is visible and on display, while exemplary norms are prescriptive in fashion.

- 10 See Glosser. Broadly speaking, the goal of reform and the modernization project in Asia was the “nation” rather than the “state.” The state in this sense served the wider purpose of ensuring the integrity of the nation. Since the nation was embedded in a new family regime, the private lives of its citizens were a matter of state and public concern. Work, social roles, and gendered identities were full of national significance. In the West, as families became involved in the market, they retreated to the private sphere. Privacy and subjectivity were part of capitalism – work was segregated from “life.” The reverse obtained in Asia: modernity linked the family, work, and subjectivity to the nation and hence to the state. Modernity in Asia thus emerged in a different context, not as an evolution of indigenous socio-economic forces but as a product of the colonial encounter. Hence, national identity has been constructed on the basis of community and national discourses embracing the themes of kinship, love, austerity, and sacrifice. The new vision of the state in Asia has also been seen as depending as much on family behavior as on public institutions and law. See also Chatterjee.
- 11 See Beresford and Tran Ngoc Angie; McCargo.
- 12 Navaro-Yashin argues that a constructed notion of state power in Turkey is sustained through nationalist symbols and ritual events that serve to invent and reinvent the state through ordinary life practices. The state acquires its power not only through ideological enforcement in real social institutions such as the army and in schools, but also through public, civil, and popular activities generated by society. Navaro-Yashin argues that the production of state power at these sites is what makes the state “tick” for ordinary people.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 By way of contrast, Michael Taussig explores how everyday religious practices reproduce the state through intimate, bodily exchanges and transformations such as spirit possession.
- 15 See Sen and Stevens.
- 16 See Taylor.
- 17 The term *state feminism* is usually applied to states that promote women’s rights. I prefer to use *official feminism* or *public feminism* for Communist states like Vietnam where gender politics are largely a post-colonial phenomenon. *State feminism* is widely used for Western states and was coined in reference to the Scandinavian social-welfare states arising out of the theory and practice of social democracy; it is based on an analysis of the specific connections between the state, the market, and the family in the history of Western industrialization and the emergence of the urban middle class. In market-based Western societies, men’s status, income, and independence were largely determined by the market. Women’s low status was reflected in their dependence on the family, their weak position in the labor market, and their low levels of political representation and power. State feminist regimes compensated for these root causes of gender inequality by taking measures to enhance women’s economic independence and reproductive rights. See Holter; Hernes. Two non-Western cases in which the authors have examined state feminism are Mervat Hatem’s study of the Egyptian welfare state under Abdul Nasser in the late 1950s and 1960s, and Carolle Charles’s study of Duvalierist Haiti, where women were incorporated into the political sphere on the same terms as men through state violence.
- 18 See Hernes; Lê Thi.
- 19 See Hernes.
- 20 The Women’s Association is present and active in virtually all the villages in Vietnam and is also part of the powerful district-level bureaucracy.

- 21 Women representatives to the National Assembly increased from 18 percent in the term 1992–1997 to 26 percent in the term 1997–2002. This relatively high rate held steady at 27 percent in the term 2002–2007. At the ministerial level, however, women have been less represented: 12 percent during 1997–2002 and 2002–2007. Women’s representation in national party committees is also relatively low (10 percent in 1996–2001), as is their rate of participation in *xã* People’s Councils (14 percent in 1994, rising to 17 percent in 1999). See Hausmann et al.; United Nations in Viet Nam.

- 22 See Holter.

Appendix

Couples Survey Data

During the couples survey, couples were asked whether they, their spouse, they and their spouse, or another member of the family made the decisions for each of the specific issues included in each cluster in the questionnaire. The analysis differentiated between responses that were *exclusive selections* – only “me” or only “my spouse” – and those that were *shared* – “both myself and my spouse.” Next, the responses to each question were ranked according to the rates of *men’s* self-selection (husbands’ responding “me”), which showed that the rates of men’s self-selection were higher than those of women’s self-selection. Husbands’ self-selected responses were then compared to their wives’ responses. If both spouses agreed with each other (either the husband or the wife answered “me” for a certain decision and their spouse said “my spouse”), the responses were termed *consistent*. Responses were consistent when both spouses agreed with each other within a small margin, that is, husband’s responses were commensurate with similar rates of agreement by their wives. Responses were labeled *inconsistent* in the opposite case, as when wives answered differently than their husbands (either “me” or “both of us” when the husband selected “me”). This allowed for differences in opinion and could be compared.

When the level of men’s self-selection reached 40 to 53 percent, it was deemed *higher male*. When these values were matched by spousal agreement rates within a range of 10 percent, the results were labeled *consistent*. When these higher rates of men’s self-selection were accompanied by more than 10 percent spousal disagreement, however, this was termed *higher male/inconsistent*. Similarly, when wives’ self-selection responses ranged from 37 to 60 percent, these were labeled *higher female*, and the rate of husbands’ consistency with wives’ self-selection rates was similarly assessed.

Husbands’ and wives’ self-selection with spousal agreement within a 10 percent range produced the clearest results. Results demonstrating *shared decision-making*, however, were more complex and more difficult to interpret. Husbands and wives sometimes made claims for shared decision making, while their rates of self-selection (“only I made the decision”) were also equally

high. Wives claimed shared decision-making more frequently than husbands did. When the shared decision-making results fell within a 35–50 percent range or the responses of “me,” “my spouse,” and “both of us” were roughly equal, those cases were deemed to indicate shared decision-making.

Often spouses disagreed with one another. For instance, husbands sometimes claimed major responsibility for a decision but wives claimed it was made by “both of us.” In these cases, it was possible that wives’ responses may have represented (1) a difference in perception as to who decides, (2) a face-saving device when wives did not want to admit their husbands were the actual decision-makers, or (3) a power contest between partners. Conversely, some husbands claimed “both of us” at a relatively high rate but wives selected themselves as the sole decision-maker, which again could serve as a face-saving device or indicate disagreement about who made the decision. It was unclear whether the ambiguous findings signified agreement, disagreement, or a polite cover-up.

The couples were asked about three types or clusters of decisions: about major household matters, about production and other economic activities, and about children. Following are the data for each of these areas.

Major Household Matters

Decisions regarding major household expenditures were of five major types: purchasing major appliances, building or repairing the house, purchasing furniture and selling paddy or other major property, and ceremonial expenses. Besides these expenditures, decisions regarding representation of the family in the neighborhood (*xóm* or *thôn*) and at the level of the *xã* or agricultural cooperative were also included as major household matters. I discovered that families did not think of big decisions solely in monetary terms, but as involving other important matters affecting family life.

As shown in Table A-1, men’s self-selection regarding major household matters was higher than 40 percent for five of the nine specific types of decisions in this category, while women’s rates were much lower, and consistently so. Wives consistently agreed with their husbands that men made the decisions on these matters. Men’s self-selection ranged from 48 to 53 percent regarding expenditures, and from 40 to 50 percent regarding representation of the family. More wives selected themselves as family representative for the commune and cooperative than in any other category in this cluster of decisions. It should be noted that exclusivity (“I” or “she”) in decision-making was higher here than was shared decision-making. Women’s responsibility was self-selected and undisputed by their husbands for medical expenses and buying clothes, but these were deemed less significant issues.

Shared decision-making was reported most often regarding selling paddy or other major property and ceremonial expenses such as weddings, funerals, and death anniversaries. Where either husbands or wives were reported to have made the decision exclusively, their spouses tended to agree.

Table A-1 Who Makes Decisions about Major Household Matters

| Decision | Me | | My spouse | | Both | | My parents (husband)/My spouse's parents (wife) | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------|------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| | A. Higher male / consistent | | | | | | | |
| Buying major household conveniences | 53.2 | 9.1 | 6.4 | 46.8 | 22.3 | 24.1 | 4.5 | 8.6 |
| Building or repairing the house | 51.8 | 6.8 | 3.6 | 44.5 | 22.7 | 22.3 | 12.3 | 16.5 |
| Buying furniture | 47.7 | 8.2 | 7.7 | 46.4 | 21.4 | 22.7 | 5.0 | 8.6 |
| Representing family at cooperative or commune meetings | 50.9 | 20.0 | 13.6 | 44.1 | 7.7 | 9.1 | 22.7 | 22.2 |
| Representing family in neighborhood | 40.5 | 15.5 | 12.3 | 35.5 | 16.4 | 21.8 | 24.1 | 23.2 |
| | B. Shared / consistent | | | | | | | |
| Selling paddy or other major property | 25.0 | 27.3 | 20.9 | 16.4 | 25.9 | 27.7 | 11.4 | 9.9 |
| Paying ceremonial expenses (<i>hiêu hỷ</i>) | 24.5 | 38.2 | 29.5 | 16.4 | 26.8 | 29.1 | 14.9 | 12.8 |
| | C. Higher female / consistent | | | | | | | |
| Paying medical expenses | 23.6 | 47.7 | 38.6 | 15.9 | 19.5 | 20.0 | 8.2 | 8.1 |
| Buying clothes | 7.7 | 60.5 | 55.5 | 5.9 | 10.5 | 11.4 | | |
| | D. Everyone else in the household who made their own decisions | | | | | | | |
| Buying clothes | | | | | | | Male | Female |
| | | | | | | | 26.3 | 22.2 |

Note

220 husbands and 220 wives were surveyed.

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives.

Production and Other Economic Activities

In contrast to the men's primacy in decisions about major expenditures, the cluster of responses regarding economic activities demonstrated a broad realm of female decision-making in most agricultural production matters that was largely undisputed by their husbands. As shown in Table A-2, female self-selection as the primary decision-maker was 37 percent or higher regarding the use of capital for production or business, purchasing pigs, cattle or buffalo, use of insecticides or pesticides, when to plant, what to plant, and use of seeds. Their husbands tended to agree with their assessment, with male self-selection registering 21 percent or less on all of these matters. Shared decision-making was selected less often than female self-selection by men and women alike. Women selected themselves as the decision-maker about land use at nearly the same high rate, although both men and women selected the husband at a somewhat higher rate for this category than the others.

When it came to decisions regarding the selection of or change in family members' jobs and work responsibilities, however, men selected themselves at a higher rate. Yet their wives disagreed that this was exclusively a male preserve, as their husbands claimed, assigning equal responsibility to themselves or to them both.

More complex is the picture regarding decisions about such other issues as the use of household funds for production, borrowing or lending money or major property, purchasing agricultural or business equipment, lending major sums of money or property, repayment of loans, and the division of economic responsibilities in the family. In these cases, most decisions appeared to be shared, but there was also a high rate of inconsistent responses. Although rates of self-selection by husbands and wives were not markedly different from one another, more women than men acknowledged that men were responsible for these matters, if by a narrow margin. Slightly more men and women claimed shared decision-making in these areas, except for the selection of jobs and work responsibilities, for which men claimed more responsibility, although their wives disputed this claim, saying it was shared. Given the equal male and female self-selection and relatively high joint selection, these decisions can be viewed as shared, but not indisputably so. At the very least, these decisions were *not* the exclusive purview of men in the family, and women held or shared decision-making regarding the use of household funds for production and the household division of labor.

Children

Who made decisions about children was less clear than the other clusters, as can be seen in Table A-3. One group of decisions was the province of men: sons' inheritance of land and house, sons' and daughters' occupations, and location of sons' and daughters' occupations. On these matters, men's self-selection ranged from 23 to 32 percent and was disputed or claimed by

Table A-2 Who Makes Decisions about Economic/Production Matters

| Decision | Me | | My spouse | | Both | | My parents (husband)/My spouse's parents (wife) | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|------|---------|------|----------------------------------------------------------|------|
| | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife | Husband | Wife |
| | % | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| | A. Higher female / consistent | | | | | | | |
| Use of capital for production or business | 20.9 | 38.2 | 35.5 | 13.6 | 19.5 | 21.8 | 11.8 | 9.5 |
| Purchasing pigs, cattle, or buffalo | 14.1 | 37.3 | 32.3 | 12.3 | 24.5 | 23.6 | 12.3 | 9.5 |
| Use of insecticides or pesticides | 12.3 | 51.4 | 48.6 | 7.7 | 14.5 | 14.1 | 11.3 | 8.7 |
| When to plant | 11.4 | 51.4 | 49.5 | 8.2 | 14.5 | 15.0 | 12.3 | 8.7 |
| What to plant | 10.5 | 51.4 | 50.0 | 7.7 | 15.0 | 15.9 | 12.2 | 8.7 |
| Which seeds to use | 10.5 | 51.4 | 50.9 | 7.7 | 14.1 | 15.9 | 12.2 | 8.7 |
| | B. Decision-making is shared / consistent | | | | | | | |
| Land use | 23.6 | 36.8 | 34.1 | 21.4 | 15.9 | 16.8 | 15.9 | 12.3 |
| | C. Decision-making is shared / inconsistent | | | | | | | |
| Borrowing money or major property | 29.1 | 29.5 | 23.6 | 17.3 | 29.5 | 34.5 | 11.3 | 11.4 |
| Loan payments | 24.5 | 33.2 | 25.9 | 15.5 | 30.0 | 30.9 | 11.0 | 11.4 |
| Lending major sums of money or major property | 22.7 | 25.5 | 24.5 | 14.5 | 28.6 | 36.4 | 10.5 | 10.9 |
| | D. Lower male / inconsistent | | | | | | | |
| Selection of or changes in one's own or family members' jobs | 35.9 | 20.0 | 10.5 | 20.5 | 16.8 | 24.1 | 2.3 | 5.1 |

Note

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives.

Table A-3 Who Makes Decisions about Children

| Decision | Me | | My spouse | | Both | | Respondents' parents, spouse's and/or daughters | |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|--------|-----------|--------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % | Husband % | Wife % |
| A. Lower male / consistent | | | | | | | | |
| Sons' inheritance (house and land) | 32.7 | 3.9 | 2.4 | 25.4 | 33.2 | 35.1 | 8.3 | 8.3 |
| Location of sons' occupation | 29.8 | 6.3 | 2.4 | 19.0 | 18.0 | 22.9 | 21.5 ¹ | 18.0 ¹ |
| Sons' occupation | 29.8 | 6.3 | 2.9 | 15.6 | 22.4 | 27.8 | 18.0 ¹ | 17.6 ¹ |
| Daughters' occupation | 22.0 | 6.8 | 3.4 | 14.6 | 22.4 | 26.3 | 16.1 ¹ | 16.1 ¹ |
| Location of daughters' occupation | 23.9 | 7.3 | 2.0 | 18.5 | 17.6 | 20.0 | 17.1 ¹ | 15.1 ¹ |
| B. Shared / inconsistent | | | | | | | | |
| Sons' education | 28.3 | 11.2 | 7.8 | 13.7 | 34.6 | 45.4 | 15.6 ¹ | 12.2 ¹ |
| Sons' inheritance (other major property) | 22.9 | 4.4 | 2.9 | 12.7 | 40.0 | 46.3 | 6.4 ³ | 7.3 ³ |
| Advising children | 22.4 | 25.4 | 14.1 | 11.2 | 41.5 | 47.3 | 5.8 ² | 4.0 ² |
| Number of children | 28.3 | 11.2 | 9.3 | 17.1 | 59.0 | 67.8 | 2.0 ² | 3.0 ² |
| Daughters' education | 22.4 | 10.7 | 6.8 | 13.7 | 32.7 | 41.5 | 13.7 ¹ | 12.7 ¹ |
| Assisting children with schooling | 22.0 | 20.5 | 16.1 | 21.0 | 16.1 | 15.1 | 27.4 ¹ | 27.8 ¹ |
| Daughters' inheritance (other major property) | 18.0 | 3.9 | 2.4 | 10.2 | 32.7 | 37.1 | 5.9 ² | 5.9 ² |
| Daughters' inheritance (house and land) | 17.6 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 15.1 | 25.4 | 24.4 | 6.3 ² | 5.9 ² |
| Sons' spouse | 13.2 | 2.9 | 2.4 | 7.3 | 34.1 | 37.1 | 11.7 ³ | 10.2 ³ |
| Daughters' spouse | 11.2 | 2.9 | 2.0 | 7.3 | 34.1 | 35.1 | 9.3 ⁴ | 8.8 ⁴ |

Notes

¹ Respondents' son or daughter or both.

² Male respondents: my father or my mother or both. Female respondents: my spouse's father or mother or both.

³ Common decision between respondent or spouse's parents and their son (three persons).

⁴ Respondent, his/her spouse, and their daughter.

Bold numbers indicate greatest agreement among husbands and wives.

only a small number of their wives. At the same time, men's self-selection was lower in this category than for expenditures and production and about the same as shared decision-making and is thus termed *lower male/consistent*.

The responses regarding other decisions about children were more problematical. While the rate of men's self-selection for those decisions were about the same as for economic activities, there were broad differences between rates of men's and women's selection, as well as inconsistencies between husbands' and wives' selecting their spouse. Claims of shared decision-making were over 40 percent in the case of sons' inheritance, other major property, advising children, and number of children, and 35 percent for sons' education. As to number of children, 68 percent of women and 59 percent of men characterized their decision-making as shared, the highest rates for shared decision making in the survey. The highest rates at which children were identified as making their own decisions were regarding their schoolwork (28 percent), their occupation (18 percent for sons, 16 percent for daughters), and the location of their occupation (21 percent for sons, 17 percent for daughters).

Men and women reported sharing or disagreeing about who made the rest of the decisions about children – the number of children to have, their education, and whom they would marry – although men tended to make more decisions in the selection of children's occupations and where they worked. Children participated in decisions about their education and choosing their spouses. Overall, decision making regarding children did not reflect a strong degree of male decision-making; if it anything, it reflected a diffusion of and shared decision-making.

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